

34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 7

SPRING 2023



34 ORCHARD

Issue 7, Spring 2023

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This issue dedicated to Nikki, who has taught me that sometimes breaking things is the best option.

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Optic Nerve ♥ © Page Sonnet Sullivan, 2022

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In my basement, I found a tub containing remnants of a long-standing friendship, things with which I thought I could never part.

Then I recalled the last time I saw that friend.

He wasn't himself. He was a beleaguered, twitchy, angry mess, and the things he said were deliberately meant to hurt, intentionally meant to eviscerate. He broke my trust.

I broke the rest.

We consciously break things because we need to: sever relationships because they're too toxic (or even too healthy), commit crimes out of compulsion or survival instinct, burn down houses to purge or cleanse, trash objects in vengeance or exorcism. But what we often don't consider in the moment is the impact—yes, we may be doing what seems best at the time, but do we ever stop to think about how the destruction, no matter the reason, touches others or the world at large? How countless lives could be affected by a trickle-down?

The twenty-two artists in Issue 7 ruminate on the things we break, why, and how they influence the world around us. Well-meaning Wyoming homeowners consider a mercy kill. A flute's music heals in questionable ways, a mother demotes herself and a lonely practitioner upsets the balance of the universe. An academic's ego gets the better of him, a desperate OCD sufferer goes to extremes, and the slave of a toxic love affair ends things in a way that jilts even her. There are more, but haunting each piece is the specter of outcome.

Does the memory of that friend's choice, and his absence, still hurt sometimes? Although it's liberating to be out from under that influence, the answer is "on occasion." Whether things get broken for positive or negative reasons, clearing up the mess is never easy, because the truth is, the pieces of the things we break are always around. In the corners we don't always get to cleaning, in the backs of our closets, in the tubs in our basements, in our nightmares. The real question is do we keep them there—or do we play with

the fragments so we still get cut?

Welcome to the place where the shards of the smashed heirloom china stick to the soles of your bare feet.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.

34 ORCHARD

Issue 7, Spring 2023

AN OLD ROMANTIC

Mark Towse/7

LITTLE MONSTER

Elin Olausson/12

THE DOE

Brandon McQuade/17

WILDFIRE

Alexandra Provins/19

THE FLUTE

Ernest O. Ògúnyẹmí/25

THE PERIMETER OF OTHERS

Marie-Andrée Auclair/32

SIMULACRUM VEHEMENS

Remo Macartney/34

TWENTY BIRTHDAYS WITH YOU

Karen Cline-Tardiff/43

PENELOPE LEARNS TO WEAVE A DOUBLE HELIX

Shelly Jones/46

THE SQUEALING

McLeod Logue/48

WHERE'S LUCY?

W.T. Paterson/56

THE PROCEDURE

Jeff Adams/64

POISONED EARTH

Corey Niles/71

THERE IS NO TOMORROW

David H. West/72

THE TRIPLE G

Gregory Jeffers/73

I ONCE WORKED THERE

Christian Hanz Lozada/83

THE LAST DAY

Elaine Pascale/84

THE CHOICE

Jenna Moquin/97

WITH THE TURBULENT FLOW...

Angie Shearstone/106

THE SHRINE OF SAINT AMANDUS

Rex Burrows/107

HOW TO MAKE A VASE

Kieran Thompson/115

CONTRIBUTORS

123

The films featured at the back of this issue are recommended for readers at the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and are not paid endorsements.

AN OLD ROMANTIC

Mark Towse

From the top of the Ferris Wheel, the place looks even emptier.

I miss her already.

The town pops and sizzles for a few weeks of the year, an animated collage of colour, laughter, and hope. Sets the scene, and it's impossible not to fall in love, a little summer romance, encouraged by the smell of saltwater and skin.

And her smile, her laugh.

She arrived just over a week ago. I knew she was the one.

A droplet of rain splashes across my nose, inducing an exaggerated shudder. Damn sight colder today; my knee won't stop tapping, and the icy breeze stings my eyes. Hard to believe people yesterday were walking up and down the strip in shorts and bikinis.

Town changes at the drop of a coin, see. One could hardly see the sand yesterday, folks after one last bit of fun and sun before returning to their mundane jobs and lives. But clouds rolled in like clockwork this morning, turning the blue sea to grey. Black in some places even. Calm water turned rough and was all but empty. Yellow warning signs alerting to strong rips suddenly seemed more than just for show.

As if the town's heart slows when the tourists leave, life dampens to a pulse, and we wait patiently for their return and another spike of adrenaline.

Be tough to match the high that Kate brought with her, though. It sounds so cliché, but I was smitten from the moment I laid eyes on her. That's her name; short but inexplicably beautiful. Nothing else would suit.

Kate.

Rum and raisin; her favourite ice cream. Always in a cone. She'd pull a napkin from her handbag, wrap it around the base and turn it slowly into her tongue. Only when she finished the entire thing did she wipe the moustache away.

All in.

My Kate.

Kate.

Only yesterday, she was seated in this exact carriage, her laughter carrying on a much warmer breeze, and her scent, the essence of summer itself; wildflowers and summer fruit, filling my nostrils.

It's like a knot twisting in my stomach that only she could unravel. The softness of her skin, the glimmer in her eyes, the way she carried herself, even the way she ate her ice cream. Christ, it hurts, like being let out of prison, allowed to live life, feel things, really feel them, only to be locked back behind the iron door a few days later.

After Jenny, I used to think I'd never have such feelings again, that I'd used up all my love on her. We moved here ten years ago, gave up our jobs in the big city in search of a different lifestyle, a sea change. We bought a place and still had enough money in the bank to semi-retire, neither of us even thirty at that stage. We even talked of marriage. How gullible we were to think our needs were so perfectly aligned; that we were different, better than our peers.

For Jenny, the bubble burst quickly. "I'm not happy here," escalated to "We want different things," eventually giving way to "I just don't love you anymore."

With a jolt, I'm on my way back down, but this time to wet pavement and the smell of petrichor over street food. The music sounds so much harsher today, without the harmonising soundtrack of laughter and soft plunk of arcade machines.

Kate. My sweet Kate.

Yesterday, I could have stayed up here all day, listening to her talking about everything and nothing. The perfect pasta at Valentino's, the cocktail she wanted to try once more before leaving, the way the heat made her walk that little bit more slowly.

Even though I knew our time was coming to an end, I'd envisaged our life together multiple times, an extension of a few memories, but nevertheless, a glorious cinematic storyboard of happiness.

The guy opens the carriage. Albie? Alfie? He always looks at me like I'm crazy, but doesn't object to the extra notes I slip him to hold us near the top. Likely wouldn't know true love if it took a bite from his sandwich.

"Cold enough for you?" He'll ask a slight variation of that question for days to come; he always does. I nod politely and make my way towards the café. Empty now, of course, apart from a single staff member, Doris, a chain-smoking blue rinse who can talk about two things only, the weather and what's on the Specials Board. She sure makes a meal of it, though. Before she can even open her mouth, I order a cappuccino and retreat outside to one of

the tables.

I can picture her now, legs crossed, smiling that smile, lens-covered eyes darting from person to person as she spoke that day. A people watcher, just like me, feeding off their energy, inhaling their hope.

My Kate.

The breeze cuts through me once again, but no shudder this time, only a nostalgic melancholy at the thought of her dry auburn hair dancing in the air like kite strings.

“Here you go, petal.”

“Thanks, Doris.”

I know better than to take a breath until she’s at least twenty seconds away. Ten is a definite no-go. Fifteen seconds and you still risk a few tainted air molecules.

And *Inhale*.

A splash of rain creates a ripple in the puddle of brown in the saucer, and I can’t help but liken it to Kate—dropping into my life in such an explosive way but ultimately fading to nothing, just like all the other raindrops. I don’t even like coffee. The smell of it, though, and the memory of her lipstick on the side of the cup.

It’s getting faster, the rain. Dark clouds threaten worse, too. I leave the money, including my contribution to Doris’s lung cancer fund, under the saucer and head towards the beach, tucking my chin into my neck to try and escape the brunt of the wind.

As if trying to earn their bread, the seagulls dance but eventually declare me a lost cause, turning their attention back to the litter bin. I make my way down the sand-covered wooden steps, eyeing the curling waves, kaleidoscopic shades of grey that finally echo to shore, bringing seaweed and adding to the existing foam. As if she is here, her laughter carries on the breeze. I envision her prints in the sand as she moves in and out with the tide, giddy like a child each time it threatened to swallow her feet.

Love.

Love is visible, invisible, wanting but not being able to have, having but wanting more. Love is all-consuming. Love is passion. Love is tenderness. Love is sunlight bouncing off the skin, not being able to eat, reminding yourself to breathe. Love is flying.

Love is drowning.

I still wear the ring that Jenny bought me all that time ago. She taught me what love is, after all. Then she ripped my fucking heart out. We used to take late evening strolls on the beach. Even the night she told me she was leaving, deserting this town with the tourists, I insisted we share one last walk together.

Almost ten years to the date.

"Don't go, please. We'll work it out."

"We've tried, Jeremy. The move couldn't save us. We were foolish to believe it could!"

"Please, Jen."

"I'm going back," she eventually said after my endless pleas, eyes full of tears. "I need to pack."

I started walking towards the blackness of the water, gripped by fear, but more from the thought of losing her than immersing myself in the ocean.

"Jeremy!"

Up to my waist, freezing cold, endless black ahead cut in two by a sliver of moonlight, but I kept wading. I should have been terrified, but it felt so right.

"Jeremy, what are you doing?"

Up to my shoulders, nothing ahead but an empty void.

"Jeremy!" she screamed after me, knowing I was unable to swim.

Love is drowning.

Even as I submerged my head and the pressure on my lungs became immediate, I only felt a kinship with the water. I sensed its sadness, felt its emptiness and its need to be loved, and it felt mine. We shared our pain, a captive audience for each other. I nourished it with thoughts of Jenny, the sparkle in her eyes, the crackle of her guffaw, and the wind plastering her hair to her forehead. As I inhaled its softness, empathy, and compassion, the ocean filled me with memories of recent days—the glimmer on its surface, children's laughter, kites jerking in the warm summer breeze.

And just like that, we were one.

As I continued walking across the ocean floor, weighed down by sorrow, but at the same time, experiencing overwhelming affinity with the peaceful melancholy, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see my love, her eyes wide and face tight with panic.

She'd come back to me.

I grabbed her wrist and dragged her towards me, watching the bubbles spill from her delicate lips. We embraced until her struggles stopped, and she finally gave in to me, reunited once more in the presence of something powerful but just as vulnerable as I.

They found us in the early hours, washed up onshore, twenty yards apart. The doctor said he'd never seen anyone survive who had swallowed so much water—wanted to run further tests, but I declined.

From that day onwards, I became poor old sad Jeremy, the guy whose wife drowned trying to save him. "Accidental death," they called it, blaming the rips that had taken the occasional tourist before and no fewer than one a

year since.

We thrive and grieve simultaneously. We are one; the sand, the foam, the clouds, the morning mist rolling in from the sea, the guy in the café observing his new love sipping on a coffee. The ocean and I are just two romantics, basking in each other's sadness and nostalgic memories of happier times. Memories fade, though; can only sustain us for so long, and by the time the holidays come along, we pine for new love.

Without love, we are just bodies, living, breathing, but not feeling.

I don't age, but nobody notices; after all, how much do people pay attention? Only someone close to one's heart might comment on the absence of any lines and skin as smooth as a pebble rolled by waves. I am a ghost, sharing a heartbeat with the ocean. You can see me, touch me, smell the saltwater leaking through my pores, but you can't love me. I belong to the ocean and the ocean to me. Together, we love from afar—dreamers, sentimentalists, optimists, pessimists, voyeurs.

Romantics. We fall fast, and we fall hard.

I still visit *the* house sometimes. There's little sustenance to be had now, though, even the dusty photographs of Jenny and I evoking little emotion these days. My *home* is in the ocean now, and I rise with the morning mist and retire once the town goes to sleep, trying to soak up all the energy and love in between, enough to nurture over the off-season.

Since Jenny, others have taken a place in my blackened heart, but Kate was something special. The way she smiled at the café, from her table across to mine. Sitting atop the Ferris Wheel, listening to her on her phone in the carriage in front, or the restaurants, gushing to friends about how much she's enjoying alone time for once; the food, the wine, the weather, mundanities seeming less so after leaving her soft lips. Standing behind her in the queue for an ice cream, breathing in the mix of saltwater, fried foods, and delicious perfume that I can still taste now. It felt like I'd known her forever, the woman I named Kate.

It suited her perfectly. Kate. Christ, just the mention of her.

Alone and scarred from past loves. Kindred souls.

We knew she'd come to say goodbye on her last night. She took her shoes off, left them in the sand, dipped her feet in the water while staring at the moon. A romantic just like us.

"Help," I cried from blackness. "I can't swim."

She came to us, just like the others. And we finally embraced.

It's a moment that will help nourish us through the off-season until the memory of her fades and love comes to town once again. For now, it's time to head home, to wallow for loves lost, and to dream of loves to come.

LITTLE MONSTER

Elin Olausson

The apartment used to be tidy. Shoes lined up like well-mannered children beneath her coats, kitchen table crowned with tulips or carnations. Orchids on the sills, gifted by her mother and kept alive for years.

She had thrown the last of the orchids away a week ago, when the blooms had turned brown and wrinkly like aging skin. The garbage can was already full and she cut the stem in pieces, pressed the plant parts and the soil into the can with her hands. Her fingers came away smelly with something old and forgotten, and her manicure peeled off in front of her eyes.

Before the baby was born, Paul promised he'd spend more time at home. *It's our child*, he'd said, grabbing her head in one of his half-rough embraces, pushing her face into the spot on his neck that was sweating cologne, sea-deep and heavy. *I'll want to spend every waking hour with it.* After the birth, while they were still in the claustrophobic room in the maternity ward, he'd confessed that he'd been offered a promotion, and he'd taken it. *I couldn't tell them no, Louise.* He'd made his voice sweet, a stark contrast to the baby's siren wailing. *I'm doing it for our family.*

That was two months ago. Paul had spent the first few days at home but after that it had been an endless stretch of overtime, business trips, and work calls on Friday nights and pale Sunday mornings. He showered her with texts during the day, strings of emojis her brain was too muddled to decode.

The baby was only ever quiet when he was at home. When she was alone with it there was a constant noise jabbing at her temples, thin and acute like a piano string. Louise bought earplugs, shoved them as far inside as they would go. But the baby's screams sliced through the memory foam as if it were butter, soft and melty. After two months she still couldn't tell the screams apart, had no idea which one meant it needed sleep or which one indicated hunger. It slept, but only for an hour at a time, and it kept its face

scrunched up as if a crying fit was hatching right underneath the skin.

Whenever he came home from work, Paul would head over to the cot or the nook of the sofa or any of the other spaces the baby had claimed. If it was awake, he grabbed it and rocked it and smiled like he hadn't smiled at Louise since the birth.

"Hey, how is my favorite girl today? How is Daddy's little monster?"

Louise wanted it to wail and struggle, the way it did when she held it. But it did nothing, as if it had picked sides. As if Paul was the one it wanted, and Louise was just a hindrance.

She wasn't a young mother, but none of her friends had children yet. They'd helped her pick out baby clothes during the pregnancy, cooing over frilly rompers and miniscule newborn socks. After the birth they'd wanted to visit and meet the little one, but Louise had made up reasons why it wasn't possible. She couldn't picture her friends in the mess her living room had turned into, didn't want their thin, silk-wrapped limbs near the drooling, stinking child. Every once in a while Paul had a night off, and she slipped into one of her old dresses and met up with the girls somewhere safe, somewhere sleek and neutral where the air smelled like expensive perfume tinged with champagne.

"I can't believe you just gave birth," Amanda said on one such night, pinching at the fabric of Louise's dress where it draped around the waist. Her fingertips were like pliers aiming for the stitches, the stitches that were gone but still there.

"You're gorgeous," said Michaela, toying with the diamond stud in her ear. "And your little girl is so cute."

"Yes," Amanda agreed. "Oh my God, she's just adorable."

Louise sank into their voices, her brain absorbing the wine and the slow jazz music and the panoramic view outside. But the pantyhose carved at her waist and there was an odor coming from somewhere, foul and sickly-sweet. She wanted to ask Michaela and Amanda if they could smell it; she looked around to see where it might be coming from. Then she realized—it was her, and the girls were ignoring it just to be nice. She had taken a shower before she left home, she'd washed her hair and moisturized, but it didn't matter. She smelled like milky baby-vomit, like old diapers, like shit. It stuck to her skin, a film that couldn't be scrubbed off.

"I need to go." She reached for her purse but it kept slipping away from her, as if it was recoiling from the touch of her hands. "I'm sorry."

"What, why?" Amanda's hair was lustrous like the coat of a black cat, because she had the time to take care of it and visit the salon every other week.

"We just got here," Michaela said, but Louise heard her through thick,

frosted glass and the words might as well have been entirely different. She muttered something about paying for drinks next time and escaped, the odor making her itch all over. When she came home she locked herself in the bathroom and tore off the dress before stepping into the shower, turning the temperature up as far as it would go. It hurt, but she'd been through worse. Afterwards, the scar studied her in the mirror and grinned, fat and disproportionate. She came into the living room, bathrobed and raw, and Paul looked up from his phone.

"You're home early. Here I thought you'd stay gone all night when you had the chance."

She couldn't tell him about the smell. He'd look at her strangely, the way he did whenever he saw her wearing the earplugs.

"Well, as long as you're happy." He patted the seat next to him.

She sat, her field of vision spotted with garish pacifiers, blankets, nursing bottles, and plastic toys. The odor nudged at her brain, dragging its fingers over her scalp.

"She's been a little angel." Paul's voice was soft like custard or whipped cream. "Fell asleep in my arms."

Louise's eyes focused on a greying blotch near the hem of the bathrobe—vomit, dried to a crust. Paul kept talking, scrolling through pictures of the baby on his phone. She watched its face and thought, *It doesn't look like me. It doesn't look like anything.*



She needed to get organized. The mess was getting to her and she had to regain control of the situation, become her usual efficient self. Then she would feel better, and the baby would stop giving her those accusatory stares.

She found the solution online. A wide, air-tight box, designed to fit exactly underneath their IKEA bed. A storage space for all those little things that didn't belong anywhere, that kept cluttering up the floors and table surfaces. She made the purchase and it arrived two days later with home delivery, a see-through plastic box that was only visible when the quilt was off the bed. She put it in place and started loading stuff in it—some of the baby's toys, the ones that squeaked and rattled and that it didn't seem all that interested in anyway. It gave her great satisfaction to put them out of her sight, like wiping a stain off the counter. Over the next few days she kept returning to the box, shoving things inside to make her head stop hurting. A skirt that used to be her favorite but didn't fit her anymore; a shoe with a broken heel; a book about child-rearing that she hadn't been able to get

through. Paul didn't seem to notice, not even when she put away the *I'm a Proud Dad* t-shirt he'd bought right after the baby was born.

"You look happy," he told her one night when the baby was asleep and they were watching something on TV—faces and mouths, moving in front of Louise's eyes. "Your skin is glowing."

The scar gnarled against the waist of her sweatpants, sharp-toothed and mean.

"I was thinking, maybe we should go on a trip together this weekend? Find some hotel, some place that's kid-friendly. It would do us good to do something together, all three of us. And get out of the house for a while."

She must have said something in reply, because he kissed her cheek and patted her thigh.

"That's great, darling. I'll look into it. You don't have to do a thing."

On Friday afternoon they drove out of town, Paul and Louise and the baby. It cried and slept and cried again, and Louise missed her earplugs. The seaside hotel was nice, a tall building where the staff spoke without accents and aimed intimate smiles their way, asking for the baby's name. Paul small-talked and the baby grinned without teeth, and Louise wished she were at home with her box.

They went for walks on the beach, the wind carrying their voices off in opposite directions. The gulls screeched and Louise kept her eyes on their beaks, their swooping shapes.

"I've always wanted to live in a place like this," Paul told her one night out on the balcony. The baby was on his lap, quiet for once. "How about you, Louise?"

"I'm happy where I am," she said.

He laughed, getting up from his seat to kiss her.

She was aware of the baby's presence between their bodies—a lump, a faceless growth. The kiss tasted sour, like wine and regurgitated milk, and she pulled her face away.

Paul bounced the baby on his knee and it watched her, calmly, as if it knew she was no threat.



After the trip, Paul had to work longer hours to make up for lost time. It didn't make sense to her, but then nothing did. She took care of the baby, cleaning and scrubbing whenever it slept. She put on makeup just to feel like herself, even if she was too tired to remove it before bedtime. The baby wailed like a sick animal and she told it to be quiet, because she couldn't think. Now and again she texted her friends, slurped up all the details about

their dates and shopping sprees.

You should come this weekend, Michaela wrote to her. *It's been ages. We need you*, said the text from Amanda. *Please don't turn into one of those people who forget about their friends when they become parents.*

Louise talked to Paul, but he told her it was impossible.

"Just hire a sitter," he said, as if he assumed Louise wanted a stranger inside her home. "It's no big deal."

From the bedroom came that all-too-familiar crying, barbed and grating. Paul went to pick up the baby and came back with it, grinning, kissing its bald head.

"Hey there, Daddy's little monster." He tickled it and it laughed for him, only him. "You'll be a good girl and let Mommy have her fun, won't you?"

Louise watched them and thought of Amanda and Michaela and their hair, their faces. She told Paul she'd get a babysitter, and she patted the baby's head, and her fingers came away sticky and fetid.

Friday came. Louise fed the baby, dressed it, and went for a walk. She wiped spittle and sick, shoving the damp cloths into the box when she was done. The baby's wails followed her around like the ghost of a dog, demanding this or that. Louise showered, did her make-up, painted her nails. She went through all her dresses, picking a glitzy thing that stuck to her, strangling the scar.

Amanda called when she was getting ready, her voice liquory and warm. "Hey, how's it going? You're not backing out, are you?"

Louise looked over to the baby who sat watching her, mouth open, face red.

"Aw, is she crying?" Amanda's voice shot through the noise.

Louise pictured her lips moving, glossy, too full to be natural.

"I'll be there soon," she said and hung up the phone. The dress squeezed her like a fist and if she squinted at her reflection, she looked almost as she had before.

"I need to go," she told the baby, but the baby wouldn't stop crying. As if it didn't understand, as if it didn't want Louise to have even one night to herself. The noise sliced her open, dug into her flesh.

"Fine." She grabbed its wriggling body, staring at that mouth shaped like an o, a mouth too tiny to be human. Her heels rapped against the floor as she went into the bedroom and pulled out the box. The baby fit inside, of course it did, because the box was big and the baby was just a small, annoying thing that turned her home into a mess.

She pressed the lid down and shoved the box back under the bed. Let the quilt fall to the floor. *Easy*. The crying was still there, an itch, a mosquito hovering over her skin, but the lid was airtight and she had the earplugs. Louise grabbed her purse, took her keys, and went out into the night. The girls were waiting.

THE DOE

Brandon McQuade

Lying in the buffalo grass
along the foundation
of our Wyoming house,
a deer has been dying
for three days.
If we left her there
to disperse like seed
into the cold hard earth
like the rest of us,
she would be eaten alive
by the cold, scavenger birds
or whatever other hungry creatures
roam these streets at night.
It was merciful to call the ranger.
When he pulled up in his green pickup
the deer stood up and sauntered off.
For a moment, I thought
she might take the corner
and we might watch
her snow-white tail
disappear over the hill
like cotton on the horizon.
She collapsed in a heap
before the bullet came.

“After the graveside service was over, we dumped whiskey on my dad’s grave, laid on the fresh dirt. I wept. I thought the tears were for my dad, but some of those tears were for me.”

- Karen Cline-Tardiff
“Twenty Birthdays with You”

WILDFIRE

Alexandra Provins

In darkness, at the height of summer, smoke swept into our town. It was so swift and silent that we all dreamt of fire before we knew the great blaze was overtaking towns some three hundred miles to the east.

For two days our air was tainted with a gray haze. Our nostrils stung from the distant burning of trees, houses and maybe even skin. My father said if we were lucky we wouldn't be taken up in it. If we were lucky it would turn north or south and pass us by, unscathed. He sat in his handcrafted chair on the porch, his eyes narrowed in the smoky wind, and his hands folded in his lap. "If we're lucky," he said again.

There was no fear in his voice, or mockery. Our fate was truly thrown to the wind, and I think he was okay with that.

Some of the others didn't hold the same philosophies as my father. They weren't going to sit, wait and pray; they were men of action. They yelled at their wives and children to take 'only what is necessary,' stuffed sacks until the seams almost burst, loaded up their horses, and headed further south.

Bill Hutchinson came to see my father before he piled his family into their wagon and tried to outrun nature's fury. He was freshly shaved, in his best clothes, and squinting against the smoke like we all were.

Our eyes were hardly open at all.

"Hey George," he said, waving his hand as he approached our porch. He leaned against our step post, as he almost always did when engaging my father. "We're gettin' ready to leave. Are you packing up soon?" He looked to the east with his eyebrows furrowed.

With each passing hour the sky darkened further as more and more ashes were thrown into the air. Just looking at it I could almost feel the heat.

My father frowned and shook his head. "Nah, we're staying put."

Bill half-smiled; he thought my father was joking. "Come on, George. That wind is coming due west. We're right in its path."

My father shrugged. "Maybe the wind'll change."

Bill laughed. "Don't kid yourself. This place is goin' up in flames."

"Maybe."

"Now, I'm doin' the safe thing—I'm gettin' my family out of here. You ought to do the same. If you wait too long, it'll be too late." Bill pursed his lips and pushed away from the post. "George, do ya hear me, George? Don't wait 'til it's too late."

My father's forearm tensed as he clenched his fist, but he released it after a breath. "Where d'ya think you'll end up?"

Bill grabbed the back of his neck. "Not sure. I want to get us out of this mess. We'll go south until we meet some clear air, then maybe head west. There's a couple settlements out toward the coast that way; maybe we'll set up on one of those."

My father nodded. "Good luck," he said earnestly.

"Thank you, George. Ya know, I hope I see you out there at one of them. I'd wait for you, but we're ready to go and I don't want to take any chances. You understand." Bill tipped his hat to my father, and me by association, and said, "It's a shame nature's gonna swallow this one. It was a good place." And then he was gone.

I watched him load his wife and three children into their wagon, one bag apiece, so the horses wouldn't tire out. He had a boy of two who cried through it all. His wife tried to cradle him in her arms before they loaded up, and then bounced him on her knee when they were in the wagon, but he could not be appeased; the boy wailed as if he'd lost a limb. Their figures faded first, then the clip clop of hooves and creaking of wheels, until the only thing left of them was the unearthly howl of the youngest Hutchinson. And eventually even that faded as the distance grew.

In the silence I turned to my father. "They're not ever coming back, are they?"

My father shook his head. "No, son."

"Why not? Why wouldn't they come back to check after? To see if it missed us?"

"Hutchinson doesn't believe this place will be spared. In his mind, there's nothing but ashes behind him."

"But we will be spared, right Father?"

He didn't answer me, but for the first time in three hours he rose from his seat. "Come on."

He bounded down the steps and hastened down the dirt path. We passed three other families preparing for departure before we arrived at the Hutchinson house. My father opened the door like it was his own home and began running his fingers over the furniture and rummaging through

drawers.

He pulled out a silver serving spoon and smiled at me. “Now this, this is very fine.”

“But ... ” My words caught in my throat. I could not accuse my father of stealing—of being unrighteous. I could feel the welts on my back from the single word; I would not utter any others. Instead I opened a drawer, pulled out a blanket, and put it under my arm.

My father laughed, the lighthearted action still gruff and hard in his manner. “Don’t just take anything, boy. Your mother doesn’t want old blankets.”

We spent twenty minutes rifling through the belongings of the recently departed Hutchinson family before my father decided we had everything worth having. He piled the new items in my arms and opened the door for me. As I walked through, I almost ran straight into Jim Perkins.

“Woah boy,” he bellowed.

I froze in my shoes and my face flushed with heat. Before I could utter a single apology for my egregious theft, my father put his hand on my shoulder.

“I see you’ve heard about Hutchinson.”

Jim smiled wide. “Damn, you beat me to it. I was at the Derlin house first though.”

“Oh, they’re gone too?” my father said, offhandedly.

“Yeah, they’re all runnin’ scared. And off to where? To start over? I’ll take my chances with the fire. Been soakin’ the soil around my property all mornin’. Nothin’s worth settling all over again.” Jim finally looked down to me. “Ain’t that right, boy?”

I nodded quickly; he chuckled and ruffled my hair. My father shook his hand and we walked off the Hutchinson’s porch, carrying fifteen of their personal belongings without even a hint of shame. And I knew it was because none of the things in my hands belonged to the Hutchinsons anymore. They were things that belonged to no one, like fallen tree branches or a breathing doe. They were no one’s until they were yours—or someone else’s.

It was strange that the world should work that way, but I saw no other way it could work at all. They were gone, and never coming back. For all I knew, they didn’t even exist anymore. All I had of them were a silver serving spoon and a child’s wail echoing in my ears. And they wouldn’t need either anymore.

I laid out our new possessions on the kitchen table and took to putting them into appropriate spots. I placed the wrench and wooden hammer out in my father’s shed. I put the silver serving spoon and the large stock pot in

the kitchen cabinets. I went to deliver the linen sheets to my father's bedroom, but the harsh tone of my mother stopped me from opening the door.

Her voice was strained and cracking. "George, please, I don't want to die here."

"Missy, we're staying. It's no use crying."

"Everyone else has gone." She spoke in between labored sobs. "If we don't burn to death or suffocate in this smoke, we'll be here alone. I know—I know you decided we'd stay. This is where we've made our lives. Where we *decided* we'd make our lives. But they're all right. There's nothing for us here."

My mother's sobs were muffled, and I did not know if she was crying into her own palms or my father's chest.

My father's voice was softer than before. "What would you have me do, Missy?"

"Get us out of here!" my mother screamed.

"How? On one lame horse that couldn't bear a sack of flower? Do you think we can outrun this fire on foot, Missy? Well, do ya?"

My mother's sobs stuttered as my father shook her. I knew his hands were clasped around her arms, trying to physically jar her from her hysterics.

"If we're gonna die, we might as well die at home, not out of breath in the middle of the woods." My father's single step to the door was not enough warning for me to abscond; I was in full view when he thrust it open. His face was flushed with regret and pain, and when he saw me he looked even more injured.

On a normal day, I would earn three lashes for eavesdropping, but today was not a normal day. My father sidled up next to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and stared at the floor as he spoke. "Your mother's not feeling well. Why don't you try to cheer her up?"

I looked past my father to see my mother on her knees, trying not to sob. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but if I had not seen them, I might have thought she was fine. She calmed her breaths, put on a smile, and reached out her arms to me.

I went and embraced her, as any good son would. But her arms felt hollow wrapped around me, as if they belonged to a doll.

Over the next three hours, the smoke became so thick that we had to stuff blankets under the doorways and windowsills in order to keep the worst of it out: a dense black that billowed past the windows in gusts and made the walls shiver, as a vicious storm with no rain.

I heard a whinny and a thump to the west of the house, and I knew our only horse had died. I imagined he suffocated. My mother rushed to the

window, whispering, “Bucky,” over and over again. With the smoke we could not see a foot past the window, but she strained her eyes anyway, hoping she had heard wrong. He was an old horse that could hardly work anymore, and I told myself it was better than burning to death.

Afterwards, my mother resigned to the bedroom; she changed into her nightclothes and crawled into bed. “I might as well be comfortable,” she said softly. Then she took three gulps of the whiskey my father hid in the closet and closed her eyes. She looked at me with sad eyes and said, “Wake me in a few hours.”

My father sat at the kitchen table and smoked a pipe. All the precautions to keep the smoke out, and he insisted on filling the house with the stuff anyway. When I pointed this out to him he said, “But this kind of smoke won’t kill you. That’s the difference.”

He taught me to use his pipe for the first time.

I didn’t care for the taste. I couldn’t tell the difference between burning tobacco and the world burning outside—they all just tasted like ashes on my tongue. But my father insisted I keep smoking, and eventually a kind of calm washed over me. Almost as soon as I felt it, my father took the pipe back and loaded it with fresh tobacco. He lit it up for himself, and continued to fill the room with his different smoke.

When he was three puffs in, I looked out the window again, the smoke as thick and black as it had been an hour before. “What’s it going to be like to die?” I asked.

My father smiled, the pipe still in his mouth. “I don’t know. You’ll have to tell me when you do it.”

“I guess I’ll know soon.”

My father shrugged. “Maybe.”

I looked back to him, frowning. “Maybe?”

“If we’re lucky, the wind’ll change.”

I studied the smoke still blowing past our windows, due west. “But the fire has to be close, and the wind hasn’t changed direction at all yet.”

“Maybe,” my father mumbled absentmindedly, paying special attention to his pipe.

“How can you do that?” I asked, bewildered.

“What?”

“Not care if we live or die.”

“What makes you think I don’t care?” My father leaned forward, resting his forearm on the table, and smiled to himself. He looked at me, a shadow of the grin still on his lips, and held out his pipe. “Want another go?”

I nodded and breathed in deeply. I let the tobacco calm my nerves and sat in silence with my father as we watched the evidence of desolation pass

by the window for what felt like hours. There was a moment where I felt very hot, and I was sure the fire was right behind me, already burning down our walls and singeing my hair. But at my back there was nothing but my own fears and our family heirlooms. It wasn't long after that the smoke began to lighten up. The thick black plumes turned to white wisps almost in the span of a breath, and I felt my heart skip in my chest.

I looked to my father: he was smiling, the pipe still smoldering in his mouth. He shifted his gaze from the window to me and said, "I guess we got lucky."

I ran to my mother's room and shook her awake. She rubbed her eyes, unsure if she was alive or dead, and felt my face with her fingers.

"We got lucky," I said, my eyes misty and my lips curled up.

She pulled me into her arms and squeezed me. "Oh, my boy."

An hour later, the air was merely hazy with smoke. We removed the blankets from the doors and emerged into the world, naively expecting to find things as we had left them. But instead the landscape was painted gray and black. Hours before we had been surrounded by golden grasses, blooming oak trees, and the bustle of wildlife. Now, it was like we had stepped into a picture. Everything was a shade of gray, and it was so quiet my ears strained for any sound; when they could not find anything, they echoed with the wail of the Hutchinson child, screaming in an unseen agony.

My mother and father didn't say anything, but I knew they felt what I did. We survived, borne again into a world that was as foreign to us as the ones Bill Hutchinson and the others would venture to. But I knew somehow that ours was much worse: isolated, dusted with death, and tainted with the memory of what had once been.

In only a matter of hours, everything had left us. The child's wails boomed in my ears and all I could think about were the silver serving spoon sitting in the cupboard in my kitchen, and the thick ashes coating the only world I had ever known, changing it irrevocably.

But we were the lucky ones.

We got lucky.

Right, Father?

THE FLUTE

Ernest O. Ògúnyẹmí

*"I cannot say what, or why, or even when it was.
I only know it happened, and I was there."
— Christian Wiman*

The purple spread throughout his eyes, dark and intense, like the color of forced ripe breadfruit, sharpening the honey-brown of the pupil. It was back again—the wrong note that troubled him. Your father's body began to quake. His hand tightened into a fist. Each strand of hair stood upright on his skin like threads of vengeance called forth out of the soft earth of his body. He opened his mouth to wail, but—like magic disappearing in a wound—his voice sank back inside of him, refusing to be bid; in his throat pain strung itself like a chain of beads. Choking. His right pinky twitched and twitched, a signal, a small call for help.

You picked up the flute from the wooden table in the room and began to play. What you played was known only to you, a song you had woven out of ache, your tame animal of light, gentle lullaby. Again and again you caressed the air with the sound of your weaving, the tune lacing the room, until the dark purple began to evaporate from the eyes of your father, and the quaking receded into still, and he was away in a boat of love, rocking softly and softly on the dancing water of sleep. A sweet dream holding him carefully tight.

The miracle—once again—wrought.



Your father brought home the flute one evening on his way back from work.

It was a Saturday evening; you remember the fervent orange that spread through the sky, like firelight, and the swallows (you counted them,

they were seven) beating their wings quietly home. You were sitting outside the house, just watching the world be itself, waiting for your father to arrive. He'd promised you a flute; you needed it for music class—not once did Mr. Jinadu call you out to stand in front of the entire class because you were yet to buy one; but you were not the only one, this was your comfort.

Your father beamed as he saw that you had seen him from a distance. He was holding a black polythene bag containing what you reckoned was foodstuff, as usual.

You leapt up and ran to meet him.

Inside the room he pulled out the recorder from his pocket and asked, "Do you like it?"

You shook your head and said, "Thank you, Daddy."

The flute was green, felt right and light in your hand, and for the first time you felt proud to finally own something of your own. (You'd wanted a bicycle, a PlayStation, a bag with Spiderman popping out of it, a basketball, but your father could not get them for you.) Without rush you tore the nylon and dropped the flute's cleaning rod. You examined it as if it were a specimen, as if it held a dark secret, locked inside the hard plastic. The mouth, or *beck*, as Mr. Jinadu called it, flat and fine, fascinated you. After observing it for a long time, turning it around and around, considering all the sides—you even counted all the little holes, eight in all, two doubles; the window the shape of a chopped dice; and the foot joint like a crown—you placed it on the table.

That evening dinner was early. After the amala and ewedu soup, which you both ate from the same stainless plates, after the plates were washed and you both had taken turns to shower—your tradition—and he was sitting in bed waiting for the power supply to be restored so he could read—usually Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* or Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, a worn copy he found at a secondhand bookstall at Oshodi (he had read the story to you so many times, though he never finished it—you later read it yourself), or occasionally some other book—he asked you to play the flute.

"I don't know how to play it, Daddy," you said, your voice small.

"It doesn't matter. Just try. You don't have to get it right," he said. His eyes glistened in the faint light of the lantern.

The light soon came on and the room came alive with images. On the walls were paintings made by your father; he was a trader by day and an artist by night. There was a red, rainbow-winged parrot sitting on a branch. A door opening, the inside crowded with bright flowers, heads peeking out of them. A guitar trapped in the bill of a bird. The ceiling fan whirred and whirred.

You grabbed the flute (a little frightened though you couldn't say why—

it was just a flute!), placed the rear of it to your mouth, and blew air into it. The sound was sharp, sick. You'd freed a wrong note, and the note searched the room for a place to perch. It found your father's imposing being.

Not up to a minute after you fluted your father was no longer your father. He was *another*, something you could not name. And you did not know what to do; you knew it was the flute's work, *that* note, but how to take it back? In a few more minutes, your father's body looked like someone had inscribed lines onto it with a pack of hot needles.

You held him and cried.



Monday morning, as you put the flute in your schoolbag, your heart pounded against your chest and a shiver danced down your spine. Thank God Daddy was okay now, though the scars etched onto his body were still clear, and they hurt: he wouldn't be going to his shop today. That night, after about an hour of torment, the note rested. You did not want to take it to school with you but you feared what Mr. Jinadu would do to those who did not have a flute of their own today—you had music during the second period. Your father also encouraged you to.

In music class, Mr. Jinadu told a story about flutes, how the earliest of them—from about forty thousand years ago—were fashioned from the bones of cave bears, and birds, such as the vulture, and from bamboos of varying kinds. In some clans they were magic things, he said. Today he did not practice with the class, and he did not ask to see the recorders; he only gave a note and explained.

During break time, you walked up to Dehinde and asked him to teach you how to play (this was what the teacher said wise pupils did; they learned from others).

"Hehe. You already got one of your own," Dehinde said. "Nice." He dusted it on his palm, to out the spittle that might have been lodged there.

You stretched the cleaning rod towards him but he asked you not to worry. The boy was a musician by gift, just twelve years old and he could sway the flute and vibrate the guitar into alluring sound and even run chords on the piano. He played drums too. The violin was next for him now, he always said: even Mr. Jinadu was proud. He took the flute to his mouth, his fingers lacing it, trapping and flapping, and began to play a church song: 'You Are the Pillar.'

In your heart you'd feared that something would happen if he played, but nothing happened, even when he began playing Olamide's 'Melo Melo,' and then 'Godwin.' You would soon realize that the magic of it held only in

that room you shared with your father; to anyone else it was an ordinary flute.

Satisfied at his weaving, he'd showed you how it's done.

After school hours you met him again and he taught you more. For three days you took lessons from him, though the art, you realized, was quite basic.



It took a week and three days after the first chaos for the wrong note to return again, but by now you had mastered the art of fluting, and something, an impulse, moved you to play a tune you had composed, just as the purple spread through your father's eyes. Maybe it was the calculation that if the flute had brought the torment—when played wrong—when played right and finely it could also quiet it, maybe even free him of its wail. It did quiet *him*. Quick enough your father was still and the troubling note had fled or found itself a resting place, to wake some other time. He slept.

Joy warmed your insides that day, watching the spell be undone by your own heart's spell. When your father woke up, he asked for something to eat. You made semo and you both had it with the soup he'd made two days before. Afterwards he told you of the dream.

"I was in Grandpa's house, the house we lived in as a child. Though it was different: all around the house were bright flowers, almost lucent. And there was a river right behind the house. Small golden birds hung like fruits from a tree in the compound: I remember that tree, it was a kerosene mango tree. In the dream it gave off a lavender smell; I can still smell it even now. The birds were singing, but I could hear your flute playing too. Grandpa was there, but he was younger—he looked like a baby. All my brothers and sisters too were there. Uncle Gbenro, you know him—"

You shook your head. He had died in a car accident three years ago.

"Yes. He was there. And we were all happy, like we were children once again. But we were just like we are now, grown men." He smiled. "It was beautiful, son. Very beautiful. Your music took me places. I know that it will take you places too. Just keep at it. Please keep at it. And, believe it."

That night he read to you from *The Metamorphosis* until you fell asleep. But *your* night was dreamless.



Your father took to watching the flute—sitting there on the table—his eyes narrowed to slits when he did, his gaze fixed, their energy flowing

towards the plastic thing. It was as if he were waiting, expecting it to reveal itself, its *other* side. Something, anything. Maybe for tiny golden angels to come slipping out of the holes like fairies. Maybe even ants, but talking ones, jaws unclasping in sound. Anything. You realized, too, that he intended to sketch it, maybe even paint it. He hadn't made art in a long time.

You were busy with your math assignment, sitting on the floor with your head in the book, your lucky pen dribbling.

"Keji, look—something's happening to the flute!" he said.

Out of the tone holes and the thumbholes and even the window came forth flowers, white as snow-in-summers, with wispy stems—rooted in the flute—holding them up; and on the flowers were eyes, just like pawpaw seeds, glistening as if teary, blinking. They looked like innocent children.

Your father, like you, was transfixed. Immediately he reached for his sketchpad, reached out his hand for your pen and began to sketch the flowers and the eyes and the flute. He was at it for hours, but in the book there was no similitude to what lay on the table: he ended up drawing a face with rabbit ears. He was sweating, there was no electricity, and the room burned a little. He was dazed. Could he not work a sketch anymore? He did not make lines for a face—how come? He would try again. Yes.

You picked up the flute to closely witness the flowers and the pawpaw-seed-like eyes, which multiplied, but they disappeared once you touched the recorder. You opened the case, parted the head and middle and foot joints, and looked inside each one to see where the white tenderlings had fled, where they were hiding; you saw nothing in the case.

When the flute was left alone they were back.

You did not stop taking it to school and making tuneful graces with it.

However, your father kept trying to sketch the flute and the flowers and their eyes. Always, the result was not the intention. One time he ended up sketching an apparition, something like a ghost; another time it was a pack of ghosts with their faces like small mangoes sharpened at the head. At one time a bird with a bone in its talon was the result; a crucifix with a braid of clematis on a different day. It was as if the lines shifted every time he drew them and looked up at the image, as if the note trapped in his chest shifted his hand in his making, to conform the sketch—not to the image that *he* desired—but to that which *it* wanted.

But giving up was not a game your father liked to play; so he began to draw what he retained in his memory: he worked the magic on the table from his imagination. The result was still not pleasing.

And you felt for him, wished he would just let it go, like a grief too bright to hold, a song too wild to tame.



One Sunday afternoon, in a fit of rage—he had been trying all day to sketch the flute and the flowers and their eyes, but it was an impossible task: he would look back at the page and the drawn line had shifted—your father grabbed the flute from the table and flung it at the wall. It rained; a crash, unwholed. The pieces lay on the floor like cold notes.

You looked at him, but he was looking at the cracked pieces on the floor, focused like an interested child. You looked back at the ruined flute, and there, each piece was bleeding, releasing a trail of blood like a loosened thread. The blood multiplied and became a small pool; and out of the pool came the white flowers sprouting with their gecko eyes blinking.

Like your father—you stood there watching, watching; simply watching the miracle of a wound.

“I could understand why she hired Liz: they were birds of a feather. The only difference was that Liz would focus on counting the feathers while Kathy would have the bird plucked in the most painful manner.”

- Elaine Pascale
“The Last Day”

THE PERIMETER OF OTHERS

Marie-Andrée Auclair

One day, she didn't show up
at our regular table to chat
and sip a latte. And not the next
and the next.

We wondered, short trip, accident,
illness, maybe out of town guests
a new lover, something
she forgot to tell us
or needed to keep to herself
that would surprise us.

She so chatty, her silence felt uneasy
but it was her choice not to talk with us
not answer her phone, not soothe worries
we did not want to force on her.
She had before called them intrusions.
She was free.

In this abrupt not-knowing, we wove
together our concerns with tinges of optimism
keeping alive the fabric of our friendship
keeping her chair vacant. We did not dare
resent our exclusion.

One day, we stopped waiting.
We knew. Her furniture piled on the sidewalk
the landlord careless with the fake-Tiffany lamp
she was so proud of, grumbling
*Jumpers. They never care
what they leave behind.*

SIMULACRUM VEHEMENS

Remo Macartney

Sometimes I ask myself why the fuck I moved to L.A.

The streets move like plaque-clogged arteries. People will run out into traffic at any moment. You see parked cars in suicide lanes. You see crashed cars and broken glass. All those cars. All those heedless pedestrians. All that jaundice-yellow smog hanging over you.

I drive in a perpetual cold sweat. I'll roll over a lump in the road or drop into a pothole. Then I'm checking the mirror. Then I'm pulling over, somewhere nearby, to get out and check the street. I'm circling the block two or three more times. I'm expecting to see some kid splayed across the road, face down, teeth scattered like plastic beads on the pavement. A dead cyclist, bike twisted, face bunched up like a wet dishtowel on the forehead.

I get home and check my grill for chunks of someone's grandma or tufts of the neighbor's dog. Inspect the underside of the car for blood. The wheel wells for hanging limbs. If my car's dirty, I scan for handprints in the dust from whoever I dragged under. I might jerk awake at two in the morning and run to my car to perform this routine again. If everything looks okay, it's into my apartment to review police blotters. All this to try and confirm that I didn't hit anyone.



I sit in group. A circle of metal folding chairs makes a ring on hard, white tiles. Here, we do everything in the name of Exposure Response Prevention Therapy. Whatever your OCD tells you to do, do the opposite.

We toss crackers on the floor for the mysophobes to eat. They cringe and cramp, then put the dirty crackers into their mouths.

Maybe you have harm OCD, like me. If you're scared of stabbing your friends, we bring a large knife to group. We pass the blade around and take turns holding it. No one stabs anyone.

If you have a texture thing, dip your hands in honey and hold still. If

you wash your hands raw, stick your hands in the trash and see how long you can delay washing. You'll leave feeling grateful, strung out from the adrenaline high.

Everyone here talks about their Yale-Brown scores. Everyone talks about their worst fears. Bonus points if you can design cunning new torture techniques to unleash on your groupmates.

I've got homework, too. That means counting compulsions. If I circle back to check for bodies seventeen times on Tuesday, try for only sixteen on Wednesday. This is harder than it sounds.

Paola sits across from me. She's got perfectionism bad. Closer to OCPD. We tell her to show up late for work once in a while. To do a half-assed job when she scrubs her kitchen. To wear mismatched socks. One day she skips socks altogether and brags about her sweaty feet. We cheer her on.



Paola smokes cigarettes after group. A Francisco de Goya print stretches across her black t-shirt.

"I need a smoke after that shit. You know, group is like sex: embarrassing most of the time, but good for me."

Paola designs nightmare special effects for a grindhouse film company. The studio, more or less, turns death metal songs into movies. You heard of *The Mattock Murders*? The film takes inspiration from the Cannibal Corpse song "The Pickaxe Murders." Paola said she cleared out every meat section in Studio City for the effects.

She has a workshop full of molding plastic and paper mâché and mannequin parts. She checks newspapers for going-out-of-business sales. She's hoping some big department store closes down. That way, she can raid their dumpsters for mannequin limbs.

"My movies suck. But do you know why I love making them?" She blows out a blue-gray cloud of smoke.

Traffic on Burbank Boulevard stands still.

"Why?"

"Because everyone wants to feel afraid. We invent new ways to piss our pants. I'm game. I've got all my messy, gooey art."

"I was part of a haunted house once," I say. "The neighbor set it up. People lined up around the block. My neighbor had me perch behind a long purple curtain. Told me to grab ankles. Things went great. But then I caught this big guy's leg, and he punched me in the face."

Paola laughs.

“I thought it was funny, too. Here’s this big, huge guy. He drops to his knees; he apologizes to me over and over. He’s begging my parents not to sue him for punching their kid.”

Paola nods, eyes closed. “I guess he got his real scare for the evening.”



Some guy scurries into the street on my way to work. I have to stomp on my brakes not to squash him. He waves his hand to thank me. I’m sitting in my car and hyperventilating. Double and triple-checking to make sure I didn’t hit him. He’s running off like nothing happened.

Even though he’s safe, my OCD tells me otherwise. My OCD tells me not to believe my own eyes.

I’m blocking traffic on Laurel Canyon Road, like eighty assholes honking at me. My hands make dents at ten and two. I decompress the brakes and creep a few feet. Then I’m picking up speed.

According to group, this is what victory looks like.



Paola lights another cigarette. L.A. cooks.

I press my back to a plaster wall. Sweat glues my shirt to my back like a second skin.

“I was thinking about you,” Paola says. “Our new film is all about vehicular manslaughter.”

I laugh. “You *would* think of me.”

“Yes,” she says and flicks ash from her cigarette. “I need to experiment with a couple of things. To model the effects, if you will. Wanna help?”

“What does that look like?”

“I’ll show you.”



Above Paola’s living room television hangs a poster for *Scanners*. Stacks of alphabetized DVDs flank a black sofa.

“So here’s what I’m thinking,” Paola says.

She disappears into a bedroom and comes back, dragging something like a crash test dummy.

“I’ve rigged this guy so he can stand up,” she says. “We do exposure in group. You freak over driving. So I came up with an exposure routine.”

She slaps the dummy on the chest. “I want to set this guy up, and I

want you to run him over. I'll take pictures and notes. This movie is about hit and run."

She shoves the dummy onto her sofa. "I'm thinking of titles like *The Beverly Hills Basher*. *Vicious Vehicular Violence in Ventura*. Shit like that."

"Fuck." I sit on the couch beside the slouching dummy.

"Well, it'll be fake." She shrugs. "Let's do it after dark."

"So I gotta act like I'm killing someone?"

"This is L.A.," she says. "Everything is acting."



My car slams the dummy. Plastic limbs rocket into the air. The torso wedges between my grill and the blacktop. My sedan drags the thing a few feet. Arms and legs scratch and rattle across the cement.

Sweat breaks out. My chest tightens.

"That looked great," Paola calls from the curb. "Stay there. I'll put the dummy back together."

She steps in front of my car and frees the dummy's torso. I press my foot hard on the brake and check that I'm in park. I'm terrified I'll hit Paola on accident while she stands there. This ramps up the exposure, and I sit with the anxiety.

"Wait a few minutes in the car," she says, scraped torso in hand, face chiaroscuro in the headlights. "You need to resist the urge to do a checking compulsion."

The thudding anxiety plays out, then begins to recede.

"How do you feel?"

"Not as terrible as I thought I would."

"I got a picture of your face." She crouches by the driver-side window and shows me the back of her DSLR.

"You look freaked," she says.

I nod.

"Need to stop for a while?"

"No, let's go again."



My checking compulsion decreases to eleven repetitions per day. Paola and I have set up and run down the dummy every few nights for the past two weeks. Paola started adding a wig and rubber mask to intensify the exposure.

After group, Paola and I get food at a waffle house on Burbank

Boulevard.

"I figured out how to make the dummy bleed," she says, plastic menu in hand. "I hollowed out the limbs and torso. Fill that shit with plastic bladders of blood."

She plays with a few of the sticky syrup bottles.



The blood effects work. The torso splits and dumps blood on my windshield, then somersaults over the roof.

"You're getting so confident," Paola says. "You used to drive into those dummies like a grandma. Now, look at you."

She shows me a photo.

"Cold-blooded," she says.

"The Pasadena Pedestrian Pulverizer," I say.

She laughs. "There you go."

I park the car and get out to help find limbs.

"My movies disgust people," she says. "But do they scare them?"

I shrug.

"I worked on a movie a couple of years back," she says. "I operated the blood hoses. We called it *Bloody Serious*. Based on that Slayer song 'At Dawn They Sleep.'"

Paola once showed me a scene from the movie. When the vampire bit into the first victim's neck, about eight gallons of blood gushed.

"What about it?"

"I told you my films suck. Sometimes I'm being serious. Everyone copies something. Starts to lose its taste, like chewing gum. Think vampires. A journey from folklore to branded merchandise. A song taps that collective history. Then we take that song and make a film. Another copy. What's a real scream sound like? What's a scared person look like? I have a thousand and one actors who need the work. But they never look scared in a real way. Always that veil between them and me that reminds me how fake it is."

I point out the mangled and bloody bits of the dummy on the ground. "Isn't the camp part of the fun?"

"Yeah." She lets out a heavy breath. "But sometimes that's not enough."

She picks up a thigh and stuffs it into her armpit to carry.

I stop, arms full of arms.

"You all right?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. "You ever hit a brick wall? You throw everything you have into something, and you get nothing but dog shit."

"I guess."

“Yeah,” she says.

We finish cleaning up the dummy parts, and I head home early. I spend a couple of hours running over the conversation with Paola like a new obsession.



A UPS guy runs from his truck—which sits in the suicide lane—toward the curb. I hit my brakes. He looks at me and nods.

“Fucking asshole,” I say.

I hit the gas because I’m late for group. While parking, it hits me. I didn’t freak out over the near-hit.

I go to tell Paola the news, but she isn’t there.



Paola doesn’t make it to the next group session, either. The evening plays through my head as I try to sleep. I pick each detail apart like a gull with a clam.

After two absences, Paola shows up again. She leans in her chair, arms crossed. A black t-shirt that reads *The Cramps*.

After group, Paola goes to her usual spot.

I say, “I missed you.”

I mean this to sound like a concerned friend, but I sound more like a worried child.

She lifts her dark hair and shows me a bald patch.

“I know the fancy word for it,” she says. “Trichotillomania. When I can’t get something right ...”

“Don’t worry about me,” I say.

“I thought I’d gotten past it.” Paola digs a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her pocket.

I squeeze my hands together. Bright neon signs switch on all along the street.

I say, “They tell us that it never goes away. We just live with it.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll probably never like driving,” I say.

“I got some things for effects,” she says. “You want to give it another try?”

“Of course.”



A sour smell fills Paola's apartment. On her pleather couch are plastic bags, all full of blood.

"I found a website," Paola says. "They let you order all the parts of the pig that no one wants. I got stomachs and colons and hearts and spleens. Gallbladders and kidneys and livers. We'll pack the dummy with this shit."

"Unless you're doing something weird like this, who would order this stuff?"

"I don't know," Paola says. "I'm a fucking vegan."



Stuffing a bunch of slippery pig guts into a dummy is a pain. Paola and I shove everything in, filling the torso chamber to bursting.

"Does a real person even have this much shit inside them?"

Paola shrugs. "The more, the better."

Paola puts the dummy in clothes.

"Wild," I say. Pig blood slicks my hands.

"Looks great," she says.

We haul the heavy figure into the street. We stand it up and walk to the sidewalk.

Paola picks up her camera while I wipe the blood off.

"Ready when you are," she says. "Get the car."

As I turn, a small SUV takes the corner at like forty-five.

Before Paola or I can shout, the driver rams the dummy. Paola's camera starts to fire off. The flash blasts into the night, freezing after-images into my vision.

The torso bursts, showering the windshield in blood. The legs tear off and clatter on the cement. Greasy ropes of intestine shoot through the air. Chunks of body bounce and roll. The car has so much momentum that it takes half a block for the driver to stop.

Red brake lights glare in the dark. A reflective, yellow diamond shines in the back window. *Baby on Board*. The car sits there a few moments longer. No one gets out. Then, the squeaking sound of the windshield wipers going back and forth. More blood sluices onto the pavement. The brake-lights dim, and the car drives into darkness.

"No fucking way," I say.



An awards show backs up downtown Hollywood. Duplicate posters

line storefronts. A remake of a 2002 film that remade a 1963 film.

I get stuck on Sunset and spend a whole afternoon clearing two blocks with all the crowds and cars. Tourists wander around. People take selfies at every possible moment like they're trying to capture some sort of magic from the air.

In group, everyone expects a detailed account of some freakout.

I say, "I sat in traffic and listened to my music. A crowded situation like that used to be a nine or ten on the anxiety scale. This was a manageable five."



Paola's movie gets a title like *Fearing Wheels*. I like our titles better. We drink cold sodas on Paola's couch. Outside, the sun kills everything. A window-mounted AC unit seems like the only thing standing between us and death.

"You ever think about the person who hit our dummy?" I ask.

She shrugs. "The driver chose to drive away."

"That hit-and-run will hang over their head for life." I sit up, and the pleather sofa creaks. "That event, repeating in their mind forever like one of our obsessive thoughts. The guilt. Maybe we'll start seeing them in group."

"At least the effects looked great," Paola says. "People wanna be scared. Looks like she succeeded."

"You saw the driver?" I say.

"Of course," she says. She slaps her palm on her forehead. "I'm a terrible friend. So that night, I got so pissed. I wanted you to hit it. Perfect shot, you know? I was about to rip half my hair out, then I realized I got photos of the driver. Muscle memory, I guess."

"Wait," I say. "I have to see."

She runs out of the room and returns with a large photo print. She has the photo side pressed to her chest.

"I got the greatest thing ever."

The photo: a young woman, hair tied back, face lit up by the flash. Her eyes bulge out, lower teeth jutting forward. Her tongue pushes hard against the bottom of her mouth. Jaw muscles flex tight, neck contracted.

"That's real fear," Paola says. "I don't give a shit how many times Michael Myers chases Laurie Strode down a hall. Jamie Lee Curtis will never ever make a face like that."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Fuck," she says. "I could put this shit up in an art gallery or something."

"Like you said about the guy in the haunted house," I say. "I guess this

woman got her *real* scare of the evening.”

“Take photos for a hundred years, and you’ll never capture anything like that.” She laughs. “At last, my fake shit terrified someone. Real emotion and fear. I got a title for my photo, too.”

“What?”

“*The Final Girl.*”

We laugh.

In memory, that gore-coated CR-V forever disappears into the dark, again and again.

“Paola,” I say, “sometimes I ask myself why the fuck I moved to L.A.”

TWENTY BIRTHDAYS WITH YOU

Karen Cline-Tardiff

My first birthday with you started and ended huddled on a creaky mattress in a no-tell motel on *that* side of town. A knock-off Denny's was attached to it. Styrofoam take out containers crowded the little table beside the bed, sharing space with near empty bottles of bottom shelf whiskey. I remember the smell of the pool outside: slightly moldy, faintly like piss, no chlorine. Not even the desperate heat could entice anyone to dip a toe in. The old pre-digital cable TV was just a thrum of voices over a laugh track, one show bleeding into another.

"Oh, hey," you murmured groggily. "Happy birthday."

Mmm hmm.

Birthdays number two and three came and went pretty much the same way. Through a stem full of burnt chore with an ethanol aftertaste. Same crowded table, different rooms. Less takeout, more empty bottles. I snuggled deeper under the thick blankets, the day already over, ready to sleep it off until tomorrow.

I don't know if it was alcohol or drugs or just another argument fueled by the need to feel something, anything, but birthday number four was another disaster. I went to a bar by the college where I was accepted but never went. It was some misguided attempt to feel young, prove to myself I was still pretty enough to get free drinks all night. Somehow it cost me blowjobs in the bathroom, a lineup of who's next, another laugh track over the hum of voices, all bleeding together.

4 a.m. the day after our fifth birthday together, you tracked me down outside the bar where you left me: sitting in some guy's car getting high on a ten dollar leftover, the sound of you pounding on the car window a low buzzing in my subconscious. Not sure if you were angry because I was smoking crack with another guy or smoking up our last ten bucks.

We were couch surfing at your brother's house when his wife found out it was my birthday. Our seventh. He brought out his best homemade

meth and we snorted and smoked it in a scientific experiment to see which way would get us higher. Someone found old birthday candles in the back of a drawer, and I blew out three flames atop twisted blue candles dripping wax onto a Twinkie. No appetite, we left the yellow spongy mess for the roaches and passed out somewhere between the kitchen and the back porch.

My grandmother died soon after that. She left me five thousand dollars to get a car and get my life together. You bought yourself a new truck and a new girlfriend, left me in a motel with three days paid for. When you came to get the last of your stuff, you found me on the floor, the pills I hadn't managed to take laying on the stained carpet beside my vomit. You stripped your t-shirt off my pillow, shut the door behind you on the way out.

My eighth birthday present was the return of the prodigal boyfriend. You found me sitting at the end of the bar, drinking beer because I was trying to self-detox. You didn't have your new girlfriend or the truck anymore. You plugged a quarter in the jukebox, some horrible country song about being sorry. You sat on the barstool beside me and ordered two whiskeys. Cheers.

Nine was once my favorite number, so I had high hopes. But history has a way of repeating itself. Old motels may have the same stained carpet, creaky mattresses with sprung springs, pictures nobody wants bolted to the wall. But they all have their own distinct smell. Different kinds of desperation sewn into the curtains, coating the walls. At least the cable there was a little better, even if the laugh track was the same.

"Oh, hey," you said. "Happy birthday."

Mmm hmm.

Ten birthdays. Ten years of love and happiness, and who the fuck am I kidding? To mark the year with some sort of fanfare, you bought me a card, a lottery ticket, and a new lighter. The smiling teddy bear on the card was so cute it was almost easy to ignore where you tried to scribble out *Son* after *Happy Birthday*. Almost.

Lucky number thirteen. Dad had a heart attack two days before; Mom put him in the ground the day after. I always thought he'd die from cirrhosis of the liver. No better gift than getting asked to leave my own father's funeral. Of course you stood up for me, told them how amazing I was, lied my praises as my two brothers and a cousin had to drag you out of the church. It was the best present you ever gave me. After the graveside service was over, we dumped whiskey on my dad's grave, laid on the fresh dirt. I wept. I thought the tears were for my dad, but some of those tears were for me.

The worst present I ever got was on my fifteenth. Laying on the table, feet in stirrups, a suction tube in my uterus. I knew the anesthesia they gave me wouldn't be enough. I brought my own and passed out halfway through

the abortion. I dreamed about the night I knew it happened. Five weeks ago your dick got hard, the first time in months. Maybe a year. Neither one of us thought your sperm were still able to swim uphill; figured they were as stoned as you were. You brought me a balloon with "Congratulations!" printed on the Mylar. I let it float above us in the parking lot, wishing there was a way that tiny bit of helium would be enough to lift me away, too.

Sweet sixteen. What a joke. I begged you to go dancing. We never did anything fun. Just this once, please. Just one hour. Driving back home, still humming, I reached out to turn the radio station. I didn't even see your fist coming for the side of my face. I was still stunned when you slammed the brakes so hard my head hit the dash. All I could feel was my dress ripping on the asphalt as you shoved me out the car, then sped away. I limped home to the hotel, a little over two miles away. I didn't know where else to go. You were pissed I didn't bring home cigarettes.

On my eighteenth, we celebrated by arguing in the motel parking lot, disturbing the other guests, and being asked to leave. Two pillowcases held all our belongings. Walking down the highway, we continued the celebration. Words became fists, and your foot lost its hold on the narrow sidewalk. They said you were dead on impact. They said you didn't suffer. Like you hadn't been suffering your whole life.

On my nineteenth birthday with you, you cut my lip. The glass pipe I'd rescued from your pillowcase had a chip in it, and every time I put it to my lips you'd remind me you were there. You were part of the laugh track on the fuzzy television late at night. You were cigarette smoke in the sheets. You whispered "Oh, hey. Happy birthday" as I passed out on the floor beside the bed, your t-shirt on my pillow.

It took me six months and two rehabs to detox. No beer for the shakes. No "just a bump" to keep me steady. No waking up on my daddy's grave, dirt under my fingernails, trying to claw my way into the ground to be with him. I don't even know where your grave is. I think the county might have cremated you. Either way, I wouldn't visit. Twenty birthdays with you. That's enough for a lifetime. Oh, hey. Happy birthday to me.

PENELOPE LEARNS TO WEAVE A DOUBLE HELIX

Shelly Jones

I walk along the craggy hillside
overlooking cliffs, green waves below.

My drop spindle careens from these heights,
deftly spinning the wool tended by Melanthius
as I search for your ship in the distance,
that I might cast my line and draw you near.

Like you, my wool is roving, a grizzled storm cloud drifting over the sea.

Like the winds on your sail, I wind on, my journey brief, my work undone.

Murky memories of you surface
when the morning light shines
on our son's tanned face,
when a sheep bleats, alone, scared,
in the black hours that belong to Nyx,
when a storm cracks your name
across the sky, rain muddying our fields.

But the years wane, my hair grays, my belly sags,
and the bed, carved from an olive tree
by your calloused hands, molders in your absence,
its roots rotting from my salty tears.

I turn to the spindle, splicing together
a ram's fleece, algae, a bit of stag hide,
sacred to the virgin goddess of the hunt,
who nimbly wields a bow (even better than you),

flax, grapevine from your father's land,
a hair from your pillow, preserved, still golden.

I adjust the tension, slow my tread,
the thread elastic in my hands,
strands of you plied not with a witch's herbs,
but the fibers of my existence without you.

For years my fingers cross warp and weft,
weaving a new flesh to press against my face,
to soak up my tears, caress near-virgin skin.

At last I finish, selvedge raw,
snip the loose threads like a Moirai in training,
stand back to admire my creation
before it wraps its arms around my waist,
woven torso snug against my chest.

We fall into bed, ever-fixed
to the sallow olive tree,
and shake its branches bare.

You are not the only one
who has slept with monsters,
but mine are of my own design.

I breathe life
into the fibrous body
beside me, and
ignore the knock
at the door—at last.

THE SQUEALING

McLeod Logue

She'd locked him in there. And maybe that was the right thing to do, or maybe it was a mistake, the kind she just kept making. He'd already eaten the green peas and the leftover pasta, and the Tupperware, and the roaches that were still finding their way inside the house. She shouldn't have been so angry with him in the first place; he was just a pig, so full of noise and desire. No one could blame him. She'd been hungry like that before, too.

No one had asked her to take him. He'd been sitting there in a weak cardboard box on the side of the long road outside the city. All the houses in the area looked like wealth and sky, and she'd been lonely even before she pulled over and put out her cigarette. When she gulped down the last swig of gin that had pooled in the side of her coffee mug from driving a little too fast, she could hear him squealing. Motherhood always did make her do stupid things.

She was getting better—only drinking when she was fully awake. She didn't sit up at night anymore, leaving the bottles open so they'd be easier to reach. In the morning she'd even let herself breathe before she swallowed something dark. She'd learned to lick water off her skin when she washed the dishes and let her voice slow down to a tremor when her daughter called. It made her feel good to know no one was worried about her anymore. It was so lonely to lie.

"Mom?" her daughter said on the other end of the line, snapping her back to the inside of the car. "When are we going to see you again?"

"Soon, honey."

"Your 'soon' and mine mean very different things."

Sometimes she mistook her daughter's shortness for coldness—something she'd inherited from her father. Maybe it was. She hesitated before answering, watching the pig walk circles in the cardboard box.

"I promise. I'll work on your version of soon when I get the chance."

It was the best she could do.

They both knew that.



She hadn't stopped wearing her wedding ring. She felt light without it for a time, before the dread set in. There were too many empty spaces without her husband in the house. The night he left, she swept up the mess and boxed up what she could get her hands on. Everything in the house seemed to belong to him. In the weeks following, she shoved as much as she could into the closets of the house, the walls stretching to hide what it could. She would pause to breathe in the emptiness, but the wedding ring was different. When she went without it for too long, she felt weightless, like she'd float up through the ceilings and drift so far the whole world looked like a spinning penny.

Then, she found the pig. It was drooling in the cardboard box, which made her laugh when he looked up at her, eyes wide and black. They reflected her frame back to her, and she felt beautiful as he watched.

She'd been doing her best not to look at herself. She'd never felt delicate the way she believed she was meant to. Sometimes, when the worst nights set in and she could hear all the memories shaking in the house like a ghost, she'd let the side of her hand rest on the hot stove. The wince she'd make cut like glass through the hollow silence. Sometimes, she'd yank strands of hair from her head to litter the floor. It just felt good to make noise. The kind people take for granted when you've got a house filled with things and family and miles and miles of sound.

She got out of the car and scooped up the box, the pig's little pink body lighter than she'd expected. She let him ride shotgun, which he liked. When she rolled down the windows and let the wind crest his ears and the sun warm his snout, he'd shift his body weight and open his jaw. She could've sworn she saw him smile. She reached out to tickle his chin and he met her halfway, his head pressing up against her palm. He nibbled the end of her fingers and she felt her stomach drop like a weight.



When they got home, she let him sit on the top of the toilet while she undressed to bathe. She didn't want to leave him alone and he didn't seem to mind. The house—with all those rooms she never used and all those lights she never turned on—felt warm and light like the pig brought in the sun, cradling it against his tiny belly. There was nothing in the shampoo bottles anymore and the bar of soap took several rubs to make bubbles.

She never used that bathroom anymore, kept it locked most of the

time. It was the only one with a white tub, and sometimes she needed to sit down and let the water hold her. Once, her husband whom she used to love, sat naked behind her in the tub and used his stony, tired hands to scrub her clean. He was never as gentle as she wanted. She remembered how hot and raw she was when it was over. And still, she loved that memory because she'd felt so small in the space between his thighs. She wondered what it was like to be a child again. She wondered if she had to be sober to be reborn, or if she had to believe in God, but she decided not to think about it and to just let him rub between her shoulder blades. This was before her ribs emerged like piano wire and her spine arched like a picket fence. Before she ever felt ugly. He kissed her neck and she said *thank you*, even though someone told her once that this was how love was supposed to work, and she didn't have to thank anyone for showing her kindness.

The memory never lasted long. If she held onto the good for too long, she'd remember that burning sting. The way he held her head under water. He'd offered to wash her hair and she had breathed in all the dirt that had peeled off her skin. All the horrible parts of him washing down the back of her throat and he didn't let up until she saw dark flashbangs on the inside of her skull. He was strong enough to drown her if he wanted. After that she never trusted water again. But when she had enough tequila, she'd still let him touch all the soft parts of her and call her *baby*. She guessed that was close enough to being born again. And that's how it was with her husband and anyone else who'd slept in her bed.

Except the pig, who was tiny and gentle.

When she looked back to him on the top of the toilet, he'd fallen asleep with his mouth wide open and his little legs twitching like he was riding a horse. He was helpless, so pure. It made her body heave under the weight of that sorrow. She put her head under the water and breathed in.

She let the pig sleep next to her on the pillow. And for once, there wasn't an empty part of the bed that she had to stretch her limbs to fill. His body was small at first, but when he grew she shrank to give him space. Even when she was weak, her body felt firm against his skin. He made a long noise letting air out of his lungs and she loved him. She loved that he always needed her.



When he was hungry—which was always—he'd rub his belly against the side of her leg and squeal until she flung him whatever she was holding. It didn't matter if it was inedible or rotten or meat, because real hunger doesn't know if you're made of the same thing. It was small at first, the little

scraps. But soon, when the kitchen was empty and the liquor cabinet was dry, she'd open the closets of things she wanted to forget. The pig would stare up at her with his black seedy eyes and let his jaw go slack for a moment. She could hear his heavy breath crawl up on the back of her neck, inch by inch. She figured she'd kill two birds with one stone. If she could swallow cognac, whiskey, wine, and beer and still wake up breathing, then pigs could eat blankets, khaki pants, tennis shoe strings, pages of books, and bullets. She wanted all of her husband's things gone and the pig wanted to eat.

He still woke up breathing. Still hungry. And in the morning, his snout was wet on her cheek.

She loved feeling him there. She couldn't fathom the house being empty. It had been for so long when her daughter moved out and her husband left. This fear didn't make her weak, it made her strong for loving something so much that she'd put her own life on the line if she had to. She told herself that was companionship, something she never had with her husband. She fed the pig everything he gave her and everything he'd left behind. But the squealing never stopped. It was a burning, ugly noise, a great, heaving sobbing. She wanted to yell *shut up, shut up, shut up*. But who would that help?



Sometimes she caught him looking at her from across the living room with those empty, soulless eyes that said *I'm hungry*. She hadn't eaten shit for weeks, the pantry bare and lifeless. She wondered what he thought about her. She wondered if he stared at her like that when she was asleep. He'd been swallowing her hair when she yanked it out in the bathroom; she'd caught him making a horrible noise when it pooled in the back of his throat. Soon, he was swallowing strands from her head when she laid next to him on the couch. She could feel the cold tug against her scalp. She knew he would never grow sick of her, that the hunger was more than she could bargain with. She wondered if her body looked like chicken breast or the biscuit dough or the deodorant stick that he'd swallowed without ever moving his chin. She wondered if she'd taste like bathwater, like spirits.

There was nothing left in the closets anymore. The pig had devoured it all. The socks and stained t-shirts and records. She crushed them up small and he didn't seem to mind. Everything was edible. The house was empty; only the bones of the couch and the bed remained intact. He'd eaten the stuffing from the furniture, the pillows, even gnawed on the bones of the chairs and tables. She was exhausted from feeding him. It felt like her life had

been sucked out through a crack in the door, time passing in blinks. She couldn't remember the last time she left the house, the last time she ate a meal. The last time she'd had a drink. The hunger she felt in her bones was intoxicating. She was air, a cool breeze, the only thing keeping them breathing out and in. How long had they been sitting on the floor of the living room? How long had he been staring at her? She could hardly feel anything but his gaze and the knots in her stomach. It was as if she were eating herself.

She could feel his closeness, like the gap had been sealed and all of reality had been shocked back into perspective. He never smiled anymore, but now when he opened his mouth all she saw were teeth. His snout looked full, like layers of sharp, yellow rocks had grown in behind the front row. The only thing she could think about were his canines. They sent a shiver down her spine.

She reached her hand out to touch his wide face. In the space between them, there was a distant tenderness. He had grown so much larger as her body shrunk to keep up. There were only a few precious moments where they had ever been the same size. If they could have both stopped changing, maybe they would have been happy. It had become too difficult to bathe him, his body massive and swollen. She knew he didn't need her affection anymore. She could feel the power shift, like a light bulb being tugged on a string.

Her hand trembled in the air like an offering, and without blinking, he hinged his fat neck forward and latched his jaw open, the rows and rows of teeth like a cavern she had stumbled into. How had she never noticed how animal he was?

The sound came first, the crunching of flesh and blood snapping like baby carrots. He bit down hard at the base of her last three fingers, her wedding ring catching the light one last time before everything was red and hot.

He squealed like a music box.

She opened her mouth to scream too, but the blood kept coming. Her throat betrayed her, the ringing in her ears more powerful than any noise she could muster.

He squealed again. It was guttural this time, born from somewhere deep in his organs. He jerked his neck back, the stump of her hand jittering like repelling magnets.

She clutched at the space where her fingers had been, the emptiness of her ring finger expanding endlessly. The squealing was constant, merging with the rhythm of her heartbeat.

And now everything sounded like laughter. Her husband had made this

noise before, his boots clicking across the hardwood like cue balls. She couldn't breathe deep enough to cry, her throat twisting around itself. She was caught in the space between time, her senses muted. The house was filled with his squeal, as if there had never been a moment without it. The walls buckled under the pressure.

His throat gave way to a high pitched cry. His squealing sang like a musical jewelry box. The kind her daughter had when she was a child. She'd heard it through the walls after the lights went out, the ballerina spinning like a top. Her daughter would open and close the box, the song pausing between snaps and then looping. It drove her skin wild, the goosebumps rising like dough. The sound of "Für Elise" clicked away, the recorded piano knocking back at the walls. She'd been so angry in the dark. It was the only pure emotion she'd ever had.

The pig walked a figure eight around her body as she lay limp in the middle of the room. His hooves avoided her, but his eyes never left her skin. He was insatiable, his snout lowering every so often to taste the blood she was leaking onto the floor.

She couldn't stay here. Not like this, exposed in the empty house. There was nothing left. Nothing but her and the pig.

She rose in crooked arrogance, the pain swelling to her head, her eyes lagging as she grabbed her hand. Her thumb and pointer finger spasmed over and over, pinching the space between them like lovers.

The pig watched her lean against the opening between the living room and kitchen.

Their breath was a fading symphony. They had never really been equals. She should have known better to show her weaknesses. He was an animal, just like the man who'd held her head underwater. She should've known better. She thought she knew better.

He lunged at her leg first, taking back a chunk of skin.

She cowered under the weight of the sting, finally finding her voice in a shallow yelp. It did nothing but exercise the pain.

The pig seemed to like the challenge. When he lunged again, she was ready, her body agile and quick. She imagined herself rising up again, floating against the ceiling. She'd be safe there.

On the third lunge, she grabbed him back, her one good hand tightening around the nape of his fat neck. There was so much of him to grab onto. What was left of her other hand snapped into position, pushing against his eye sockets, his snout, his inner ear. The softest parts of him were closest to his teeth. She could hear them grinding in pain as she jabbed at his face over and over and over.

He receded, trying hard to brace himself against the wood. Like a child

that never learned to walk, his hooves slipped, clumsy. They were cloven in two, like hard knuckles.

She knew the feeling. The helplessness. She felt it too. And still, she dug her nails into the skin of his neck and swiveled her body so they both faced the blank wall.

She dragged him by the skin between his ears to the bathroom. He should've been heavier, but his legs had no traction. They struggled across the floor where the shag carpet had been, down the hall where the framed photos of her daughter had hung. Nothing was sacred anymore.

She pulled him hard into the bathroom by the front door—the one where they'd first fallen in love—and he let her, squealing like a coddled child. She couldn't tell if he was bleeding or if her blood had merged them together. For a moment, the air went prickly and the house smelled like pennies.

Time seemed to stop as she looked down at him with urgency. She expected to see him looking up at her, but his eyes were darting like paper planes. She wanted to bend down, to kiss his dry, open snout. She wanted to let him swallow her body if it meant he'd stop screaming. But she wasn't ready to let him win, not this time. She swung her arm in an arc and pulled the bathroom door hard on its hinges, trapping the pig inside.

She could still hear "Für Elise" humming inside her head. It reverberated above the squealing from the other side of the door, above the ringing bouncing between her ears like an echo. Above her own sobs.

Her body shook and the flashbangs returned. She concentrated hard, made them look like pigs in tutus performing a ballet inside her daughter's jewelry box. She was there, directing their giant bodies from the wings. Keeping time with her arms. Her daughter sat in the front row in a red plush seat. The pigs reached out their arms and pulled her on stage alongside them. Sashaying across the stage in splintered harmony, she was one of them. Her own body, massive and clumsy. She had never felt so beautiful, so seen. She was there. And everyone was clapping.

“But that’s what happens when you’re poor. It strips away options until there’s nothing left but desperation.”

– W. T. Paterson
“Where’s Lucy?”

WHERE'S LUCY?

W.T. Paterson

The hottest toy that Christmas, the one thing my daughter Hattie wanted more than anything in the world, was the *Where's Lucy?* doll. Created in the likeness of Lucy Pasternak, the nine-year-old girl gone missing from Kanahak, Nebraska, retailers couldn't keep it in stock and toy manufacturers were blindsided with unrealistic demand. Everyone had to have one. With all proceeds going to the Pasternak family, and the tagline "Bring Lucy Home," people thought they were legitimately helping. And that was the real gut punch; this little girl was everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Lucy vanished from her back yard. Police couldn't catch a lead and the Feds scratched their heads for weeks. She was there, then she wasn't. She was seen, then snatched. Amber alerts yielded nothing, nor did the candlelight vigils, flyer campaigns, or bake sale fundraisers. When the story went national, I knew they'd never find the poor girl. With visibility that large, whoever took her would go to great lengths to make sure she stayed gone. Too much of a liability otherwise. The news report of the sweet child with straight black bangs broadcast into every home and every phone may as well have been a living obituary.

Hattie had seen better years, too. We lost her mother shortly after Valentine's Day to addiction, the final months being a tortuous march through detox and relapse. Last Christmas, Hattie quietly watched the withering until her mother overdosed in the bathroom two months later. My little girl has refused to cut or brush her hair since finding her mother keeled over the tub. But that's what happens when you're poor. It strips away options until there's nothing left but desperation. How could I ever explain that the *Where's Lucy?* doll was a long shot at best, that Santa might not have the means to get her the most coveted toy in the world and even if he did, it probably wouldn't change anything?

"Daddy," she said the day after Thanksgiving. "There's only one thing I want this year." It was the first time she had approached me with a request.

Most of the time, her days were spent in solemn contemplation running through what the other children in school had said to her. Recently, some of the girls had taken to calling her trash, while certain boys played a game where they thought her invisible, but when we had to microwave Thanksgiving dinner and make mashed potatoes from a packet, she understood her lot in life. "I want to bring Lucy home."

Over her shoulder, an advertisement ran on the television. Happy children played with the sixty-dollar doll, brushed its hair, hugged it tight, and tracked its location with a smartphone app through a GPS chip. I wondered if she wanted one to fit in with everyone, that she'd bought into the hype, or if there was something else deep down that a grieving child couldn't fully express.

Lucy, the small missing girl. The perfect black bangs. The porcelain face with big eyes. She'd taken on a new life in the wake of her old one.

A good father doesn't say no; he finds a way to give his child what she needs. After the tumultuous year that Hattie had been through, that doll was a symbol of hope.

I called Josiah after months on the straight and narrow.

"Sorry, brother," Josiah said. "My guys can't even get our hands on those damn dolls. But if you need some coin, you can always run a bag."

"I'm out of the game," I said, even though every person is always one step away from falling back into old patterns. Detox and relapse. Here, and gone. Besides, Hattie needed a father. A present one.

"Courier. That's all I ask. Give your girl a proper Christmas," he said.

I asked what I was running. He said not to worry, that he had forty large with my name on it if I delivered the payload to a contact just south of the city. It was too good to pass up, even though my last job had landed me in some serious hot water.

But the thought of Hattie waking up with presents to open, some new clothes, and a touch of Christmas magic in her life, I did what needed to be done.

Josiah met me at the warehouse near the dock. His thin face was covered by a bushy beard. The night was cold and still and the rusty chains that moored the boats shivered in the wind. The cardboard box was only a few pounds heavy, but I tucked it under my arm and went back to my car. I drove south of the city to the handwritten address and circled the block a few times to work up the nerve.

Outside, I buzzed the apartment. The door unlocked and I pushed inside to walk up a staircase into the second story hallway. 12B. I knocked with two hard raps and two light. The door opened and a man in dirty tightie whities filled the frame. His pot belly hung over the flap of his underwear,

and scattered chest hair, wild and frayed, led to his face that was covered with a giant cartoon rabbit's mask. Behind him, a woman in soiled lingerie and a cartoon fox's mask writhed on the bed. The thing about the masks is that I couldn't see their eyes, just small screens painted with irises and corneas like the heads of characters at an amusement park. Beside the bed were two one-piece costumes crumpled and lifeless, the faux fur like roadkill in the dark apartment.

Furries and their yiffing.

The man took the box and picked lint from his belly button.

"Care to join?" he asked and turned to a spare coyote costume with a big cartoon head draped over the chair. I was about to turn and leave—furries aren't my thing—but that's when I saw it. An unopened *Where's Lucy?* doll on the dresser. Junkie insurance.

I stepped inside and the door swung closed behind. The room stank of unwashed bodies, the pungent sweat of uncleanness and sex, bodily discharge and unmoving air.

The man tore open Josiah's box and looked at the woman. The large cartoon mask with big eyes and toothy grin seemed to reflect the intentions of whoever was underneath. The woman rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. The man waved at me to follow, but I stayed put. He tailed the woman and seconds later, their mask-heads rolled out through the door like victims of a guillotine. They bickered about something. I crept to the dresser and looked at the unopened box. Little Lucy Pasternak stared up at me with those big, unblinking eyes. I put a hand over them, lifted the box under my arm, and I was gone.

At the dock, Josiah handed me a backpack full of cash and I went home.

Hattie was asleep on the couch. The television kept her company, though the volume was barely audible. With the doll hidden in the closet and forty grand at my disposal, I silently promised to give my girl the best holiday she could ever ask for.



On Christmas Eve, two cops showed up at my door. I knew why they were there; everyone's got something to hide.

Everyone.

"Been some break-ins recently. People getting creative about holiday cash, or getting that doll, the missing girl one," the first cop said. He grinned like he knew something.

"Poor taste if you ask me, but hey—pain does things to a family, ya

know?" the second said. Neither blinked as sharp winter wind pushed through the door.

"Thanks for the heads up, boys," I said. "Anything you need from me?"

"A senator got robbed a few weeks back. Lost one of those dolls. Someone broke in and snatched it," the first said.

"Can you imagine that? A senator!" the second said. "That's what we're up against out here. People robbing senators and kidnapping an already kidnapped girl."

"You know anything about that?" the first asked, and both cops zeroed my face.

"Wish I could help," I said. "But I've got problems of my own." I nodded at Hattie sitting on the floor watching television, her matted hair like a lion's mane. "Lost her mother this year."

The two cops nodded and checked in with each other.

"You hear anything, you give us a call," they said. The first tipped his hat and left. The second scowled with wild, feral eyes.

I closed the door and allowed my heart to pound.

That was no accident. That senator—the furry—saw my face. Coming forward in defense with allegations of his drug use and fetish would place me at the crime scene and boom, there goes Christmas with my little girl. I'm taken in, booked, and tossed behind bars.

Because that's what happens to the poor when they live by rules of the rich, even though the rich have the *most* to hide.

"Daddy, can I open a present early? Just one?" Hattie asked. Our meek tree with thin branches sparkled with half-lit string lights over a handful of poorly-wrapped presents.

On the news, the Pasternak family announced that they would be opening their home to fans of the *Where's Lucy?* doll, a sort of mecca for those willing to trek. It coincided with the launch of a line of accessory items pulled straight from Lucy's room. Now, fans could buy life-sized or miniatures of the same bedspread, posters, and clothes.

"Of course, baby," I said, and then pointed. "That one there."

Hattie reached under the tree and pulled out the box. She peeled back the edge of the wrapping paper with thin fingers, careful not to rip. Everything was a fragile balance between whole and torn. Her eyes went wide. She slapped a palm across her mouth.

"For me?" she asked with eyes no longer eclipsed by grief.

"Merry Christmas," I said.

Hattie ran over and gave me a hug, then back to the doll and removed her from the packaging. She hugged and squeezed, singing incoherent lullabies, then took a small pink brush and ran it through the straight black

hair.

I watched more of the story about the Pasternak family. Little girls lined up outside their door all dressed like Lucy. Same black bangs, same outfit, the same wide-eyed expression. This family had found a way to bring Lucy home without bringing her home. I wasn't sure if I should be disgusted or impressed. Desperation does funny things to people.

Outside, the cops sat in their car parked at the edge of the block. Maybe it would be good to get out of dodge for a while.

I called Josiah.

"I'm going dark," I said.

"Peace be with you, and with you," he said. "Three ghosts?"

"Two," I said, drawing the shades. "My face was glass case."

"Hats and beards," Josiah said. "Rats leave before the flood. Nasty vermin, but they survive."

I hung up. The cops flipped on their flashing blues, pulled a U turn, and sped away to some other call. Likely a tip from an *anonymous* source. Josiah had a way of playing the game.

"Hats, you wanna go?" I asked, nodding at the TV.

Hattie's mouth dropped open. She nodded slow and steady.

"Can I cut my hair to be like Lucy?" she asked.

What could I tell her? This wasn't about me, and a good father knows when to give into phases.

"Get the scissors," I said.

A moment later Hattie returned with kitchen shears and a fistful of sharpies. Hair dye for the poor.

I sat her on a kitchen chair and spent thirty minutes dragging a brush through snarls before giving in and hacking away. Once gone, we each took strands and colored until Hattie's entire hair went black and shiny and the apartment smelled like ink.

She didn't look like Lucy Pasternak, but she also looked like Lucy Pasternak and I imagined my little Hattie being taken. The idea was so unnerving that I made her sleep next to me on the couch for safe keeping. The two of us there on Christmas Eve by the glow of the television, legs sprawled and tucked over couch arms, Hattie's hair leaving a stamp on the pillow, and it was the happiest I'd been all year.



We drove to Kanahak, Nebraska on Christmas Day. The roads were mostly empty save for the families packed into their cars rushing to get from one relative to the next.

Outside of the city, it was all highways and overpasses. It was exit ramps and gas stations, food courts and coffee to-go. It was everywhere else in the world, only there, and there, and there.

We pulled in after the sun went dark and the neighborhood Christmas lights turned the world into a carnival of reds, blues, greens, and yellows. I'd never seen anything quite like it, and there was a certain charm in the way those string lights danced across day-old snow. It was somehow comforting.

The Pasternak family house had a crowd outside and a bunch of little Lucys playing with sleds on the front lawn. Hattie got out of the car, clutching her doll in one hand and my gruff mitt in the other. She took hesitant steps like the other happy kids wouldn't be so happy when they saw her.

Instead, they ran over and offered up a sled, wishing us both a Merry Christmas.

The two-story home was atop a small hill, and the driveway wove around the side like a question mark. Parents of the kids-at-play poured whiskey into their hot chocolate and cheers'd each other at a job well done. Happy kids? Check. Their winter parkas and stylish wool hats seemed a far cry from my workman's jeans and overcoat.

"Which one's yours?" a parent asked.

"The one that looks like Lucy," I said, and we all laughed. From the top of that driveway, I peeked into the back yard where a wooden swing set swayed in the night air. Further back, a big tree with exposed roots rocked in the wind. That tree.

That tree.

Behind it was a forest that led to who-knows-what before the property lines became someone else's land. Not a fence in sight.

"They letting people inside?" I asked and shoved my cold hands into my pockets.

"Nah. They want some quiet time alone. Kids can play out here, though," a parent said.

Another car pulled up, and an angry woman leaned out the window, swearing and cussing, calling the children vulgar, and besmirching the name of all things holy.

"Lucy was never real! She's a ploy to sell toys! You all fell for it, you consumerist assholes!" she yelled.

The driver flipped us off and the car sped away. Some of the children started to cry and the parents told me that this had been happening all day.

"Apparently it's some big conspiracy," one of them said. "Radicals, deep state secrets, you know the type."

"I mean, I've never met Lucy personally, but that doesn't mean she

wasn't real," another parent said. She turned to me. "Have you?"

"Me?" I said. "I'm from Chicago."

Mrs. Pasternak opened the garage door and came out with a tray full of cocoa. She said she'd heard the commotion and that if the children wanted to come take a quick tour, they wouldn't mind.

The woman looked broken, fragile. Lines, etched by tears, pleas, and that which could never be undone ran across her face. Whatever pleasantness she presented seemed a cover for a deep, dark wound that would never heal.

We collected our kids and took the tour.

Inside, we saw the fireplace hung with three empty stockings, a full tree brimming with lights and boxes of wrapped gifts beneath, and a cooked ham on the table picked and poked. The rugs had been vacuumed and felt plush beneath my boots.

Upstairs in Lucy's room, the girls begged for pictures while they posed next to posters, the bedspread, and going through the closet. Mr. Pasternak explained that replicas would be available for purchase online soon, but as a special treat, each visitor could take one thing if they promised to take care of it. The other girls grabbed a mounted postcard, a butterfly barrette, a hanging bath towel.

"What do you want, kiddo?" I asked Hattie.

She shrugged and clutched the doll. I looked outside and saw the tree lumbering in the dark, gone silver from the moon. It stared back at me as I stood in that second-floor bedroom.

When the spell lifted, I noticed Hattie had tucked her doll into Lucy's actual bed and pulled the covers up to the chin.

"We can go now," she said.

"But ..." I said, and nodded to her doll, the impossible-to-get item, the one thing she wanted more than anything in the world.

"I brought her home," she said, then reached up and took my hand.

On the way out, Mrs. Pasternak bid us goodnight and handed us each a fresh sugar cookie.

"Pay no mind to those cars outside. Terrible folk who say nasty things. Calling us awful names and harassing our guests."

"Apologies," I said, and gave a tight-lipped nod.

"Do I know you?" Mrs. Pasternak asked. "Do you know my nephew Josiah?"

"I'm not from around here," I smiled, and ushered Hattie outside into the cold night. Sure enough, a car sat at the edge of the driveway, honking and calling us crisis actors, people paid to make the story appear real, that it was all a giant hoax to move product.

“You’ll burn in hell for the lies you tell!” they shouted, but drove away before any of us cared to rebuke.

In the car letting the heat wash us down, I thought about how good Hattie was as a daughter and wondered how I’d ever gotten so lucky. There were things she’d never know and things I’d never tell, like how her mother had OD’d on a fix that I brought home bought with payout from taking little Lucy Pasternak. How could I explain that I’d done it to help ease our financial burden, to get Mom a fix before sending her to rehab, but how it had all gone south? That tree can hide a full-grown man and that forest makes for a clean escape. Those straight black bangs and large eyes had stared at me in hopeless fear as my hand slapped across her mouth and we were gone. Sold at the docks. Human cargo.

Hattie asked if we could drive around and look at the lights. A good father doesn’t say no; he does what needs to be done, and so we idled through the neighborhood absorbing the magic of Christmas lights as they reflected off the snow.

THE PROCEDURE

Jeff Adams

He finds himself staring at a building's front door, which groans open. A middle-aged woman with striking red hair and gorgeous green eyes and dressed in a nurse's uniform greets Eugene Spicer and invites him to step inside.

"My name is Iris, but if you don't mind please call me Miss Lundy. As a practical matter, I don't go by my first name." She wears a badge that says *Hello My Name Is Miss Lundy*. Her face rings a bell.

Eugene does not recall how he got to this place or why he is even here. He senses that it is a familiar location, and that the building could be the workplace of someone he knows, yet he has no memory of ever approaching it. "You can call me Gene—oh wait, no—forget that."

"Not to worry, Mr. Spicer." Miss Lundy leads him down a short hallway to another door. "Please stay here. I'll be back." After several minutes, that door opens wide to reveal a smiling Iris Lundy, now dressed as a nun. "Please come in."

Eugene steps into a large room with no windows and one enormous chandelier that illuminates the entire space. At the far end of the room sits an elderly man in a leather chair situated behind a huge oak desk.

"This is Mr. Spicer," Miss Lundy announces, and disappears before Eugene can thank her.

The old man stands. "Please enter, sir." He gestures to another leather chair facing the opposite side of his desk.

Eugene steps forward. "Good to meet you, um—" He suddenly realizes that he does not know the man's name. And it seems to take forever for him to cross the room.

"John Smithy."

"Mister Smithy."

"Call me John. Miss Lundy gets all caught up in formalities, as if breaking a rule could damn you to hell. But we do respect those rules don't

we, mostly the harmless ones though, even if we don't always obey them. Then again, what about dogma? A guideline if you ask me. Nobody has asked me, unfortunately, which is my fault, to be honest. But still, it makes me grumpy when onerous human enhancements are levied on my principles when they should really be left alone. Sadly, this is not for us today. We have a different agenda. Please take a seat."

Eugene is confused by the old man's odd lecture. Nonetheless, and as instructed, he begins his descent into the chair. But he stops halfway because, as John Smithy remains standing, the old man's body language also gives off the strong signal that he is not about to sit down; he is, in fact, taking close measure of his new guest.

Smithy wears a rumpled, gray business suit, an off-white shirt and a solid gray tie. Everything hangs off him as if his body has no mass. He has a full head of bushy, whitish hair. His skin tone is ashen, and he has a forgettable face like one might see in a newspaper ad for life insurance—a necessary presence to indicate a version of humanity, but the real subject is something else entirely.

Eugene creaks slowly back up to a standing position as Smithy extends a limp hand, which Eugene grabs. The hand is cold and clammy, a soft bag of flesh and bone. Eugene quickly releases his grip, feeling that he has unknowingly breached a privacy, such as the accidental touching of another man's groin in a steam room.

"Do you feel it yet?" Smithy asks.

"I'm sorry?"

"The tickle in the throat."

Eugene tries to clear his throat but he cannot. Nor can he swallow. His throat feels weird, as though it is stuck in an open position. "Am I supposed to?"

"Some do, some don't."

"Feel?"

"Extremely few get to meet me. They are the ones who don't go to black during the procedure, which they may or may not feel. But that's a trivial matter, and it is all my doing. Mainly, no one really believes the story they tell about meeting me, no matter how hard they try to be convincing."

"Procedure?"

"I am not an illusion, Eugene."

"Iris never—"

"Miss Lundy, please. You know her preference."

"Never told you—"

"Please, I knew you were coming here before she did."

They are both seated now. Eugene does not recall when they sat

down.



Before his anesthesia, he protested the need for anything. "What's the emergency?" he asked.

It wasn't an emergency situation, the woman said to her husband Eugene, but something ought to be done. Something to find out if anything is going on.

"What makes you think something is going on?" he asked.

"It has been more than a year."

"All my life, really. Somehow it got on your nerves about a year ago."

"No one coughs when they eat," she said.

"Not every time. Not me."

"Most of the time."

"I'm used to it. My mother would cough when she ate too, as I recall."

"We need to do something now."

"I already did something. Post nasal drip, according to the doctor," he said.

"Do you believe her?"

"Well, she is a doctor."

"Something is going on."

There was cancer in his family. He went back to the doctor to express his worry about that, but mostly to inform her that his wife would not let the subject rest. The doctor prescribed a barium swallow test.

A week later he was directed to a room deep in the bowels of the local hospital. He was greeted by two very cheery college aged volunteers who gave him the impression that their gleeful welcome had more to do with witnessing a person consume a vile-tasting liquid than trying to relax him.

And then there was the huge pile of equipment dominating the center of the room. Two vertical towers of computer screens framed an examination table set on its end. The table sported three sets of bright red restraining straps positioned at chest, waist, and ankle levels, each set buckled and ready for a new assignment. A tangled mass of wires, originating from two large cabinets to which the computer screens were attached, hung suspended in the air, looking like an electronic tumbleweed. A black power cord, as thick as a garden hose, snaked across the floor and disappeared into a hole at the base of a wall. Eugene struggled against thinking he was in an execution chamber.

"Do you suffer from vertigo?" one of the volunteers asked.

"You mean like getting car sick?"

The volunteer pointed to the examination table. “You are going to stand with your back against that, and we are going to strap you in.”

“Are you worried I’m going to collapse or something?”

“We are going to tilt you backward until you are parallel to the floor. You will be on your back, and then you will roll to one side. You will roll again onto your back, and then we will tilt you up to vertical.”

“And when do I swallow the barium?”

“You’ll see,” the other volunteer replied. “But basically during all of it.”

It occurred to Eugene that the red straps were really to prevent someone from bolting out of the room. “Sounds like fun.”

The radiologist joined the little group. He was a pleasant looking man, easily younger than forty. To Eugene’s relief, he displayed the sincere authority of someone who knew precisely how to allay a person’s fear of the unknown—by addressing it directly.

“It’s never as bad as people might think,” the radiologist proclaimed. “Barium is just a little chalky, kind of like the stuff you would take to settle an upset stomach, so don’t worry. Some of my patients actually like the taste. But if you have any problem during all of this—it won’t take but eight to ten minutes, where you drink in various positions and I read the screens for every swallow—we can pause things or stop entirely. Simple as that.”

Eugene was grateful for the reassurance and for having been given control of the situation. “Okay let’s go, doc.”

Everything went smoothly, just as Eugene had hoped, and just as the radiologist predicted. Better yet, the radiologist told him that what he saw looked normal. The report would be sent to the family physician by the end of the day. Eugene wondered if this would be enough to satisfy his wife.

“So, can you confirm that all I have is post nasal drip?”

“Oh no,” the radiologist replied. “Structurally, evaluating you from the outside, things look normal on the inside, except for some slowness in how fast what you swallow gets through your esophagus and into your stomach. The slowing occurs as we age and is not dangerous. But no, the better way to analyze things—you know, whether it’s reflux or something more serious—would be from the inside.”

“Inside? How?”

“Endoscopy. Think of it like a colonoscopy, but going into the upper end of the body, from the mouth down to the stomach. It’s pretty quick, and you are sedated. You don’t feel a thing. They get an actual view of everything, not the x-ray shadows that I read, although I am confident in the accuracy of what I told you.”

“Would you do the endoscopy?” Eugene asked. It was as much a request as a measure of his curiosity.

“No, a gastroenterologist does it. And I’m not saying an endoscopy is mandatory. But there is enough left that we don’t know about now to provide a diagnosis, and to indicate endoscopy as a next step. So, it would be covered by insurance. It’s up to you.”

Good grief no, Eugene thought, it’s really up to my wife.



“How does it feel?” Eugene asks the old man.

“To be me?” Smithy replies. He laughs and points to himself.

“No, the tickle. What should I expect?”

“Relax, Eugene. This is research and you are one of my subjects. Consider this a consultation. We don’t have much time.”

Once again, Eugene tries unsuccessfully to clear his throat, and he cannot swallow. He has a vague memory of someone telling him, in an earlier consultation, that this unusual condition was deliberate and necessary to avoid complications during the procedure. “What do you want of me?”

“That is precisely my question for you,” Smithy responds.

Eugene is puzzled. “I don’t really know who you are or why I should want anything from you.”

“Exactly my thesis!” Smithy exclaims, slapping a lifeless looking hand on his desk. “Totally consistent with the others. Now you know why I get grumpy.”

“The others?”

“Like you, they left us,” Smithy says, gesturing with his arms raised high and wide to indicate that he means the whole house. “They left me!” he adds in an angry tone of voice, pointing two aged forefingers at his heart.

“You selected me for this? Is this some kind of retribution?” Eugene racks his brain for a time in his life when he left something that was important to an old man he did not know, allegedly with a legion of deserters.

“You selected yourself.”

“I have committed an act I can’t recall and which makes you grumpy? Who says *grumpy* these days!”

“Do not blaspheme, son.”

“Well how about that, another blast from the past.”

“When was the last time you went to church?”

“Oh God, I don’t know.”

“I do.”



An orderly wearing a surgical mask came to the foot of Eugene's bed in the outpatient ward, read a chart, asked him for his name and date of birth, checked the intravenous line connected to his right arm, and told him a nurse would be by to roll him away.

Right behind the orderly came a masked nurse, who repeated the questions the orderly asked and said to Eugene, "Ready for us, Mr. Spicer?"

"Do I have a choice?" he replied, looking for a laugh.

He didn't get one from the nurse, who was busy raising the sidebars and releasing the wheel brakes of Eugene's bed. She reached over and placed the chart on his chest. She wore a badge that read *Nurse Lund*. Then, placing herself behind the bed, Nurse Lund wheeled her supine patient toward the surgery room.

Dr. Smith, Eugene's gastroenterologist, greeted him at the entrance. "Hello, Mr. Spicer. I'll be seeing you in a minute."

"Doubt that I'll be seeing you, though," Eugene said with a chuckle.

Once the bed was placed inside and its brakes secured, Nurse Lund came around to Eugene's left side. She held what looked like a small white spray can and asked him to open his mouth. As he did so, Nurse Lund said, "This will numb your throat and keep you from gagging."

What she didn't tell him, as she began to spray, was how awful it would taste. But before Eugene could tell her the obvious, she was finished.

Like a skilled magician, out of nowhere Nurse Lund revealed a red plastic form about four inches long and an inch or so wide, with a quarter-sized hole in the middle of it. "Can you lift your head a little for me now, and open your mouth again?"

Eugene did as Nurse Lund asked.

"Now close your mouth over this whole thing."

Without her telling him, Eugene realized that the hole was to guide and stabilize the doctor's probe as it made its way down and illuminated his innermost physical secrets. It was then that Eugene got an up-close look at Nurse Lund's bright red hair, and her stunningly beautiful emerald green irises.

The plastic guide secured to his jaw, his throat numb and gaping open, Eugene watched Nurse Lund stick the sedative needle into the intravenous line. She squeezed the plunger ever so slowly.

Suddenly, Eugene Spicer found himself standing and staring at the front door of a building he had never seen before.



Eugene's wife drove him home from the hospital. He was groggy and very thirsty. Although it was the middle of the afternoon on a very sunny day, he wanted desperately to go to sleep.

Somewhere in his foggy mind, he heard the words of Dr. Smith telling him earlier that there was an area of concern in the esophagus, and that he would know for sure with results from the biopsy.

"Try not to worry too much," he'd told Eugene. "It could be nothing."

As the car crawled along in heavy traffic, it paused in front of a local church that had posted a large sign describing times of services for the coming Sunday. Eugene read it all and thought that ten o'clock would be a perfect time. But then, he wondered if he had waited too long.

POISONED EARTH

Corey Niles

we planted a tree
in poisoned earth
drowned it in water
scorched it with sun

gave it everything
everything we could think of
to make it thrive
despite the death
below the surface

but the bark dried
rotted
branches tore off in the wind
until there was only a hollow stump

I visit it sometimes
run my fingers over its jagged edges
wonder if we had uprooted it
moved it elsewhere
would it have flourished

other times
I stare at the dead thing
surrounded by blanched, dry earth
and think that some seeds
are destined for this



THERE IS NO TOMORROW

David H. West/Staff Contributing Artist

THE TRIPLE G

Gregory Jeffers

I was first to notice them, three of the most broken down men I'd ever seen, lurking at the steel fence. That fence, the barbed wire stretched across the top, and our rifles were the only things keeping them at bay.

My brother and I were with Dad, in crippled lawn chairs on the front porch, squinting at the rising half-moon shrouded in the ever-present smog. The moon had taken on the appearance of a cotton ball hastily pulled from a pill bottle.

Dad was smoking his nightly roll-your-own. Ricky and I had just finished giving each other haircuts. Ricky had limited experience in this regard, so my hair was at least as short as his, maybe shorter. No way I was trusting a thirteen-year-old to style me in any way I'd want to be photographed. Not that photos were any longer an option.

Then these three showed up. I sucked in a scream, folded my arms over my breasts and grabbed my shoulders. Men skinny with famine. Drawn, nicotine-stained faces, pant legs shredded. One of them wobbled at the hips. Another, the tallest, had a thin mustache scraggly-curling over his lips. A web of saliva spanned the third man's gaping mouth, glinting in the fuzzy moonlight.

These guys and a few other destitutes had busted into the old motel down the road. Dad had shut it down and boarded up the windows a few months earlier, and we'd moved everything up the road to the fenced in compound of our little house and the Triple G, not that long ago a gas station and convenience store.

Squatters. Dad warned us to give them a wide berth. For the first couple weeks there'd been women and children, too. But they'd disappeared slowly. I'd fought off the urge to ponder on it much.

Now, alerted by my gasp, Dad swung the rifle off his knee and jumped to his feet, taking the porch steps in a leap and flicking his cigarette to the pavement.

Ricky ducked between our chairs.

Dad tilted his grip on the stock, levering the barrel into his other hand as he approached the fence.

“Get,” he said. “You can’t come here.”

“We need water, Boss,” Wobbly said. “The well hand pump gaskets are shot.”

I took a moment to notice his beat up boots. Neither any longer had a heel. The other two squatters were barefoot.

The tall one with the mustache gripped the chain links with one hand. “And food.”

“Just water. We need water,” Wobbly said. He eyed me with a look menacing and beseeching at the same time.

I tic-shivered. “They do need water, Dad.”

He ignored me. “Get back. I’ll find a way to get you water, but we don’t owe you nothing. You’re trespassing.”

The tall one tugged at his mustache. “It’s not about owing. It’s about what’s right. We didn’t bring this on.”

“Those sons-of-bitches you helped put in office sure as shit did,” Dad yelled, turning his back on them. “Tish, go fetch the spare hand pump out of the second repair bay.”

I wasn’t sure why he hadn’t asked Ricky. Ricky knew his way around the garage better than me. Probably because I was three years older, near seventeen. But Dad still generally treated me like a kid.

Our small wood house was attached to the grocery end of the gas station, set back from it and two service bays like a reluctant cousin. I crept off the porch and across the pavement, staring at the brown grass in the cracks.

Ricky shadowed me.

What we referred to as our front yard was in actuality the fenced parking lot of the former gas station and convenience store. The glass in both gas pumps was broken, nozzle on one severed mere weeks after the Big Dust. The bullet-riddled sign out front was still legible. *Triple G*, it read in bold flowery cursive, then in plainer thinner print below, *Duncan’s Gas, Groceries, and Guns*.

I fetched the hand pump out to Dad. Ricky was visibly shaking. Dad handed me his rifle and heaved the pump over the fence. It bounced on the top strand of barbed wire and flipped to the ground. Wobbly picked it up. He and Drool headed back to the motel. Tall Mustache guy barked out a laugh and licked his lips, staring me down before turning to follow the others.

The drifters and vagrants scared hell out of me. The fence and the guns should have been enough to make me feel safe, I suppose. But there seemed

always to be a gnawing. A sense that a greater malintent lurked *inside* the compound, incubating like a bacteria culture preparing to bloom, or cocooned in a musty corner nibbling itself to maturity. This uneasy possibility, the real threat festering inside Triple G, bided its time, I felt sure.



The motel, the only other building in sight, sat a tenth of a mile further down Highway 78. Duncan's No-Tell Motel. Dad had purchased it with the Triple G two years earlier, while Mom was still alive. He'd given up his job as service manager at the Chevy dealership and we'd left the city because he believed the political shift in the country would soon lead to widespread violence. The motel had a little bar and dance floor, but Dad, a non-drinker, had never bothered to open them. He rented the rooms for about six months before the country went to hell, then shut the whole thing down and moved the bedding and most of the booze up to the gas station.

The Triple G doors and windows already had steel security grills when we bought the place, what with the guns, ammo and all stored inside. Dad hired a company from the next town up to erect the fence. The foreman made funny faces and large shoulder shrugs to his crew the whole time they were putting the three strands of barbed wire on top, like he thought Dad was nuts. That was before the Big Dust and all the looting. Bet they don't smirk that much anymore.

Ricky and I had painted a shuffle board court on the asphalt, and between that and the old netless basketball hoop the previous owner had hung off a telephone pole at the side of the building, we stayed busy enough in the mornings. By midday it was typically too hot to do much, and we'd retire to the house to read or play two-body-bridge, a game Mom taught us.



A couple months after the squatters showed up, others appeared. At first all I could see in the blistering haze were three lumps stumbling toward us on the shimmering asphalt. Might just as well have been sage brush for all I could make out, as I squinted through the chain links.

Ricky appeared at my side, breathing hard. "Who is it, Tish?"

I scratched my scabby elbow. "Damned if I know."

"You're not supposed to talk like that you know."

I squinted harder, fending off the haze with a flat hand. "Looks like a woman with two kids."

"Yeah. One of each."

I looked at him and squinched my lips to the side.

"A boy and a girl," he said.

"I got it." I gave him a slight tap on the back of the head, something I'd seen Dad do. I focused back on the three drifters. "Shit, she can barely walk. Looks like she'll keel over any minute. Better get Dad."

"You said shit."

I stared at him for a second. It dawned on me just then how skinny he'd gotten. How we all had. I didn't know if I was angry at him or the world.

"Why don't you grow up? Damn near fourteen aren't you? Just get Dad, pain in the ass. I swear, sometimes I think the past two years have retarded your development."

He started off and looked back. "I'm telling."

I faked a kick. "You do, and you won't be able to pee for a week."

He ran off and returned with Dad just as the woman and her kids arrived at the gate. She and Dad stared at each other for a few seconds, like one dog with a bone and one without. We kids were either too scared or mystified to speak. The wind came up and coated my lips with fine dirt from the abandoned highway. I licked it off, setting my teeth on edge.

"Can you help us, mister?" She squeaked the words out, each painful to hear. She had what looked like a porcelain doll face someone had taken a small bat to—tiny cracks, as if her whole face might crumble at any second. She let go of the girl's hand. The girl was maybe a year or two younger than me. Then the woman wiped her hands on her flowered dress just at the hips and placed them on the woven wire fence like she was at a faith healing. "I swear we won't do no mischief. Just a drink is all we need. Then we'll be on our way."

The notion they might have to take up their slog again appeared to send a new jolt of misery into the girl, who already looked like she'd died and been obliged to return to life through an apple corer. The boy, who was so stoop-shouldered I'd not been able to see his face, looked up. He had the same tell-tale burns a lot of the blast survivors had. Hard to miss. Queasiness rumbled in my stomach.

I moved my stare to the brass padlocks on the gate, wondering if Dad would show some pity. These were the sorts of moments when I missed Mom most. She loved those big beautiful brass locks. *Your daddy ever forgets to lock those beauties, you save us all, darling.*

Dad hesitated. The motel squatters were garnering some interest—in the females I supposed—and slithered in our direction. I gave Dad an elbow.

He looked over my shoulder and unsnapped the key ring from the hasp on his belt. Worked the three brass padlocks free from their iron rings, and with an angry groan from the hinges, wheeled the gate open. The

woman near fell in on top of Ricky and the two kids teetered after her. Dad took two furtive glances up and down the barren and endless highway in a ridiculous embrace of imagined security, then closed and locked the gate, each brass padlock clicking with a type of certainty that was otherwise nonexistent at the Triple G. Or in the world, for that matter.

Mustache guy winked at me.

I peed a little.



I had a boyfriend back in Tulsa. First one, when I was fourteen. Mom had liked him. Dad didn't care one way or the other, like so much in those days. The service department was his be-all and end-all. I believed he loved us, just couldn't show it. Couldn't or wouldn't, I'm still not sure. But Mom more than made up for it. She didn't dote, but she did emote. I didn't make that up. Mom used to say it about her mother, Grandma Stone. Now *that* woman could cook.

Boyfriend's name was Bear Scattergood. I was as much infatuated with his name as I was with the boy. He was big-boned and handsome and had a waist and hips I was forever wanting to get my hands on. But there at Triple G, at night, or in the afternoon just before our meal, when my hunger was at its meanest, I thought about his flat strong chest, spread like a mesa before my mind's eye. I longed to taste it, grope it, walk on it, pitch a tent on it and live there forever.

I often wondered if someday he wouldn't just come meandering down Highway 78, just like these folks had. I'd go with him. Wouldn't matter where he was headed.



The woman, her name was Elise. Kids were Bud and Geraldine. I figured Bud for a nickname but didn't care to explore it further. In the first two days, Elise and Geraldine had washed every surface that could repel water and dusted every one that couldn't. Geraldine had a drawn face and pronounced front teeth, a sad horsey look. The longer they stuck around, the more permanently the mother's wide mouth hardened into that slight grin most often worn by the self-satisfied. I near expected her to start whistling.

Bud, who I reckoned to be my age, turned out to be pretty handy in the shop and took to mending the fences and fashioning gaskets to replace the ones in the hand pump. He and Dad hit it off from the get-go. "Two strong silent types who'd rather tighten a bolt than hug a woman," Mom would have

said if she were there.

I grew suspicious about things being too good to be true, and sure enough, six days in, Elise took off on her Bible shit. I was surprised Dad didn't fuss a peep about it. I figured once her holiness got in his way, things would be different, but for the time being he seemed okay with blessings on the meals, Bible-reading at night, and various quotings of scripture at what appeared to be purely random moments of misguided or insincere righteousness.

Mom had been spiritual, and religious to an extent, but shied away from brimstone and snake oil. When we lived in Tulsa, she was a strong advocate of Christian values, but our Bible was mostly shelf dressing.

Within two weeks Elise was sleeping on Mom's side of the bed. It broke my heart to see Dad betray Mom like that, but I'd heard men had their needs. It didn't hold water in my book, but I let it go for everyone's sake.

Ricky picked up on it and approached me a few mornings after the sleeping arrangements changed.

"She's in Mom's bed."

"What?" I feigned ignorance.

"That drifter. Elise. She's sleeping in Mom's bed. With Dad."

Pretending wasn't going to help. "I know. I was hoping you might not find out. I was hoping she'd leave soon. I was hoping they'd all leave soon."

He broke into tears, let me hold him for the first time since he was a toddler.



Things got worse when the booze arrived. Bud must have found the stash in the second service bay. Dad was off hunting, and I was on the porch when Elise and Bud came out with a case of Jack Daniels. It started out harmless enough, some fun evening noises drifting up the stairs into my room. But Dad had no experience with drinking, at least none I was aware of, and it wasn't but a week or two later the sound of arguing and glass crashing began.

Then I all but gave up on Dad. I'd lost my mother and would have predicted losing my father to be on a par with the sorrow I had been feeling for the last two years. But this turned out to be more of a grudge than sorrow. And I was equally irritated he had discarded Ricky and taken on Bud as his comrade.

But then one morning, maybe two months after Elise moved in, Dad served my breakfast and sat down next to me. He seemed unusually well groomed and didn't smell of booze or tobacco. "We need to go hunting

today. You up for it?"

I felt light then, like a backpack of stones been winched off my shoulders. "Sure thing. You bet I'm up for it."

"Eat up."

"Ricky coming?"

"No. Ricky's going to hold down the fort."

I was sorry to leave him behind but was happy to have Dad to myself again even if only for a day.

We left at mid-morning. I shrugged into the survival pack, the pack Mom had insisted on keeping by the door. Medical supplies, ammo, military rations, socks, and knit hats. Bleaching powder for the creek water. Dad rolled his eyes. He had always seen the survival pack as an unnecessary hindrance. We both slung deer rifles over our shoulders and headed up the back slope toward the woods.

The sun was an angry little pinhead. We did a quick reconnoiter of the old motel. Just two of them now, looking better fed than the last time. Roasting some god-awful-smelling hunk of meat over the fire pit and sharing what must have been one of the last bottles from the bar.

I shuddered as I recognized Wobbly's boots now on Mustache guy's feet.

Once in the woods, I felt at home, breathing deep cool breaths. Just like before, in the woods eating lunch with Dad, Mom and Grandma at home making a cherry pie and a big roast. By three, we'd shot a good-sized doe. Dad leaned his rifle up against a tree while he hung and gutted the deer there in the woods.

I sat on a stump a few feet away.

"I think Bud is sweet on you, Tish."

My stomach went upside down. "What are you talking about?"

"He's been talking about you." He looked over from the carcass. "All good stuff." He returned his focus to his work.

I didn't know much about men, but I did know enough to know when they were talking about you instead of to you, it generally was not "all good stuff."

I got to thinking about Bear to get my mind off the awful possibilities Dad had conjured. I was near drifting off when rustling in the bushes caught my attention. Mustache guy strode out of the underbrush and took two strides toward Dad's rifle before noticing me. I stood, bringing my rifle stock up to my shoulder.

He turned to face me square on. "I don't think you got it in you, girlie."

Dad turned, his big buck knife streaming blood. "Shoot him, Tish. Shoot him, goddamnit. He gets that rifle, we'll have a whole new war on our

hands.”

Time was frozen like that for only a couple seconds, but it felt like eternity. It felt like the entire fate of mankind hung in the balance between my resolve and my damnable innate hesitation.

Then he lurched back into the woods and Dad retrieved his rifle, eyeing me briefly. I dislodged the rifle butt from my shoulder and vomited in the bushes.



When we got back, the place was “quiet as a one-hole shit house,” as Bear used to say. The moan of the gate hinges lamented more than usual. Ricky was on the front porch, hunched over, his head in his hands.

“Help with this, Rick,” Dad said, arching his neck to indicate the deer slung over his shoulders.

Ricky ambled to his feet, and he and Dad headed to the far bay of the garage where they did the butchering. Without refrigeration, we’d eat nothing but venison and canned vegetables for a couple days while they smoked the rest.

I went into the kitchen where Bud was tinkering with a broken wooden chair. He nodded even more solemnly than was his custom, and I lifted my head in lame acknowledgement. Behind Dad’s bedroom door, I could hear murmuring and a few soft sobs syncopated with throat clearing and breath hitching.

I went to my room and came down a couple hours later, when I heard Dad and Rick clap through the front screen door. Bud was still in the kitchen, and as I entered, he motioned to Dad with the crown of his head toward the bedroom. Dad raised his eyebrows and tapped on the door.

Ricky and Bud exchanged glances, and Ricky blasted back out through the screen door. It swatted the doorframe twice before squeaking to rest. I looked at Bud, but he avoided my stare, so I went after Ricky.

He was leaning against the backboard post, shifting our partially-inflated basketball from one hand to the other, focused on it intently as if it might be a crystal ball.

“What’s up, Ricky?”

“That fucking girl.”

“Geraldine?”

“She made me kiss her.”

“*Made* you?”

“She came into my room. Made me kiss her. Made me put my hands on her tits.”

“Jesus, Ricky. What else?”

“That’s it.” He looked up from the ball and I couldn’t tell if the squirm of his lips was him fighting off a smirk or tears. “Honest. Nothing else happened.”

“How ... ” I wiped the dirty hair off my forehead. “How’d it end?”

“She had her hand down my pants when her mother burst through the door.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Elise slapped both of us hard across the face then beat on me with closed fists, screaming I was Satan, calling her daughter a whore. Satan’s whore.”

“Jesus.”

I put a hand on Ricky’s bony shoulder. The door slapped shut again and he looked up, shrugging my hand off.

Dad marched toward us. Ricky intercepted him halfway. They stopped about two feet before they would have collided, then wordlessly turned and walked toward the garage.

I stoked the fire and cooked the biggest of the steaks. Just as I finished, Dad returned from the garage, flung the steak onto a cutting board, and carried it with one hand, the other choking the neck of a Jack Daniels bottle.

That’s when it hit me; we would never be close. I had deceived myself into thinking my father could fill the hole in my heart my mother’s death had carved. Put a plug in it to stop the wind from whistling endlessly through it. I eyed the garage for a long moment, pondering on Ricky, then trudged into the kitchen to plate dinners.

Other than a painfully endless prayer, it was a silent and sparse dinner, much the way I imagined it might have been if Judas had betrayed Jesus before eating instead of after. I went to bed without a word to anyone other than “Amen.”

Just before dawn, I heard rustling in the kitchen, threw on my clothes and went down.

Ricky, moving with obvious pain, was stuffing a backpack with a few cans of provisions and a parka. He gazed at me, his face more bruised than not, and grabbed a rifle, two boxes of slugs, and Dad’s keys from the rack.

I jammed my feet into the maw of my boots, grabbed another rifle, a coat, and Mom’s survival pack, and followed.

He silently keyed open the padlocks, let them hang from their bolts and opened the gate just enough for us to slide through. Then he tossed the keys back into the yard, dust puffing like a small mushroom cloud.

I gazed briefly at the old motel, the tall guy hunkered down, his gaze moving from us to the half-opened gate.

"Your daddy ever forgets to lock those beauties, you save us all, darling."

I sprinted back, closed the gate, and threw the middle bolt, then snapped the lock closed. I hiked the rifle up my shoulder and followed Ricky, my boots hushing through the dead grass, carrying me into the dimly lightening woods.



Editor's Note: *"The Triple G" was shortlisted for the Fish Publishing Short Story Prize 20/21, as well as the 2021 Tucson Festival of Books Award.*

I ONCE WORKED THERE

Christian Hanz Lozada

I say to myself when I pass an old workplace
I did exist
I have done things

There is a sadness
when capitalism moves on and *closing*,
clearance, or plywood blights the windows

of where I once was, where I once worked,
where a piece of me
sold for pennies on the dollar.

There is a hope, too,
that the rest of me
has value and still exists.

THE LAST DAY

Elaine Pascale

It's all good.

Until it isn't.

And it wasn't good on the day that I had to pack my office after ten years. The fact that this was the eighth time I had packed my office after ten years did not escape me. It was that I could not escape this chore, this "stuck point," that was a problem.

I kept experiencing my last day of work. Repetitively. Monotonously. There was no name for this torture that I knew of, but it was a type of torture that surpassed that of working in a toxic environment. It was inescapable and condemning in a way that even surpassed being trapped in a meaningless career.

New England had been my home—but not my home—for as long as I could remember. My underutilized life, along with my recycled last-day-in-the-office, forced time to surrender meaning. I could have lived in New England for decades and always feel like I had just arrived. And not in an exciting "honeymoon" way. I could neither adjust to the climate nor the people who chose to live out their lives there. I had stubbornly stayed because my best friend, Nancy, fought a cancer that stubbornly refused to let her win.

They had told me in grief support to wait a full year before making any major life changes. I was chomping at the bit to try someplace new and had been grieving Nancy since the terminal diagnosis, long before her death. This momentum was unusual; I jokingly attributed my tendency for inertia to my weight, but the truth is I normally retained status quo. The desire for a change was so new that I latched onto it with gusto. Still, I complied with the advice, and when I was ready, I gave my notice at work.

The notice led to the start of the non-ending last day. The weeks leading up to it had been normal in their toxic way, but when I could finally see the finish line, the ribbon I was meant to crash through wouldn't break.

“It’s a shame you won’t get to know Todd better,” Liz said. She had begun working in our office shortly after Nancy had died. She watched me sort through books and files while recycling and shredding most.

As with the last seven tries, titles recurred from my prior attempts to leave. I knew that it was impossible for the documents to have survived the shredder, and I prayed that this time would be the last. I wanted all of this to be in my metaphorical rearview mirror. I wanted this job to be dead to me so I could grieve and move on. I had learned a lot about grieving.

“I don’t want to know him better,” I told her in between sessions with the shredder. “He called me racist because I have a twang when I say certain words.”

Liz shook her head. “After all these years ... you still have a twang. That shows how you hang onto things. And it’s unfortunate as it makes you sound ... well, you know, less than you are.”

“That’s basically what he was saying,” I answered—without any anger, as I would be escaping this woman and this place soon. At least, I hoped I would.

“I wish you would give it another shot. Give him another shot.”

I handed her a book I knew she wanted. I had handed it to her seven times before, yet it always reappeared on my pile. “He told me that his aunt once vacationed in Savannah and that she was seated ahead of a Black couple at a restaurant even though the couple had gotten there first. This was his example of the blatant racism of ‘my people.’ Mind you, this was after he bragged to me about his Salem roots. And he was talking about being related to the people who burned others alive.”

She was not listening. “I am sure I know other ... men ... is that what you like?”

I continued to explain to her what had happened on this blind date, which was a repeat of the very same blind date she had sent me on seven other times. Each date occurred shortly before I packed my office and shredded the same documents. I didn’t always end the date the same way, though. “I reminded him that in his beloved Boston, rocks and bottles were thrown at children for being bussed to the wrong school and that that was the racism of ‘his people.’ Then I left.”

“Again, it’s a real shame. He is an electrician. He owns a house in Scituate and when he retires in a few years—”

“—he wants to sail around the world. They all do.” I took a sip from the beaten coffee mug that I had thrown away seven times before. *They all do* referenced not only the shared bucket list of so many men of a certain age, but also my recent reality of reliving the same blind date over and over along with packing my office over and over. In this case *they* could be the pronoun

for the many Todds I'd had to suffer through. "Is it so shameful to be alone ... to want to be alone?"

"If it is for the right reasons. If you *want* to be alone, then I applaud you. If you are *afraid* of caring for someone because ... " She stopped, closing her eyes in what I thought was a slow blink of sympathy.

"I am just not ready," I said. "And I especially would not start something here, when I am leaving."

"When is your last day again?" She smiled. She was well aware that this was my last day. I swore she put an undue amount of stress on the word "again."



Liz was an exceptionally tidy woman. She was thin, and neat, and detail oriented. When she was hired, I knew I was just biding my time, so our vast differences were not a red flag in terms of our being officemates. She, on the other hand, had copious opinions about the ways in which I contrasted with her. She was obsessed with my love life. She prided herself on being "soul attached" but did not offer further details, and I never asked. She sometimes teased me about having ADHD, as she said I failed to pay much attention to the intricacies that she labored over. She never said anything directly about my weight, but I always sensed a silent judgment. The main voiced objection toward me was about my brushing my hair at my desk.

"Your hair ... floats over here, to my side." She pointed to her desk area.

"They vacuum every night," I replied as I pulled a sweater from my drawer and wrapped myself in it. I swore that woman brought a gust of cold air along with her every time she entered our space. I wouldn't say she walked to her desk, more like she appeared from a shadowy corner, but I attributed this to the light step that sprang from her slight body. And the shadowy corners had grown in size since she was hired. I reported the failing lights to maintenance, but whenever they showed up to check, the problem was gone.

Liz would stare at the hairs from my brush until I discarded them. I had recently started disposing of them dramatically in the shredder, which seemed to snap her out of her reverie.

Every day Liz sat at her desk and talked to me about my life. She managed to pose invasive questions while pouring over spreadsheets and codes and numbers.

Though we spent hours together in a double-wide cubicle, I never saw her eat. This was in juxtaposition to my marathon of shoveling food, mostly

snacks, into my mouth while trying to beat deadlines. I rode waves of sugar while she seemed to exist on fumes. As the rest of us spent the day hoisting large cups of coffee that had been complicated by caloric additions, she rarely even sipped water.

Instead, she seemed to subside on minutia. She knew how many reams of paper were in the storage closet and how many individual pages that meant. She was constantly fingering staples and paper clips and counting them under her breath. She appeared to have a compulsion to count groups of like objects: the smaller and more difficult to distinguish the individual components, the better.

Which explained her issue with my hair and her pique over it.

The only time she had mentioned my weight was when she had asked if I had a picture to send Todd. As I was not really invested in a love match, I declined producing one for as long as possible. She assumed I was being self-conscious and told me that “beauty comes in all sizes.” When I failed to respond, she continued with some weird statement about larger bodies outlasting others in a famine.

As ominous as that was, it didn't creep me out as much as it saddened me. If I were honest, I had been feeling guilt. Nancy had always been the healthy one. She had run every day. She had eaten vegetables and fish. She had steered away from dessert. I had always struggled with my weight and doctors warned me that it could cause concerns, comorbidities they called them. But I was fine; I was healthy.

And Nancy was ... dead.



Business as usual is a cliché for a reason.

On my last day, and its subsequent repeats, I was required to attend a department meeting. Ironically, the focus of the meeting was crafting a five-year plan. On a few final days, I tried explaining to my supervisor, Kathy, that it was not necessary for me to attend, but was told that my presence was mandatory.

“You are still part of the team,” Kathy crinkled her nose and gave me a practiced smile. Every time she told me that, it was produced in that tone that mothers use when they think one child is jealous of another.

Kathy thrived on misery. She purposefully complicated the simplest of instructions to assure sabotage. Gaslighting came as easily to her as breathing. I could understand why she hired Liz: they were birds of a feather. The only difference was that Liz would focus on counting the feathers while Kathy would have the bird plucked in the most painful manner.

Liz was never at the meeting. In fact, in the nearly twelve months I worked with her, I couldn't remember her at any meetings. When I would complain about the time I wasted sitting and listening to the monotonous business scripts being spouted on repeat as if they had meaning, she would roll her eyes and say "same," but she didn't seem to ever leave our cold, dark cubicle.

I never saw her when cake was produced for office birthday parties, either. I didn't mind those events. What I did mind was the looks I would get when I secured a second helping. The looks typically came from the women who spent their lunch hours together in the office gym. They would silently congratulate each other while taking bites off the same plate, sharing the same slim slice, while I stuffed spoonful after spoonful of buttercream frosting into my mouth. They would look at me as if I had just committed a crime, or danced naked, or farted. All three scenarios would have been an equal injustice to that crowd.

I told myself I was seizing the day when I seized a second piece. Nancy could no longer enjoy indulgences, so I would indulge for her. Granted, Nancy had never really liked cake, but it was a tribute, nonetheless. And then I would feel guilty about her not being there, and about the amount of time she spent suffering, and I would want a third slice.

One time I brought Liz a piece of cake, which was left untouched until I needed a mid-afternoon snack. During the birthday celebration, I had loudly announced to all in the room that I was bringing it back to my cubemate.

The gym women exchanged concerned glances, as if I had said I was bringing the cake to the Tooth Fairy.

"I am," I said indignantly. "I am giving this to Liz."

"Liz," one of the women said, nodding, "I hope she likes it."

My voice grew louder. "At least I think about her. None of you ever invite her to anything."

The same woman looked as if she were going to respond, but one of her friends placed a hand on her wrist and shook her head.

"She has been through a lot," she said softly.



After the failed eighth attempt, I tried to call in sick to see if I could reset the clock in terms of the insufferable, non-ending last day.

I was able to complete the phone call, yet I still found myself at my desk, packing the same box with the same items I had packed before. The box was going to be problematic on public transportation, but I didn't care. I simply wanted to walk out with it and never return.

I tried to decline Kathy's meeting invite. I suggested that Liz represent us instead.

"Liz?" she sounded confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm just. I am leaving, Kathy. It makes no sense for me to be at a meeting with a five-year plan focus."

Kathy paused and took a deep breath. "You haven't left yet. And you can still make yourself useful. You can be the note-taker at the meeting," she said with performative sweetness.

As Kathy walked away, I looked at Liz seated in her usual seat. I hadn't noticed her there before. In fact, I was positive I'd been alone in the cube until Kathy had approached. The motion detector lights had been off when I had arrived.

"It's a shame you won't get to know Todd better," Liz intoned. Her energy was heavy, like a weighted blanket.

No matter how well I slept, I felt tired when she spoke to me. I sighed but didn't answer. Maybe if I ignored her, this attempt would end differently.

"... a real shame. He is an electrician. He owns a house in Scituate and when he retires in a few years—"

I slammed a book on my desk.

She stopped in her tracks. Instead of looking startled at this outburst, she looked pleased.



During the failed tenth attempt, I insisted that I would not be attending the five-year plan meeting.

"There is no point, Kathy. I am not going to be here. It's like being asked to plan a party you are not allowed to attend."

She smiled and wrinkled her nose in that annoying way. "Of course you are 'allowed to attend.' It is our hope that you will be here to help guide us through this redesign."

"I resigned," I said pointedly.

She put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing my flesh in an appraising way. "There may still be a place for you within the organization. Did you read the openings I sent you?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to stay."

She tilted her head and examined me as if I were an unexpected and contaminating ingredient she found in her food. "I cannot imagine why not. This company has been very good to you. We stood by you during your ... loss."

Kathy had a way of holding onto the sick days and vacation days of

others as if they were a personal slight. She would recount to me that day I had to call in because a nor'easter had created a white out and there was no public transportation—the entire city had been shut down, but I was somehow supposed to figure out how to make it to the office.

As a result, I rarely took any time off. The company would owe me a large payout in vacation time if I *were* ever able to leave.

Kathy would also remind me of coworkers who had to miss work due to deaths in the family, miscarriages, house fires, and all sorts of personal traumas. I always felt like she relished discussing the problems of others, but resented the time that people needed to recoup. It was as if she wanted their personal tragedies to play out in front of her for entertainment.

“Grab your notebook, and I will see you in the meeting room in five,” Kathy instructed, spinning around so quickly that she almost tripped over Liz.

“She didn’t even say ‘excuse me,’” I muttered to my cubemate.

Liz wrinkled her nose and smiled at me with an exact replica of Kathy’s smile. “Let me know what happens in the meeting. Spare no details.” She fingered a few paper clips and the lights above our cube darkened even further. “And we can talk some more about Todd.”



On my eleventh attempt, Kathy paused at the corner of my desk and watched me shred a few papers.

I looked at her expectantly.

“Just wondering how long you were planning to do that, or if you could do that somewhere else.” She pointed over her shoulder. “People might be finding it difficult to concentrate. Someone may need to make a phone call ...”

“Like Liz?”

“Who?”

“Liz, she shares my cube. I believe she reports to you,” I said sarcastically.

“Have you been drinking? I imagine you are celebrating as you count down the days.”

“This is my last day.”

Her eyes widened in mock surprise. “So soon? Why didn’t you remind us? We could have had a little gathering for you.” She lowered her voice. “I know how you love your cake.”

“I don’t need a party—”

“Don’t be a martyr. Martyrdom never ends well.” She shrugged in a dismissive way. “You know, my people always believed in the Hag of the Mist. If you don’t change your attitude, she will latch on to you.”

“I have never heard of that one,” I muttered, not really interested, but feeling obliged to say something.

“She was like a type of ... ghost, I guess. She would become attached to those who walk with gloom and doom.” She put her finger to her lips, thinking. Then, she pointed to me. “You know, these things have some basis in truth. If you cling to your troubles, it can feel almost like another body is weighing you down.” She frowned and did not bother to disguise her glance at my “muffin top” spilling over my pants. “We all know extra weight is no joke.”

“I don’t cling to troubles. In fact, I am doing my best to jettison them.”

Her eyes bore into mine. “Are you? I have had several meetings with you where I tried to unpack what was going on with you—”

“You do not need to help me ‘unpack’ issues,” I snapped. “If anything, you could help me pack and get out of here.”

“Your tone is entirely unprofessional.” She turned on her heel and marched away. This was typical: she pretended to be helpful, but only wanted to cause upset and leave you alone with the damage.

I again noticed that Liz was present. This time, she was staring longingly after Kathy.

“Ignore her,” I said, “Once I am gone, she will turn on you.”

She nodded. “I can only hope.” Oddly, she sounded a bit love-sick.



I couldn’t stop myself from being angry at Kathy, which led to two large comfort meals followed by scouring Kathy’s social media while cursing her beneath my breath. There were the expected pictures of snowboarding and sailing and posing in a variety of outfits that all looked the same. Many were of Kathy looking pensively into the distance and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for whoever had been cajoled into playing photographer.

One photo caused me to pause. It was taken at a restaurant on the wharf. I could make out some of our team in the background. I recognized that the photo was from a memorial service for a coworker’s spouse. I both could and could not believe that she would post a picture of her smiling from a private service dedicated to mourning.

I used my fingers to make the photo larger, to see what familiar faces I could spot in the background. My eyes rested on the restaurant chalkboard that detailed the specials and drinks of the day. One drink was called “Hag of the Mist.” I remembered what Kathy had said and decided to research the myth.

I gasped at what I found on one cryptozoology website.

An etched rendering of the hag looked identical to Liz.

A quick scroll revealed a section for comments and for photos from people claiming to have captured images of the hag. One person had posted an old daguerreotype. It was a family photo. The caption explained that the photo had been taken to preserve an image of a child who had died. The corpse was seated on the mother's lap, as if still alive. Someone from the website had circled a figure that hovered in the background.

The resemblance to Liz was undeniable.

I put my phone away and walked into Nancy's room. I needed to feel close to her, and looking at her remaining belongings usually soothed me. The dying light of day entered the room with an evasive glow, and I moved to the curtains to shut them.

A figure shifted on the sidewalk across the street.

It was Liz.



After the failed twelfth attempt, I made an appointment with HR. I didn't expect them to stop my last day from repeating, but I thought I could get some help with Liz. If she would leave me alone, and that is what I truly wanted to be—alone—I could focus on packing and leave permanently.

The office on the top floor had all the trappings of faux comfort: plants, inspirational word art, free coffee. People spoke in hushed voices, and I wondered if they ever told a joke, or laughed, or sneezed, or farted. Everywhere I looked, I was reminded of the upper-level-ness of this department.

I could not wait to be gone for good.

When I was finally seated in a private office, I spoke quickly to the woman in front of me. "I am having some ... communication issues with someone on my floor."

Alison was the name of my HR contact, and I had been assigned to her for a decade. This was my first time meeting her. She rifled through a file. "You have not had any issues documented."

She was correct. I had always been a good employee. So good that this organization was not willing to free me from its grasp. Even though I deserved leave; even though I deserved to be free. "No. This is recent."

Her eyes scanned me in the way that I am used to most women's eyes appraising me. My shirt was a little too tight, as I had not been willing to invest in a new wardrobe after gaining weight from inertia combined with stress eating at Nancy's bedside. My bulges were apparent, and fit women loved to dine on them instead of food.

“I am going to need you to understand that HR is not under a confidentiality clause,” she said. “That said, you cannot be made a victim of retaliation. If you would like to name your aggressor—”

“—I don’t feel comfortable with that term.” I tugged on my buttons, trying to conceal my peeping flesh. “She is not aggressive. Passive aggressive, maybe.” As there were only two men on my floor, I didn’t feel that I had given anything away by using a gender-specific pronoun.

“Do you feel that maybe this is related to ... personal matters?” Alison’s face shifted to patronizing sympathy. “When my husband passed, I took advantage of the telehealth therapy sessions. Now, those are confidential, and they really helped me to stop seeing myself as a victim—”

“What exactly is in that file?”

Alison shifted focus from my strained clothing to make eye contact. “I am aware you took a bereavement leave. Not as long as you were allotted. To be honest, you could have taken more time.”

I had been aware of the amount of leave I was allowed to take. I’d also been aware of being in the house alone. Of seeing Nancy’s empty bed. Of smelling her preferred soap on the clothing that still hung in her closet. Recently, I had gotten rid of many of her things: items her relatives had not wanted and that I had felt ready to release. Her bed was another matter. It was expensive to have someone haul it away, and I found myself wanting to nap on it from time to time. I would have to figure out its removal if I wanted to move. *When* I moved.

I tried to explain this to Alison. “I needed to get back. I needed to start my year.”

Alison arched an eyebrow. “Your year?”

I didn’t want to explain to her that this past year had simply been about crossing days off a calendar. That my entire agenda had been to finish the year so that I would officially be done with grieving and could move on with my life. And that included being finished with this company.

“It’s Liz.” I decided to lay it all out there, just as my shirt was allowing my flesh to seep through the gaps between the buttons. Maybe I wasn’t being honest enough—with myself—and that was why I was repeating this last day over and over.

She frowned. “There is no Liz in your department. Are you talking about someone from another pod?” She quickly typed into her laptop. “There are two Elizabeths, one is here in HR and the other works security. There is a Lisabette who works in the cafeteria ... is Liz a nickname for something else?”

“It’s Liz, just Liz,” I mumbled, recalling the name printed on her name plate. “Liz Raethe.”

Alison began typing again. “W... r ... a ... ith?”

“No. It’s R ... wait, what?”

“You said her name was Wraith. I don’t see anyone with that name ... ”

I felt my chin drop.

Alison had spelled it out for me, both literally and symbolically.

I stood. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to waste your time. I think I can handle this on my own.”

She looked up from her laptop. “Are you sure? Please remember that HR is here to help you at any time. Also, you will receive an email asking you to rate this meeting and my performance. If you could please take a minute to fill it out.”

I nodded in agreement as I made my way to the door. I hoped I would now solve my predicament and be able to leave before the HR performance email hit my inbox.



I ended up filling out Alison’s evaluation on my fourteenth attempt, simply to pass the time. I had some serious internal work to do if I ever wanted to be free of this external work environment. I had been fooling myself about being over my grief. That dark vortex that I had carried within me had allowed Liz to attach herself to me. If I didn’t break free, I would be doomed to repeat this last day indefinitely.

I planned a party for my fifteenth attempt. I was celebrating my freedom. I brought a cake into the office with me: a large cake. I had streamers and confetti. Most importantly, I was celebrating letting go. I had let go of my guilt over Nancy.

Instead of reporting to my cubicle, I sat in an empty one on the floor below. It had been vacated by a woman who had chosen not to return after her maternity leave ended. Thus, it had an air of happiness. The lighting was also adequate, and it was the right temperature.

I had decided not to pack my things. There was nothing on my desk that held true meaning for me. Let the others scavenge for free supplies and the cleaning staff could take care of the rest. I hated to leave that burden on anyone, but I had my own burden to contend with.

I began scrolling on my phone, not worrying about getting fired—in fact, hoping that a good firing would end this cycle—when I felt the temperature around me drop. The lights dimmed, and Liz appeared in the cube beside me. What was interesting is that there had not been a cube beside me until now. It appeared suddenly and was fully stocked with all the supplies she had in her cube one floor above.

Without acknowledging her, I stood, gathered my celebration materials, and went to the floor below. Again, it was bright and a moderate temperature for a few moments, until Liz found me. I repeated this action on many floors, and several bathrooms, knowing what the result would be—just as I knew my last day would repeat unless I took matters into my own hands. I then led Liz back to our original cubicles.

The lights dimmed so significantly that a flashlight would have been warranted. A frost developed on my desk. It would reappear instantly after I wiped it away.

“I am done,” I announced without looking at Liz.

I felt a bony hand on my shoulder. It was the first time I had ever felt her touch me. Her fingers squeezed my flesh painfully.

“I need you to stop,” I insisted. The pain intensified. I looked at my shoulder to see the tips of her fingers disappearing into my flesh—if she could not latch on to me, she would try to climb inside of me.

“I am rejecting you,” I said, but the fingers only pushed in further, past the second knuckle, and a shock of pain raced through me.

As Liz continued to sink into me, burying her hand up to her wrist, I closed my eyes and visualized my future, and I was able to see it without the longing of wanting Nancy to be a part of it. I had accepted it and was not afraid. For the first time, I was not simply paying lip service; I was honestly looking forward to it.

I was shivering from the cold, but I focused on saying goodbye to this place, to the wasted years of my life, to Nancy.

The hand began to recede.

“Warm weather. Sunshine. A fresh start,” I said over and over until the hand simply rested on top of my shoulder.

I opened my eyes to see Kathy heading toward my desk.

I smiled at her warmly. I had both anticipated and hoped this would happen. “Will you be having a piece of my cake?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “There’s cake? You brought *your own* cake?”

“No one else seemed prepared to do it. Sometimes we have to take matters into our own hands.” My voice was condescending, but she did not seem to notice. She was looking at the space beside my shoulder.

“Who is that?” she whispered.

“Liz,” I replied in a normal voice.

Her mouth formed a perfect circle to convey the question “Who?”

“You see her, right?”

“Of course I see her. There is someone right there.”

“That is all I needed to know.” I opened the vial of confetti and doused Kathy with it. Liz sprang away from me and entered Kathy’s personal space,

intent on counting the individual pieces of miniscule paper.

“Get off.” Kathy tried to swat Liz away, but that only made Liz begin her count again.

I watched, eating two slices of cake, before leaving the rest of it for my coworkers. I moved my hairbrush from my desk to Liz’s as a memento, or in case she grew tired of the confetti, and walked to the elevator. I could hear Liz talking to Kathy between counts.

“One sixty-seven ... would you want to meet my friend, Todd? One seventy-five ... I believe he belongs to your boat club ... one eighty-four ... ”

And finally, it was all good. And all finished.

THE CHOICE

Jenna Moquin

When he leaves for work in the morning, he walks through the door and doesn't even notice me. He's too busy, he's in a hurry, he probably needs to get to a meeting. It's different at the end of the day, when he comes home.

He wipes his feet before he enters the house, when he finally sees me, and allows my existence to be real.

But that's when I don't want to exist anymore.

The sun nearly burns me during the day, because I have no trees to shade me, and no cool air comes my way. It's quiet here, when he's gone for the day. Nothing but the tree leaves swaying in the breeze, the birds chirping, the occasional delivery truck driving by. It makes me think about the past, how I got here.

How did I wind up here? It wasn't by chance, but by choice. I made my choices. And now I have to live with them. What's that old saying? You've made your mat, now you must lay on it. Or lie on it? I can never remember the proper one.

Regardless, I chose to be here.

It was all my own doing, really. I let it happen on purpose. Because I wanted it? No, I'm not so sure about that. Because I was *expected* to want it is more likely, since that's what happens to so many of us. The expectation. The knowledge that we don't have many choices after all. Our choices are made for us through circumstance. But even if it's the wrong choice, the one that lands us in this fate, knowing you made your own choice can make all the difference in the world. Even if you wind up where I am today.

It's not that bad. All I have to do is smile when it's expected of me, cry when it's expected of me, shine when it's expected of me, and die when it's expected of me. It's almost like having a blueprint for life. After you give in and make the decision that I've made, you no longer have to worry about anything anymore. Because you have something else to guide you: the expectation map.

The map is peppered with people who guide you. They make your decisions for you and walk all over you. The people change over time, from the father to a teacher to a supervisor at work, to the husband. They make you prepare for whatever comes next. Whatever someone else wants. The constant preparation for something for someone else. Meals and holidays, and bake sales and birthdays, coffee and doughnuts for the staff meeting, the endless loop of time.

It's easier once you give in. Once you decide to let someone else make your choices, and you're just along for the ride. It's freeing, really. It's like floating through time with no worries in mind, just lying here (laying here?) while the sun beats down on you.

Mondays are the best, of course. The beginning of the week when each new day will bring this blessed peace. It's funny how the desired time of the week shifts, depending on your situation. If you're a working stiff, the weekends are the best part of the week. But a housewife? The weekends are the busiest part. When you can't stop the influx of running feet throughout the house, in and out the front door, the back yard, only to come inside and demand food and sustenance every few hours. It's like a tidal wave of want and need, and you turn into a bed and breakfast. Not someone who runs a bed and breakfast, because that would make you an actual person, but a bed and breakfast itself, the building and the workflow that occurs inside.

How did I get here again?

I should tell the story, even though it's the same one you've heard before. The damsel in distress, rescued by a knight in shining armor, who sweeps her off her feet. And then she sweeps his abuse under the carpet when it flares up after the wedding.

It's sort of random, at first. Like a lark, a chance he takes doing something small-scale. A form of verbal abuse, a slight insult or gibe at what you look like, or lack of intelligence in a certain subject. Or an overinflated annoyance at something he'd found endearing before, during the early days of dating, that turns into hatred. Resenting this part of you that he'd once found adorable.

Six months after the wedding, he was suddenly disgusted by the way I chewed my food. *Like a chipmunk*, he'd commented with a smile during one of our first dates. And then, one night while I was working on a particularly tough piece of steak, he looked up from his plate and stared at me with a darkness in his eyes I'd never seen before.

Do you have to chew like that? It's disgusting.

A chill passed through me when he said that, and the ceiling suddenly felt much higher, the room wider as I shrank down in my chair. I pushed the steak aside and ate the coleslaw instead, something I didn't have to chew as

hard. And suddenly, just like that, I was no longer an adorable little chipmunk.

That's when they test the waters to see what your reaction is, and when you put up with it, that gives them the green light. It didn't stop with nasty comments about my chewing. It turned into comments about my weight, how I dressed, how I ironed his dress shirts. I became so conscious of making sure his clothes were perfect that my own wardrobe was neglected. I began wearing this drab, scratchy brown frock whenever I did household chores, and would change into a slinky dress the second he came home.

Even when I took great pains to look beautiful he would find something unattractive about me. Even if I cooked his favorite dinner, I had somehow prepared it wrong and upset him. It seemed as if nearly everything I did was something terrible, so hateful that he screamed violent obscenities and made me feel so small I crumpled to a heap on the floor.

I crumpled so many times I lost count ... that's how I wound up here. Stepped on, trampled and tread upon so much it flattened me. But I like it down here. Like I said, it's nice and quiet during the day.

But when he comes home and wipes his feet on me, after a long day at work, it's uncomfortable. Not painful, really, but it makes me feel dirty. Used. As if I'm just some piece of furniture that's more of a decoration, there when I'm wanted, but ignored when nothing is needed of me.

When it gets dark and cold during the night, I shiver when the witching hour approaches, because that's when everything is so unpredictable. That's when, if he has too much to drink, he starts wiping his feet on me so much I can't stand it. I keep myself so flat and small I wish I would disappear so he can't even see me anymore. So I'm just a smear, something he can't even touch.

I can't breathe sometimes. I can't see sometimes. I like it during the day when the sun is out; it helps me see the beauty that's still in this world. The green grass and cerulean sky, the birds chirping, the leaves turning, and no one wiping their soles on me. It's harder to see when I'm cooped up indoors all day, doing chores and preparing food. I think I actually like it better out here.

It's the passage of time I know better than anything else. How the seasons will change, the temperature changes, and the sun also rises in the morning and then darkness at night. The darkness is the worst ... I hate the winter. The days are too short, the weather too cold, and those boots with hard-packed snow in the grooves.

But I am resilient. *Be resilient*, I tell myself. Try to ignore all of the dirt and snow left on me. No one ever thinks to take a sponge and soap to me

and scrub, just like I've done to nearly everything inside of this house from the toilets to the floors to the bottoms of shoes. Even if I can't really wash it off, no matter how many rainstorms pass by. The dirt will always be there, something I will always have to wear. Even if all I feel is numb after a while. I can still see the pretty blue sky, the leaves on the trees, the blue jays and red robins that fly by in the morning.

I can experience the little bit of life I've got left. Even if it doesn't really belong to me, since so many of my choices are not my own, have never been my own ... even if everything that happened to me didn't need to happen, if I'd made different choices.

But would it have? Wasn't I cursed to live this life, have this destiny from the start, simply due to who I am? Being what, or who I was, determined my fate, did it not?

Wasn't I faced with this fate from the moment of birth, to let it lead me? Down a path that I didn't know the map for—the expectation map hadn't been handed to me yet—but I went along for the ride because I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know any other way to be. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe that's why so many of us become dead inside, crumpling to heaps on the floor so early in life.

But some of us resurrect.

Some of us can break free.

Some of us realize our strength, and fly away like falcons—like phoenixes, rising up from ashes into a rebirth. A new order. A new life to soar through, only with this knowledge we didn't have before.

If only that were true, and real. If only it wasn't just a lie we tell ourselves, to get through each and every day. So few of us break free, I mean really break free, but more often than not fall back into the expectation map where they wipe their feet on us all the time, only it's a different *he*.

If I could get there, I would soar. I never would let anyone take that feeling away from me, no matter how lonely I became. But I made a different choice. I chose a different path. I made my own journey, my own decision ... it was the beginning of the metamorphosis, and I wound up with the fate I have now succumbed to, down here on the floor.

Nearly every woman reaches this choice. *Do I give in to this, or fight back?*

But the fighting back leads to so much heartache, sometimes more than the heartache of succumbing to it. I guess it all depends on what one values more: the quietude of comfort, or the deep sense of self-respect. The latter can sometimes come with intense levels of discomfort, between working a menial nine-to-five job and barely making ends meet, (if you've been a housewife for years, it's sort of hard to break into the workforce) to

living somewhere with bugs and smelly neighbors and ambulance sirens passing by, and then simply working the menial job just to live in that horrible apartment.

It's two different types of hell. It all depends on which one bothers you the most. How did this happen in the first place? Who made the decision to make sure that certain people are only allowed certain choices, and others are allowed so many?

We don't get to choose our fates.

But we can choose our destinies.

Even if we only have two choices. But does that make the choice truly real? If the choice is only between two equally abhorrent things, what joy does the privilege of making this choice even bring?

Was this just something I stumbled upon, just to be stumbled upon? On the floor, not quite in the corner yet, but getting there with each seasonal wear and tear. Letting myself become threadbare and useless, something for others to wipe their feet on, and ignore me.

Isn't that what so many of us want to become?

I keep telling myself that this is what I wanted. Every time he wipes his feet on me and makes me feel dirty and used. This is what I wanted.

It's better than the alternative, I keep telling myself. Because the alternative would mean change and disorder, and uncertainty, not knowing what the next day will bring. But maybe that's a good thing?

At least this way I can expect what's coming, every time he comes home at night. I can expect the chagrin and ennui of the same thing, day after day, weekends and then holidays, summers and then winters, all over and over again in an endless loop. But there is comfort in the tediousness, that's something to keep in mind.

Changes that come, but nothing really changes that much. The next holiday season I'll do fudge with walnuts. I'll wear red instead of green for parties. We'll go to the Cape instead of Hampton for the summer.

That's something to help me through the days, and the chores, and the never-ending pressure to do something for someone else. Never for me. God forbid I should think of doing something solely for myself. How dare I dream about doing something that focuses only on me, and something I want to do. Something I enjoy.

Enjoy? That word went by the wayside long ago. I don't enjoy anything anymore, except the daytime during the week, when it's quiet.

Until one day he comes home in the middle of the day. And he isn't alone.

He's brought someone with him, a slight red blur that smells like jasmine and coconut. She wipes her feet on me, with pointy-toed heels,

before he does, and they go indoors and then upstairs.

It isn't enough to be something he steps on day in and day out. He has to humiliate me, too. In my own home, no less.

And then my new metamorphosis begins.

I want the scary unknowing life of the other choice. I want to work my own nine-to-five job without knowing what kind of life it will bring me. I don't even care if it's something so menial I'll still be waiting hand and foot on someone else. At least I'll make my own money for it. And only have to do it for forty hours a week. The weekends, and holidays, will become mine. My favorite time of the week will simply shift.

I want frozen dinners and nights in front of the TV. With just me. I want that uncertainty, that freedom of a blank future in front of me. Oh, that magical feeling of nowhere to go, not knowing what awaits, but knowing my fate will finally be in my own hands.

I want it all. Without him.

I grow cold and nervous all over with the thought of starting this new life. How can I begin? What's the first step? This is the hardest part, the first plunge into new waters. The shock hitting your skin, and then relief as the familiarity settles in, and you can relax in the water that your body is getting used to.

The first step will also be hardest. How am I going to pack my bags, box up my things, without him noticing? How can I squirrel away enough money for a down payment for an apartment?

How is any of this possible?

I begin to lose my nerve. Starting to justify things like how nice it is to have someone at home, even if he wipes his feet on me. How convenient it is to have someone else pay the bills. How comfortable I am in this home I've built from the inside over the years.

And then the cold feeling inside of me shifts, and I grow warm as anger settles in.

This is my home, too. Why do I have to leave it? *He* is the one doing terrible things. *He* is the one who forced me to be where I am now.

He is the one who should have to suffer.

But can I really make him leave? What can I possibly do or say that will make him see he is better off without me?

Unless ... I try something else. Something that will get him out of my life forever, and I won't have to leave my home. Something that will be the proper way to make him pay for the things he has done to me.

I wait for the right night. A cold, rainy night, the kind that comes with sleet and freezing temperatures. I have to wait until the days begin to shorten, when the sunlight stops hitting me for long hours, but I am resilient.

Soon after All Hallows' Eve, when the temperature will be just right. Cold enough for freezing rain, but not snow.

Snow isn't slippery enough.

One morning, I see gray clouds, just before he steps on me as he leaves the house. It's garbage collection day, and he pulls our bins to the head of the driveway.

The clouds darken as the day goes on. The rain begins around midday, and the temperature drops just before it gets dark. He is wise enough to be careful on the steps as he comes home that evening, and careful as he walks up the driveway dragging the garbage bins inside. But I notice the brown bag in his hand, the shape of a bottle through it. He won't be so careful later in the evening.

So I make myself slippery that night. I shimmy closer to the edge that will make the rain and sleet hit me harder than usual. I let it fester and freeze up around my edges. I hear him thrashing around the first floor in his inebriated state. Stumbling here and there, banging into side tables. I wait for him to step outside, so he can slip on me and fall down the concrete steps. The wide, steep steps that I was worried about as soon as we bought this place, since it was hard to see in the dark where one step ends and the next one begins.

The neighbors have forgotten to bring in their garbage bins. It's always irritated him, and he's fond of stating this opinion to our neighbors, face to face. I can hear him complaining about them by the bay window near the front door, in his loud, drunken voice, that they should've brought the bins inside by now. It won't be long.

He stomps toward the front door and tears through it so quickly I don't even hear it creak. He steps outside, too suddenly, too absentmindedly, on my slippery, nearly frozen edge.

And then, he falls.

His feet fly out from beneath him and he lands on his back. He shrieks and pulls himself over, so he is facing me.

It's almost as if he is seeing me for the very first time. Who I truly am. What he's turned me into, with his own words, and feet, and treatment.

He starts to get up, but the steps are covered in a thin sheet of sleet. His feet slip and he falls backward. I hear his neck snap when he hits the next step. He continues to tumble, falling to the bottom that opens out to the driveway, twisting so that he is still staring at me as he lands, his eyes blank and glassy.

I feel myself rising, the ground growing smaller beneath me. My arms burst through the top of the doormat, and soon my legs follow.

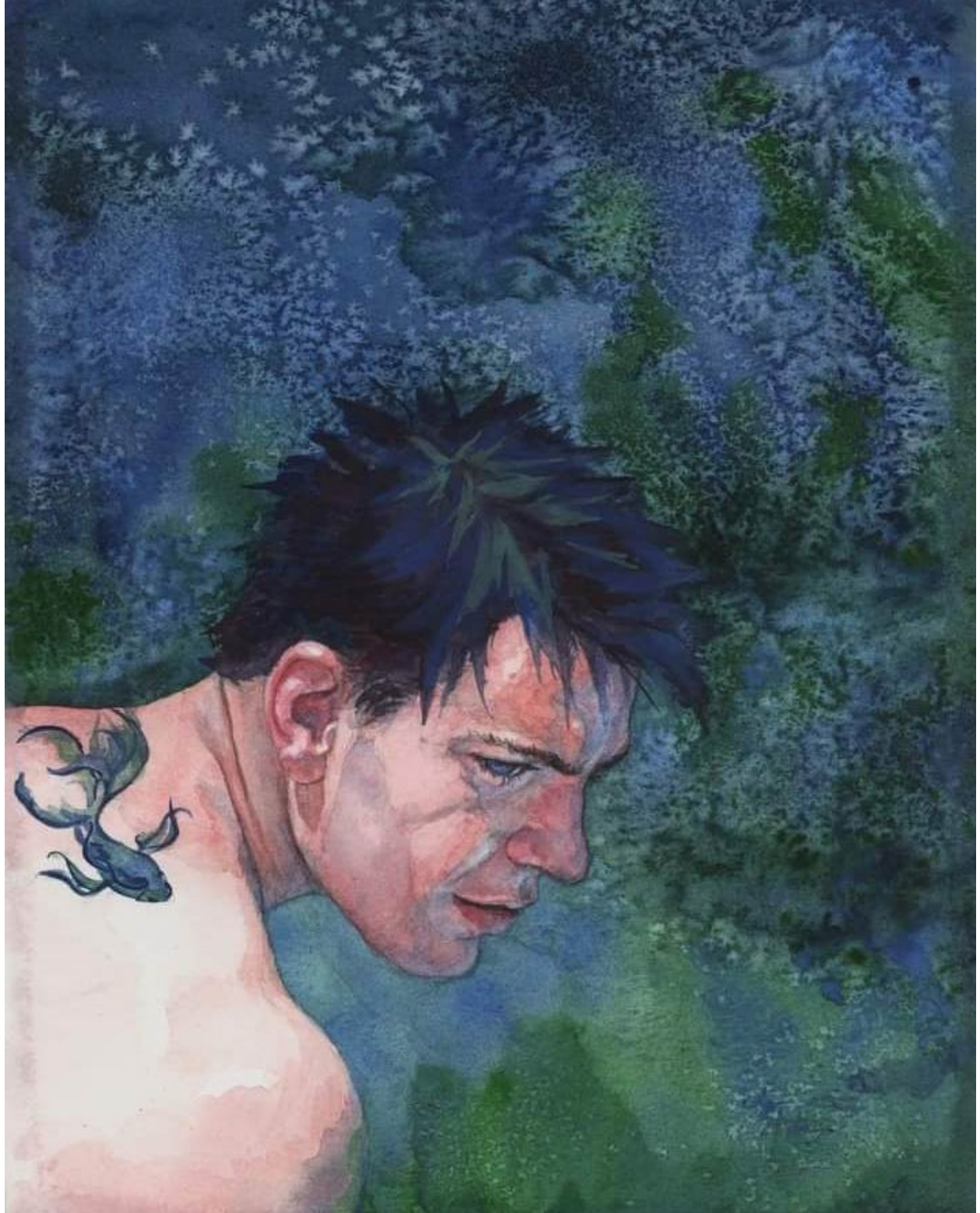
My muscles are a bit rigid at first, and I catch myself before tripping on

the steps, still slick with sleet. I carefully step to my husband, stiff on the last step, and stand over him, with my arms splayed toward the freezing rain. It cleanses me, baptizes me. I no longer care what happens to me, because I no longer exist. Not in the way I did before.

And now my new life begins.

“Find something to hate—nature, God, negligent road crews, government officials who deemed it unnecessary to fund the negligent road crews—
and let that hate move you.”

- Kieran Thompson
“How to Make a Vase”



WITH THE TURBULENT FLOW...
Angi Shearstone

THE SHRINE OF SAINT AMANDUS

Rex Burrows

The Shrine of Saint Amandus is neither spacious nor grand. In fact, it's an oblong wooden box about the size of a rolling suitcase, roughly fashioned to resemble a church. The shrine's makers dressed up their work with a bit of gilded copper here, a handful of semi-precious stones there, but the overall effect might be described as rustic or rough-hewn. That said, it's probably impolite to speak ill of the dead and their artistic efforts. Centuries of war and plague had left medieval European craftsmanship in a sad state of disrepair, and I'm sure they were doing the best they could with the tools and techniques available to them.

A small figure, presumably meant to represent Amandus, is affixed to one end of the shrine. The expression carved on the tiny face doesn't quite carry off the air of saintly serenity that was likely intended. In fact, he looks more than a little startled, perhaps disconcerted at the steep demotion in status he's undergone over the past few centuries. One day, you're an object of veneration in the cathedrals of Belgium. The next, you're an item of curiosity in a Baltimore museum. You'd be annoyed too. I suppose I can even relate, at least in my own small way, but that raises certain subjects that I'd prefer not to dwell on.

The explanatory card on the side of the glass case describes the shrine as a reliquary, a vessel built to house the mortal remains of a saint or other important personage. Following his death in 679 AD, Amandus's bones rested—more comfortably, I would imagine—in the crypts beneath a monastery in Flanders. That's where they remained, quietly mouldering, until the eleventh century when a faddish craze for the renewed veneration of saints swept across Europe. The monks of the day weren't about to pass up such a solid marketing opportunity; they disinterred poor Amandus and dumped his bones into this gussied-up box for public display. The card clarifies that all human remains have been removed from the shrine, but I still find myself wondering what would happen if you picked up the box and

gave it a good shake. Is there any chance that you'd hear the dry rattle of some object that the conservators missed? A finger bone? Maybe a tooth?

It's a morbid thought, likely the result of the foul mood that I'm in.

Focus. The text continues, detailing the sainthood that would eventually land Amandus in the shrine:

Shortly after his death, Amandus was canonized the patron saint of vine-growers and vintners. There is no evidence of any special association between Amandus and winemaking during his life, but the establishment of such posthumous affiliations was not uncommon during the period. The Roman Catholic Church was engaged in a long-term effort to co-opt or supplant pagan beliefs that remained persistently tied to the region's agrarian traditions. Carvings representing pre-Christian nature deities can still be found on several prominent cathedrals, including ...

The description goes on, but I've lost interest. I make my way out of the medieval wing, passing ornate altarpieces and stained glass panels. As I walk, I pull off my tie and crumple it into my coat pocket. Any attendees of my disastrous speaking engagement should be long gone by now, and besides, I'm past the point of caring about making a good impression. My dress shoes clack an authoritative rhythm that echoes off the marble floors and down deserted hallways. It's hours past the museum's closing time; I'm sure I'll eventually run into an annoyed security guard who will usher me to the nearest exit post-haste. For now though, I can pretend I have the Walters Museum all to myself.

I bypass the elevators and opt for the meandering stairway that links the museum's main buildings. I'm leaving the more modern portion—a monument to the poured concrete brutalism of the 1970s—and entering the Renaissance-style palazzo that was erected by the Walters family near the turn of the last century. Their founding donation of art and architecture ensured that the Walters name would remain stamped on the institution long after the family's Confederate sympathies had become an embarrassment to polite society.

Two levels down and a few wrong turns later, I arrive back at the expansive courtyard that forms the heart of the old museum. The dim, cavernous space is bounded by tiered Ionic columns, pairs of which flank passageways leading off to adjacent galleries. During the museum's normal operating hours, the hall would be naturally lit through the glass and wrought iron canopy that hangs far overhead. The sun set hours ago though, and the scattered light fixtures can only provide limited compensation for the loss. The boisterous chatter of school children on class trips has been replaced by

the tentative patter of raindrops against glass.

The tables, chairs, and slightly wobbly lectern that served as set dressings for the evening's prior debacle have been cleared away, and the hall has resumed its normal function as the gallery for classical European sculpture. Examples line the periphery of the space: marble busts of ancient Roman senators, lithe nudes of Greek mythological figures, and funerary stele whose commemorations have long since eroded away. A few of the pieces have been draped in vines, probably some curator's overzealous attempt at natural verisimilitude. During the nineteenth century, possession of these artifacts helped re-position the Walters family—upstart liquor barons and railroad magnates—as members of Baltimore's social elite. Enormous wealth and even more substantial vanity were prerequisites for assembly of the collection.

This observation provokes some unwelcome but unavoidable reflection on my own situation. I've done well enough financially, especially for an academic historian, but I'm fairly sure it was the ego side of the equation that got me into trouble.

It wasn't always this way, and I firmly believe that even my critics would acknowledge the importance of my early work. My first book, written while struggling to earn tenure at a small liberal arts college in New England, is still considered an important text that advanced understanding of the broader historical context for the American conservation movement. That said, it was my second book that really put me on the map. "The foundation for a new school of environmentalist thought," at least according to one of the more hyperbolic blurbs gracing the cover. The paperback edition achieved some improbable crossover success with popular audiences, which led to a series of increasingly high-profile interviews in print and television media outlets, which in turn begat my elevation to the status of Recognized Public Intellectual. It's amazing how far you can go with solid vocabulary and a bit of wit. I'll admit that I enjoyed all the attention, and can you really blame me if the appearances on *60 Minutes* and *Nightline* went to my head just a little?

The next ten years brought three more books that, while not as ecstatically received as my previous output, were sufficiently well-reviewed to keep me in the public eye. That proved more than sufficient to earn me an endowed professorship at the distinguished university just a few miles north of here. All of this was accompanied by predictable sniping from disgruntled peers, mostly criticisms about my new social circles and accusations of my ambitions being purely careerist. I tuned out the chatter, confident that my increased visibility and prestige was essential to expanding the reach of my message.

Which, I can now acknowledge, may have been getting a bit muddled.

At the time, the softening of previously firm stances felt like a natural evolution of my thinking and progress toward a more nuanced understanding of incredibly complex issues. For example, direct federal management of public lands isn't always practical. Private sector interests can play a positive role in conservation efforts. Property holders, even indigenous ones, do occasionally need to bow to the broader good and permit development of lands and resources. I told myself that none of this had anything to do with the company I was keeping, which at the time included a number of elected officials and the various types of creatures who operate in their orbit. My then wife pointed out the growing list of incongruities with my earlier and more strident viewpoints, but we were locked in a bitter set of divorce proceedings. It was easier to dismiss her opinion as one more dose of spiteful venom—of which there was plenty to go around on both sides—rather than accept it as a largely accurate diagnosis of my compromised position.

My circuit of the courtyard has brought me back around to the museum's exit. I could leave, but what do I have waiting for me at home except an empty house and half a bottle of single malt Scotch? I backtrack to the passageway that leads into the collection of arms and armor. Murder implements of past ages aren't of any great interest to me, but I do enjoy what lies on the other side of these galleries: *Der Wunderkammer*. The Chamber of Wonders.

Three bear skulls greet visitors at the door, the snarling threat of their permanently bared fangs safely contained under glass. The walls are studded with impressive racks of antlers, and a sizeable taxidermy alligator hangs ominously over the opposing doorway. Antique cabinets and lacquered display cases house the remains of rather less fearsome beasts. Jewel-toned insects pinned in tidy rows vie for attention with jars of sea creatures pickled in murky formaldehyde. Tiny primate skeletons stand posed on wireframe armatures, gazing out into the room through hollow eye sockets.

In addition to natural history items, the chamber features a number of Baroque oil paintings. Several depict biblical scenes that have been improbably transplanted to the Americas, Judeo-Christian iconography of the Middle East playing itself out against unspoiled New World vistas. The upper reaches of the walls have been decked with more of the vines that I noticed in the courtyard. These ones even sport a few clusters of puny, underripe grapes. I can't make sense of their presence here; are they part of some tacky promotional strategy for an upcoming wine tasting at the museum?

In a sense I've returned to Belgium, our friend Amandus's old stomping grounds, albeit a few hundred years further down the line. The chamber is intended to mimic a collection of natural curiosities and art objects that would have been displayed by a sixteenth century Belgian nobleman, one assembled with items plundered from every corner of the planet then accessible to European trade or conquest. What might initially pass as the quirky contents of a rich man's study actually serves as a preview for the brutal age of colonialism that would reach its zenith under King Leopold two hundred years hence. The sequence of events connecting Amandus's shrine to the Wunderkammer only took a handful of generations to unfold. Forcibly indoctrinate animist nature worshipers into an aggressively expansionist religious framework, add a dash of nascently metastatic global capitalism, and presto, their descendants come out the other side as apex imperialists.

The insight is worthy of the fiery young man who wrote my first two books. It's nice of him to put in an appearance, even though he's several hours too late. He almost certainly would have made a better account of himself than I did.

I'd been invited to the museum to speak at a private after-hours event for the top tier of donors. My contribution would amount to the delivery of a canned speech on the Hudson River School of American landscape painting. I'd used the same presentation on several previous occasions elsewhere; most art museums have a few examples of the form tucked away in one dusty corner or another. These events are all more or less the same anyway and I know the drill by heart: show up, look distinguished, go through the rhetorical motions, and then answer a few predictable questions over coffee. It's a dull routine, but the hefty speaking fees do help take the edge off.

I should have recognized trouble as soon as I noticed the young woman lurking toward the back of the courtyard. She didn't fit in with the well-heeled crowd, barely out of her teens and sporting a few too many tattoos and piercings to pass as a donor's daughter. Her attitude of thinly veiled contempt, which only intensified as I ticked through my speaking points, was another bright red hazard signal. I concluded my presentation, and the applause was still echoing as she made her way to the microphone that had been provided for questions. Once in position, she adjusted the height of the stand, cleared her throat, and proceeded to demolish me.

I'll spare you (and myself) a recounting of the gory details. I think it's sufficient to say that it was a concise, well-thought-out, and expertly delivered ass-kicking. She never stooped to directly accusing me of being a sellout, nor did she need to. The thesis of the argument was perfectly clear to all in attendance, and her masterful deployment of several prominent quotations from my own earlier works was particularly effective. My newly

minted *bête-noire* concluded her statement, and then patiently waited for me to mount a defense.

I've given hundreds of speeches over the years, maybe thousands. I've crossed swords with some of the most prominent thinkers of the modern era and have accumulated an armory's worth of deflections, feints, and ripostes useful for fending off exactly this sort of attack. Tonight though, nothing came to me. Absolutely nothing. I could only stand trapped by the look on my accuser's face: anger, disappointment, and the faint traces of something that might have been pity. The silence, punctuated by uncomfortable shuffling and throat-clearing from the crowd, stretched out from awkward to agonizing. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the event's host rising to intercede on my behalf, but I gestured for him to remain seated. Once it became clear that I'd have nothing to say for myself, the young woman shook her head, turned on her heel, and walked out. The museum's heavy bronze doors boomed shut in the wake of her departure.

Needless to say, there were no further questions.

The host brought the event to a close with a feeble joke, something trite about the vocal passions of youth. The last thing I wanted was any interaction with the crowd milling toward the exit. At least two of my colleagues were among them, ones that I knew would be gleefully spreading word of my uncontested drubbing among the faculty at their earliest opportunity. I retreated to the stairs at the opposite end of the courtyard and brushed past a sign that declared the upper galleries closed for the evening. No one made any move to stop me; maybe the staff thought it wiser to let me slink off to lick my wounds in peace.

And that brings us back to our current scene: an aging history professor skulking through an empty museum, forced to ponder the rather shabby box that he's built for his life's work.

A soft rustling sound pulls me up from my navel-gazing. The vines garlanding the room are in motion, their leaves trembling as if stirred by a faint breeze. That could be written off as the work of an overactive HVAC system, but don't they also seem thicker, more verdant than when I first arrived? A cloying floral aroma is leaking out of the drooping blossoms and the previously runty grapes appear to have swelled and ripened. They actually look delicious, nearly poised to fall to the room's tiled floors. It's impossible that this much growth could have occurred over the few minutes that I've been standing here stewing. I was probably just too distracted to properly observe them when I came in. It's late and my imagination is clearly getting the better of me; time to show myself out.

My pace toward the exit is brisk, but certainly not panicked. Breaking into a trot would represent an undignified acknowledgment of my mounting

anxiety. I ignore the greenery that festoons the intervening galleries. The delicate runners curling around axe handles were definitely here earlier, I tell myself, as were the twisting strands of foliage that threaten to swallow suits of armor whole. The odor of fecund growth is overpowering, so strong that I'm feeling light-headed. That's all the more reason to ignore the sense of dread that's blooming in the pit of my stomach, the one that's growing even faster than these fucking vines. It's unconscionable that the curators have allowed this to get so out of control. I'll be sure to leave a nasty comment card the next time I visit.

I stumble back into the courtyard. There, any lingering attempts at self-delusion crumble into dust. The vegetation has run riot, turning the vast hall into a shadowy arbor out of a fairy tale. Thick, ropey lianas sprawl across the floor and clamber up the marble columns like strangler figs. Most of the internal lighting has been choked out, and only faint shafts of moonlight are able to penetrate the canopy of leaves spreading across the glass ceiling. As I pick my way through the tangle of undergrowth on the floor, clusters of grapes smash beneath my feet. The slippery ichor threatens to send me reeling at every step, horribly slowing my progress toward the exit that I must reach.

I'm almost at the door—I can see the streetlamps and traffic and sanity of Charles Street only a few feet away—when I'm seized. Green tendrils twist around my wrists and ankles, clamping down with the strength of pythons. I'm pinioned, hoisted up off the floor, and conducted back to the center of the courtyard. There, a seething mass of vines has reared up and is busily fashioning itself into the rough semblance of a human figure. Dim light shines through gaps in the writhing form; it's more the vague, sketched out idea of a man than the genuine article. The facial features are at best an afterthought: two black pits perched above a jagged slash of a mouth. They're too rudimentary to bear any recognizable expression, even when I'm shoved within inches of the face.

The mouth yawns open with a woody creak, and then a torrent of green chaos pours out and cascades over my face. First my lips and then my teeth are prised open. The explosive *pop* of mandibular dislocation arrives in my ears a split second before a searing white shock of agony. A flood of growth pours down my throat, and rudely, insistently, *painfully* pushes its way through my trachea and into my lungs. Minute hair-like fibers bifurcate and branch until they've penetrated every cavity. I'm choking and spasming but somehow failing to suffocate. The invading rampage exhales a heady stream of pure oxygen laced with more complex chemicals—terpenoids and pteridines and volatile organics. Communication, message, and meaning are sent coursing through my bloodstream, and my consciousness undergoes an

abrupt fracture. A doubling, followed by a sudden wrenching shift.

I become simultaneously captive and captor, the holder and that which is held. For the first time in centuries, through borrowed eyes, I am able to perceive myself for what I am: dry spiritual twigs of a long dead man inexpertly grafted on to an infinitely deeper and stranger rootstock, one that extends far below the bedrock of all human mythology.

I rid myself of the blockage that was Amandus. What little remains of him is pruned away and plowed into the rich black loam of a more suitable, more symbiotic organizing sentience. Beneath me, my extended being explodes in a fresh spasm of growth. I am lifted up, up through the hall, up through the shattering glass, up into the moonlit sky. I am born aloft upon Yggdrasil the World Tree, which is also myself. I am the crucified and I am the cross. I am subsumed transfigured baptized resurrected born anew.

I am become the Saint of Leaves, the prophet and the messiah, the apocalypse and the savior, the god and the man bound in one green form.

HOW TO MAKE A VASE

Kieran Thompson

Step One: Don't die.

You come up on the stretch of black ice too quickly to avoid it, and your steering wheel spins wildly in your hands. It's out of your control now; brace yourself for impact. Feel as the car compresses around you, the metal frame of your trusty Buick crumpling in and down like tissue paper. See the glass flying, shards embedding themselves into your skin. Hear the screech of your tires, the wind whipping through your ears, the sound of the fire roaring with you inside it. You can't scream—not yet. There's not enough air in your lungs for it. All you can do as your car twists and burns and flips is sink down deep. Sink into the sensation of burning alive, of skin going crisp, of flesh and blood boiling.

When your car finally comes to a stop off the shoulder of the highway, you might be tempted to fall back into your seat—still buckled, you've always been such a cautious driver—and die. The pain you feel is unimaginable, insurmountable. It hurts, from your torso to your extremities to your pounding, pulsing head. The last time you felt like this you were just a little girl, and you were lying prone on the ground after a long, breathless fall out of your treehouse. Your body was smaller back then, and hardier; you're an older woman now, and the pain is not so easy to shake off. You lay in your seat, nauseous, scraped clean, every inch of you prickling and raw, like the epidermis had been grated away to reveal the fleshy, pink dermis.

Don't die. You'll want to, desperately, but fight the urge to close your eyes and fall into that bright, white nothing because you are not the only person in the car. There's still a child to think of—your son, remember?—and he needs you more than you need you. Though it kills you to move, reach back and grab hold of his hand. You won't be able to see his face, not at the angle you're pinned in, but imagine it, the mirror image of your own. It'll be all right, it'll all turn out right, you hear me? Stay awake! Don't let him fall

asleep, and don't let yourself sleep either. When you hear the sirens coming close, cry out as loud as you can.

Stay still now. Let the EMT soothe you and your son through what remains of the window. Hold onto his arm with the one hand you can feel, and try not to protest as your son is carefully lifted from the car. Let him distract you with questions and corny jokes as a group of firemen twist metal to pull you from the wreckage. Bleed and whimper, but live. Stand at the precipice of death for as long as you please, but do not let yourself die. You are still someone's mother. Someone still needs you to hold him, to tell him all will be well even if it won't be. Live on as you are moved from place to place, crash site to operating room after room. Defy death one, two, three times through the night, shocking your nurses and doctors.

Keep breathing, even as a doctor stands at your bedside and tells you in the softest voice so sorry ma'am, he just didn't make it. We tried, really, all that we could, but his injuries were just too severe. Live and recover and grow stronger each day, though there is no point in it, not any more.

Step Two: The guilt of outliving your son will try to swallow you whole; let it.

After having made it through countless surgeries and months of physical therapy, you're free to leave the hospital. Don't worry about the cost. The death, innumerable scars, amputation, cane, aching body, shattered mind, and obscene amount of opioid prescriptions have all been billed to your insurance! Feel free to pick up your debilitating self-loathing on your way out the door. There should be a specter at the desk to validate your existence.

Take a taxi home, and make small talk with the driver even as he flicks his eyes down to what remains of your left leg. Flinch and grind your teeth at every squeal and sudden stop, the fastness of the cars that merge onto the highway, the speed in which things come at you. Grip onto your thighs until they are splotted with half-moon indentations. Don't cry in front of this stranger, don't burden him with your fears. Leave a decent tip before limping out of the taxi and into your house.

Now that you're home alone, slam—lock your door and weep. You didn't have much time for crying in the hospital. Every day was a miracle, every day was about healing and pushing forward and not considering the past. In counseling you talked about feelings of emptiness, but you showed nothing to your therapist, anxious of being made to stay there longer. You've got nothing to fear now, no one to hide from but yourself. Collapse onto your couch, hurry your face into one of your oversized pillows and scream. These are your primal noises, your mother-sound. Once, you saw a video of

parents mourning their children after a ferry crash, and it terrified you, that hopelessness, the way grief had turned adults into babes. You're one of those babes now, so act the part. Cry until you can't, scream until it hurts. When you feel strong enough to stand, let rage guide you. Find something to hate—nature, God, negligent road crews, government officials who deemed it unnecessary to fund the negligent road crews—and let that hate move you.

Go through the house, room by room, and get rid of everything that reminds you of him. Get rid of the small socks decorated with cartoon characters, the half-dressed dolls, colouring books, waxy crayons, markers, and stickers in the shapes of Disney characters. Don't give yourself any space to weep over the clothes, sparkly heart-shaped bags and barrettes, the beads and bows, ribbons, and dainty little shoes. Shove it all into a trash bag and throw it out onto the curb along with his dollhouse, the tricycle and the month's old food from the fridge.

(There is no end to this task. Weeks later, you'll find traces of him, and you'll come apart again and again and—)

Let the weeks pass you unnoticed. Become numb to sensation, numb to time. Disregard the calendar. Shun the phone. People will call you, sometimes; ignore it. Ignore the knocks on your door, the doorbell ringing. Occasionally, you'll wake in the middle of the night screaming, clutching at empty air where your leg was. Cry yourself back to sleep when this happens, your tears and piteous sobs the only lullaby you sing. Stop the clocks. Smash the mirrors, or at least cover them with black cloth so as to avoid the look of your drawn and gaunt face, the eyes he shared with you. Swear off food, drink only to take your pills. Ah, the precious pills! Blue and yellow, white and round, white and oblong, white and coated in polymer—pop them one after another after another, that one for the pain in your heart, that one for the war in your mind, and that one there to quell the urge to cut off the other leg that hurts so much.

Give in to your grief. Make a home out of purgatory. You'll wish you died in that crash along with him, that you didn't have to go through the steps of breathing. Alas, death doesn't want you just yet, so set up camp in this middle place. Take another pill. You'll be here a while.

Step Three: After a month, leave your house.

There's nothing left in the fridge, and for the first time in forever, you're ravenous. Go to the store nearest to you—it's loud and big, and you can get your prescriptions refilled while you shop around. Walk aimlessly through the aisles, touch things just to know they're real. Squeeze and pick up fruit you won't eat, and sniff at vegetables that'll end up rotting in the crisper

drawer. Stack the cart full of frozen foods and TV dinners, cheap and fast and easy things you'll be able to eat without thinking too hard. You used to make meals—real fancy stuff you found online or snipped out of magazines, but you can't bring yourself to stand that long. Pick up comfort food instead—saltines and sardines, jars of crunchy peanut butter, bags of chips, fruit cups, personal boxes of cereal and instant mashed potatoes. Stand there in the grocery store, and give yourself a moment to be anything other than yourself, just another woman bent over the handle of her shopping cart surrounded by rattling, unoiled wheels and a playlist of 80s hits.

Here, you'll accidentally run into Kennedy, a face you haven't seen in years. Take a moment to marvel over how long it's been—since high school, right?—and think to yourself how she hasn't changed a bit. Well, no, that's not exactly true. She's got a soft pudge and fatty arms, and her bright eyes are a little dimmer than they used to be. Her smile's the same though, and when she talks, it's in a little girl's voice, determinedly cheery. Smile back when prompted. Don't cringe when she asks you how you've been.

Feel free to freestyle here on how you break the news of your recent disability to Kennedy. If you like, you can nod down to your cane and amputated left leg. Kennedy will gasp and ask what happened. If you're comfortable talking about it, she means. You're not comfortable with it; you never will be, but debate with yourself over if you want to tell Kennedy—from-high-school that it's none of her business or if you're lonely enough to disembowel yourself in the dairy aisle of your local Walmart. Make a decision fast. One second, two seconds, three, four, five—fine, you'll tell her, because why not? Who else are you holding this misery for? Surrounded by skim milk, sliced cheese, organic brown eggs and a variety of yogurts, you can give Kennedy a play-by-play account of the car crash, of your loss (tell her about the leg, but not about your son; he's yours and yours alone), of how you've been so alone and lost in your grief. Brave ceramicists might like to shed a few tears.

Kennedy will ask you for your phone number. Give it to her (she gives you hers in turn), and part ways. Go home and eat until you can't because something has to fill the void.

Let a day pass, maybe two, then answer Kennedy's calls. She'll ring you so much, day after day after day, and soon enough, her call will be your one constant. Pain is fluid, grief is liquid, but Kennedy calls at twelve in the afternoon and six in the evening. You'll open up to her, tell her more about yourself than you've ever told anyone. Tell her about getting married too young and widowed soon after, about the years of loneliness and latching onto strangers for just tendrils of affection, of having nothing that was yours until you had your son. Break open your chest, and tell Kennedy that his

name was Cassidy and that he had a lazy eye. That you didn't attend his funeral because there was more of you smeared across the asphalt than there was in the hospital body, and anyways, you weren't strong enough to go.

Make a friend. Trust Kennedy, love Kennedy. Let her share her life with you in turn for stories from yours. Be loved and understood, be seen and hugged and told kind things about yourself over the phone and sometimes in person. When Kennedy invites you to her pottery club, say yes.

Protest a little, if you want, about having never done ceramics before. It's pointless—Kennedy will insist that the class is for everyone, not just professionals and advanced hobbyists. Besides, she can't wait for you to meet Sharon. Oh, you'll just love Sharon. She's great, a real visionary, and she's totally unlike anybody ever. Not only is she a wonderful ceramicist, she's a wiz with feelings, and all that pain and sorrow you carry in you just sort of disappears after a few classes, not to mention the pottery hahaha, oh the pottery is just so lovely, and there's something so wholesome about turning clay into something of substance, and just think about it okay?

Step Four: Wait for Wednesday to come then go to the pottery class.

Kennedy promised to drive you there (you don't drive anymore, of course) so all there is to do is wait. Wash the dishes, watch some TV, and think about how you never had any sort of aptitude for handicrafts. It's all so complex to you, the beadwork and crocheting, the time it takes to turn fiber and dirt and string into something else. Worry, just a little, about being an outsider in an established group of people, but swallow it down once you hear Kennedy's car pull up in front of your place.

You'll be tense the whole ride there. Don't bother trying to come down from it, that nervous sort of high you get when thrust into new situations. Pay little attention to your surroundings—tap, tap, tap your foot on the carpeted floor of Kennedy's Sedan, flex and pop your knuckles as you slip down residential streets. Eventually, Kennedy will park in front of a purple bungalow with blue trim and a wild, uncut lawn. Count the cars—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten cars!—that surround the house, and look over the mess of lawn ornaments, the wind chimes and bird feeders and bright clay planters scattered through the porch and yard.

Let Kennedy help you out of the car. Pride won't help you when you're flat on your ass because you couldn't handle staring up at the house and maneuvering your cane at once. When she knocks on the door, try your best not to faint, though you feel lightheaded. Just stand there stiffly as the door is yanked open to reveal her, Sharon.

You'll be surprised when you see her, but don't show it. Take a moment to marvel at her, at how she's nothing like the defunct flower child you've been picturing. Something about the mix of emotional work and ceramics tricked you into believing she'd be some ageless crone hunched over a pottery wheel, hair streaked with patchouli oil and her wrists weighed down with turquoise. In reality, she's just a year or so older than you, chipper, and her matronly eyes warm you to your core. Stay still as Kennedy introduces you as a friend of hers, the woman she's been talking about lately, and blush and extend your hand for shaking.

Gasp, audibly, when Sharon grabs you and hugs you close. Sharon's much stronger than she looks, and her hold on you is bear-tight and just as fierce. If you're feeling up to it, return the hug, then let yourself be led by the hand into the dimly lit purple house.

The classroom you're brought to is nothing more than a renovated garage, so don't be too self-conscious as you step down into the smell of concrete and clay. Thirteen others wait around pottery wheels, some wetting their hands and palpating clumps of clay. Take a seat beside Kennedy and glance at your own pottery wheel, your clump of red-brown clay you'll be working with. Take a peek around you, carefully, not so obvious. See the others barreling ahead with their projects, little plates and mugs and bowls and ashtrays, pinch pots, vases, artsy little statues they'll glaze and add to their already robust home collections. Beside you, Kennedy flattens and smushes white clay into a vaguely vase-like shape.

Be indecisive. Be embarrassed by your lack of skill and jittery and unsure. Hold your clay in your hands until it's too dry to work with, unpleasant and cracking between your fingers.

Now, here comes the tricky part. Hold still as Sharon weaves her way through the garage to stand in front of you. You'll want to shy away when she offers you help, but don't. Let her squat down and press two clay-wet fingers onto your forehead. Listen closely as she tells you that you're blocked off and full of mournful, blue energy. Your aura is so heavy, she'll say. I saw it in you from the moment I looked into your eyes. Blue energy, grief and misery and weight. You wear it like a shroud, child.

Let her hold your face in her hands and smear red clay over your brown cheeks, your chin and nose. Allow her voice, deep and throaty, to unspool you. Let go, let go. Stop holding it all inside. How can anybody help you, heal you, love you if you're holding everything in?

Fall to pieces with an audience of strangers, in front of Sharon and Kennedy and a baker's dozen of people without names. Weep and wail while Sharon cups your face in her gentle hands, while someone else rubs soothing circles onto your back, like burping a baby. The pottery wheel will

start to turn. Turn to it, and let your tears soak into the clay. Mold and stretch and manipulate the clay with these people, your new friends, telling you that it's all right, it's safe here. You've forgotten how to be loved, but being in Sharon's house will remind you. You are safe here, you are seen. Relax into Sharon's hands, into her voice which coos and shushes and guides. You are a mother again, see? You are giving birth right now, held in the sanctity of Sharon's cool, concrete garage, assisted and midwived by a small crowd of lovers all going push, push, push, release.

The shape of your creation is irrelevant. Be it a pinch pot or a misshapen bowl, you will have made it in your own hands, in your own image. After it's been fired and glazed and left sitting in Sharon's garage for a couple of days, take it home with you and sit it beside a picture of Cassidy.

Step Five: Take a look in the mirror. Who is that woman? Who are you?

Well, you'll say, I am a survivor. I survived a horrible crash and I survived losing my leg, my son, and now I'm alive. There are people that love me. Kennedy and Sharon and all the kind folks in the pottery club love me, and I love them too, as fully as one can love a person. I have reasons to live, I have reasons to thrive. I take care of myself because my friends would want me to.

Erase the life you had before. You were so unhappy back then, and things are so much better now, aren't they, what with your new friends and family. On Wednesdays and Fridays, go over to Sharon's place and sit in her living room or in her garage or in her back yard around her massive handmade kiln, and learn more about pottery and life. She's so wise, her mind lush with thoughts. Believe her when she says that all things are pottery, that Adam and Eve were made of clay and suffused with life from God's own mouth. Thrill at the idea of being reformed someday, your miseries nothing but a smashed vessel made new.

You may doubt sometimes, and sometimes you may waver in your faith, but never for too long. Recover quickly. Don't let doubt cloud your mind. Imagine yourself being mended, cracks and hairline fractures filled with fresh clay, smoothed down, baked and glazed anew. Spend your free moments thinking up a new form for yourself. New eyes, new body, and new spirit. On the nights when you can't sleep, flick on your bedside light and draw it—horrible but lovely, vile but angelic, many-eyed, many-limbed and perfect.

Step Six: Don't move.

Sharon's just about done applying the last smudges of clay onto you.

Many hands touch you; many hands move and smooth and spread red, brown and white clay over your body, thick as a second skin. Blink but not much—there's clay coating your eyelashes, weighing down the lids. One last blink, and the world goes dark; the final bit of clay over your eyes, blinding you. Rely on your sense of smell and sound to make out your surroundings. Others are being built in Sharon's garage, their new forms as disastrous and divine as your own. Suck in a deep breath of warm, damp smells, like burning and baking, of brand-new pottery fresh from the kiln. Feel excitement and fear, an amalgamation of the two.

Listen as best you can as Sharon congratulates you all on your renewal. Don't respond because you can't respond—there's clay caking your mouth, over your teeth, coating your tongue and slipping down your throat, blocking up your airways. Pant out hard through your nose, and let that hard, whispery noise be enough of an answer.

Step down from your stand carefully. Let an unseen hand guide you from a cool place to a cold place to somewhere unbearably hot. Feel the heat of the kiln, the hot bricks and the fire within. Feel the sweat drip—dripping from your skin beneath the clay, the first level hardening.

Hear, faintly, some high-pitched noise almost like screaming, but don't let the fear in, even as you realize how irreversible this is, how permanent.

Step into the fire. You've seen the kiln do its work before, how it turned wet into dry, soft into hard, how formless messes have become vessels in its belly. You are a vessel now; you are the vase. You boil and cook from the inside out, every bit of you burning up, worse than the fire of the car crash but holier somehow; cleaner. As you begin to harden and dry, eyes becoming like jelly, organs dissolving into soups, use what little strength you have left to smile and laugh and rejoice! Let your final moment be one of complete bliss! Scream, woman! Scream!

You are made.

CONTRIBUTORS



Mark Towse (“An Old Romantic”) is an Englishman living in Australia. He would sell his soul to the devil or anyone buying if it meant he could write full-time. Alas, he left very late to begin this journey, penning his first story since primary school at the ripe old age of forty-five. Since then, he’s been regularly published in anthologies and magazines and, to date, has eight novellas to his name, including *Nana*, *Crows*, *3:33*, and *Hope Wharf*.



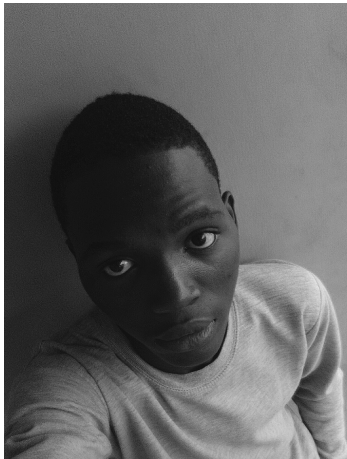
Elin Olausson (“Little Monster”) is a fan of the weird and the unsettling. She is the author of the short story collection *Growth* and has had stories featured in *The Ghastling*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Nightscript*, and many other publications.

Elin’s rural childhood made her love and fear the woods, and she firmly believes that a cat is your best companion in life. She lives in Sweden.



Brandon McQuade (“The Doe”) was born and raised in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. He earned his BA from the University of New Brunswick Saint John and his M. Phil in Irish Writing from Trinity College Dublin. For a selection of poems from his second collection, *Bodies*, he was the recipient of the 2022 Neltje Blanchan Memorial Writing Award. He lives in Northern Wyoming with his wife and their children.

Alexandra Provins (“Wildfire”) lives in Northern California with her husband and dog. She’s been teaching English for nearly a decade to middle and high school students and has a master’s in psychology from Harvard University Extension School.



Ernest O. Ògúnyẹmí (“The Flute”) writes from Nigeria. His work has recently appeared/is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Sun*, *Banshee*, *Mooncalves: An Anthology of Weird Fiction*, and elsewhere. His debut chapbook, *A Pocket of Genesis* (Variant Literature), appears in 2023. He is working towards a BA in History and International Studies at Lagos State University.



Marie-Andrée Auclair (“The Perimeter of Others”)’s poems have found homes in many print and online publications in Canada, the USA and in several other countries, most recently in *Bywords* (Canada); *Sierra Nevada Review* (USA); *Rathalla Review* (USA); *MockingHeart Review* (USA) and *Acta Victoriana* (Canada). She enjoys writing (of course), photography, traveling and adding to her cooking repertoire after each trip. She lives in Canada.



Remo Macartney (“Simulacrum Vehemens”) lives in Seattle with his partner, Brittan. There you will find Remo, singing to the pets and collecting records. Brittan has described Remo’s work as “Pink and Black,” which you may interpret as you will.



Karen Cline-Tardiff (“Twenty Birthdays with You”) has been writing as long as she could hold a pen. Her works have appeared in several anthologies and journals, both online and in print. She is founder and Editor-in-Chief of Gnashing Teeth Publishing. Find her at karenthepoet.com



Shelly Jones (“Penelope Learns to Weave a Double Helix”) is a professor at a small college in upstate New York, where she teaches classes in mythology, folklore, and writing. Her speculative work has been published in *Podcastle*, *New Myths*, *The Future Fire*, and elsewhere. Find them on Twitter [@shellyjansen](https://twitter.com/shellyjansen) and <https://shellyjonesphd.wordpress.com/>.



McLeod Logue (“The Squealing”) is a poet and MFA candidate at UNC Wilmington. Her work has appeared in *The Nashville Review*, *The Shore Poetry*, and *Pithead Chapel* and is forthcoming in *The Sonora Review* and *Gulf Stream Magazine*.



W. T. Paterson (“Where’s Lucy?”) is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from the University of New Hampshire, and is a graduate of Second City Chicago. His work has appeared in over eighty publications worldwide, including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *The Delhousie Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *Fresh Ink*. A semi-finalist in the *Aura Estrada* Short Story Contest, his work has also received notable accolades from Lycan Valley Press, North 2 South Press, and Lumberloft Press. He spends most nights yelling for his cat to “Get down from there!”



Jeff Adams (“The Procedure”) lives in California’s Napa Valley. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *McNeese Review*, *Voices 2020* from Cold River Press, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Otoliths*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and other publications. He is the editor of *ARCHYOLOGY: The Long Lost Tales of Archy and Mehitabel* (University Press of New England), a book of humorous light verse based on the work of the writer Don Marquis. A portion of the work appeared in *The Atlantic*, with illustrations by Edward Gorey.



Corey Niles (“poisoned earth”) was born and raised in the Rust Belt, where he garnered his love of writing. His poetry has appeared in *Nightmare Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, and *Chlorophobia: An Eco-Horror Anthology*. His debut gay horror novel, *Blood & Dirt*, was published by NineStar Press in August 2022.



David H. West (Staff Contributing Artist/*There Is No Tomorrow*) photographs birds. And anything he can find that's related to birds. He lives in New England and spends his weekends either playing golf or hiking through his local nature preserves in search of feathered creatures.



The tales of **Gregory Jeffers** ("The Triple G") have appeared in a dozen or so literary journals and anthologies and in two published collections.

His stories won first place awards in the 2019 *Writer's Digest* Short Short Fiction Contest, the Sixfold Summer 2019 Fiction Competition and the Highly Commended Award in the 2022 Newcastle Short Story Anthology Contest.

Other stories were shortlisted for the Himes Prize in 2020, The 2021 Tucson Festival of Books, the Fish Publishing Short Story Prize 20/21 and the 2022 *Writer Magazine's* Flash Fiction Contest.

Mr. Jeffers lives and writes in the Adirondack Mountains and on the island of Vieques.



Christian Hanz Lozada ("I Once Worked There") is the son of an immigrant Filipino and a descendent of the Southern Confederacy; he knows the shape of hope and exclusion. He authored the poetry collection *He's a Color, Until He's Not* (Moon Tide Press, 2023) and co-authored *Leave with More Than You Came With* (Arroyo Seco Press, 2019). His poems have appeared in *Hawaii Pacific Review* (Pushcart Nominee), *Bamboo Ridge*

Press, *Mud Season Review*, and *Sin Cesar*, among others. Christian has featured at the Autry Museum and Beyond Baroque. He lives in San Pedro, California and uses his MFA to teach his neighbors and their kids at Los Angeles Harbor College.



Elaine Pascale (“The Last Day”) is the author of *The Blood Lights*; *If Nothing Else, Eve, We’ve Enjoyed the Fruit*; and the soon-to-be-released *The Language of Crows*. She is the co-editor of *Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice*. She is a regular contributor to *Pen of the Damned* and the Ladies of Horror Picture-Prompt Challenge and is part of the Strong Women, Strange Worlds marketing group. She is also a reviewer for *Hellnotes*. Elaine is familiar with toxic

work environments and she hopes to find a creative exit strategy if ever faced with one again.

Find out more at elainepascale.com, <https://www.amazon.com/author/elainepascale>, Facebook: [elaine.pascale](https://www.facebook.com/elaine.pascale)
Twitter and Instagram: [@doclaney](https://twitter.com/doclaney)
TikTok [@elainepascale](https://www.tiktok.com/@elainepascale)



Jenna Moquin (“The Choice”) grew up on the outskirts of Boston and attended Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, where she studied creative writing and literature. Her short stories and poetry have appeared in *ParABnormal Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Asylum Ink*, *HorrorBound*, *Heater*, and *The Larcom Review*. In 2016, she released a collection of dark tales, *Safe*. In 2021, she compiled a charity anthology of 1980s-themed horror and suspense tales, *Totally Tubular Terrors*. She is an active member of the New England Horror Writers and the Porter Square Writer’s Group. She is a proud

aunt to six nieces and nephews, and currently resides north of Boston with her Devil’s Ivy plants while working on a novel.



Angi Shearstone (*With the Turbulent Flow ...*) is an award-winning professional artist with an MFA in comics, a brother & sister pair of orange cats, unapologetic geek tendencies, and a great love of ska-core and punk rock. In addition to art-making, Angi blogs at www.creativityandcats.com and writes horror fiction. Her work can be seen at www.angishearstone.com, and she currently resides in New England.

Angi would like to honor Ernie Griffith from the Facebook group Photos for Artists, who provided the photo reference that inspired *With the Turbulent Flow ...*, in addition to many photos to many other artists within the group, and passed away a few months ago.

Favorite quote: "A painting is never finished, it simply stops in interesting places ..." (Paul Gardner)



Rex Burrows ("The Shrine of Saint Amandus") is a writer primarily working in the weird fiction, horror, and dark fantasy subgenres. He also has a background in biological research and holds a Ph.D. in Microbiology and Molecular Genetics. His stories are often informed by his interests in science, nature, and history. Rex's short fiction has appeared in magazines and anthologies including *Weird Horror Magazine*, *Horror Library Volume 7*, and *Two-thousand Word Terrors*. He lives in Washington DC and can be found online at <https://rexburrows.com/>



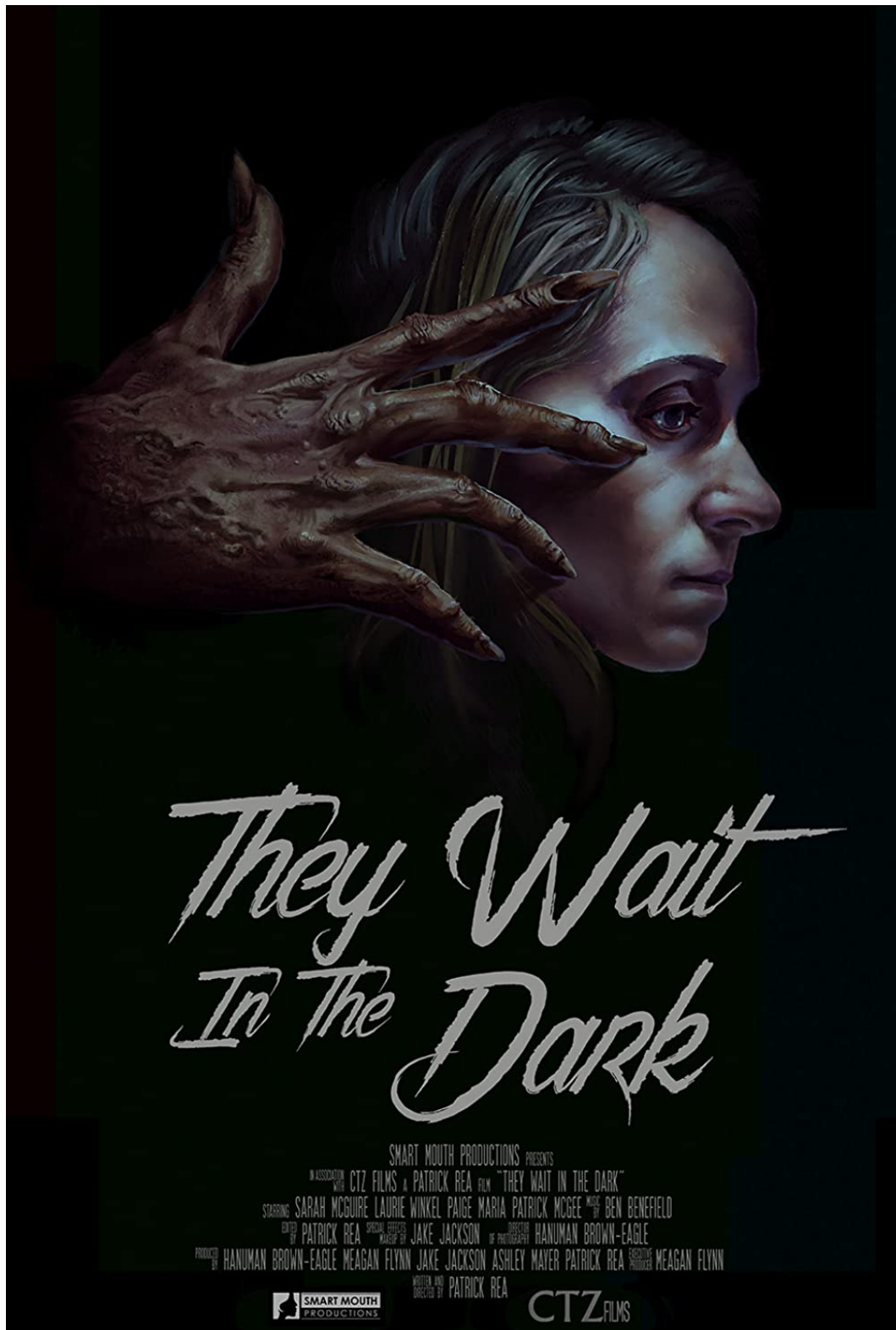
Kieran Thompson ("How to Make a Vase") is an Australian author whose primary subjects are horror, tragedy, and all things macabre. He spent his teenage years writing nature-themed poetry about death and its processes, later dipping his toes into writing short stories and novellas. He is an established member of Writers SA, an animist, and an avid *D&D* player, and can most often be found crouched on the side of the road harvesting roadkill to taxidermy.



Page Sonnet Sullivan (Staff Contributing Artist: Cover Art/*Optic Nerve*) is currently a sophomore at Rhode Island School of Design, majoring in Photography. Her photographs have been exhibited at Deblois Gallery, Portsmouth Arts Guild, Matt's Pharmacy, and the Gelman Gallery at the RISD Museum. Her photograph *Does it Matter?* was accepted into the Wickford Art Association's juried 2017 Poetry and Art Exhibition, and her artwork was published in a limited-edition collection. Page's writing has been published in *Ink Stains* literary anthology, *Awakening Compassion* (Salve Regina University), *The Patriot Ledger*, *The Newport Daily News*, and RISD's *Volume 1*. Page is interested in themes of intimacy, suspension, adolescence, and magical realism. She posts her art regularly on Instagram ([page_sonnet_art](https://www.instagram.com/page_sonnet_art)).

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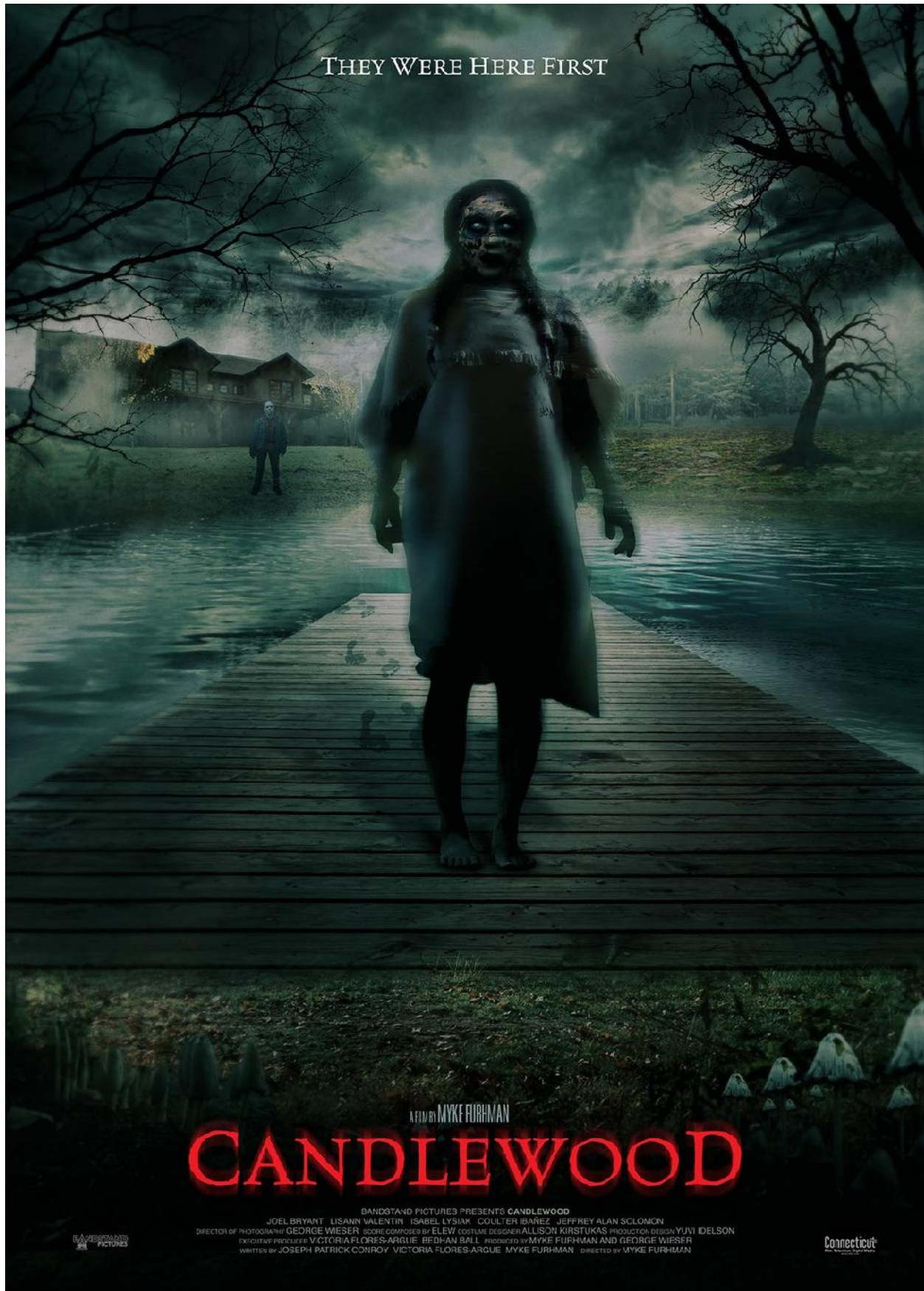
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**In this issue, twenty-two artists ruminate on the things we
break, why, and how they affect the people—and the
world—around us.**

Mark Towse ♥ Elin Olausson
Brandon McQuade ♥ Alexandra Provins
Ernest O. Ògúnyemí ♥ Marie-Andrée Auclair
Remo Macartney ♥ Karen Cline-Tardiff
Shelly Jones ♥ McLeod Logue
W.T. Paterson ♥ Jeff Adams
Corey Niles ♥ Gregory Jeffers
Christian Hanz Lozada ♥ Elaine Pascale
Jenna Moquin ♥ Angi Shearstone
Rex Burrows ♥ Kieran Thompson

Staff Contributing Artists: Page Sonnet Sullivan and David H. West

**Welcome to the place where the shards of the
smashed heirloom china stick to the soles of your bare feet.
Welcome to *34 Orchard*.**