



Spirit Lake Review

2023

20th Anniversary Issue

SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW

LITERARY MAGAZINE

www.spiritlakereview.com

Spirit Lake Review is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by the University of Wisconsin-Platteville undergraduates with support from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville College of Liberal Arts and Education.

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Cover Image by Roberta Condon.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the 20th Anniversary Issue of *Spirit Lake Review*! This spring, our student editors worked tirelessly to create an unforgettable special issue that features innovative and outstanding poetry, prose, and visual artworks. In celebration of our two-decade (and counting) run, our 2023 issue highlights the human drive for connection with self, other, nature, and past and present. Complicated and nuanced by pandemic isolation, technology, and the din of contemporary life, this drive for connection is, like all memorable art, hard-won and thought-provoking.

Housed at University of Wisconsin, Platteville, *Spirit Lake Review* is, as ever, run by student editors enrolled in our annual Literary Magazines course and advised by a faculty member. This spring, we were able to open Literary Magazines to students on both our Platteville and Baraboo campuses. For the first time, *Spirit Lake Review* offered two funded internships to Professional Writing majors. Special thanks to inaugural interns Editor-in-Chief Taylor Arcand and Social Media and Web Design Strategist Arrielle Eckhardt for their tireless work and dedication.

We hope you enjoy our website's updated neutral color palette, which features a delightful banner designed by student editor and graphic design major Madeline Korb. We are sure you'll enjoy our special anniversary issue as much as we do. From emerging writer Hailey Prager's impressive reverse narrative "Poem in Which My Father's Windshield Unshatters," to seasoned poet Michael Martone's meditative "Dead Mall," each of the pieces in this carefully curated issue render the human drive for connection as an act of imagination. Wisconsin visual artist Roberta Condon's whimsical "Waking with the Waxwings" graces our cover this year and evokes the tranquil abundance

of spring as a time of communion with nature.

Spirit Lake Review would like to thank the UW-Platteville faculty, staff, administrators, and community members who continue to support us logistically, financially, and morally. Special thanks are in order for Communications and Media Manager Jolene Werlein; Dean Hilton Kelly; Academic Department Assistant Sara Koeller; *Spirit Lake Review* founder Dr. Kelly Dwyer; and UW-Platteville Event Services staff. Most importantly, thank you to our readers and contributors for trusting us with your creative work and giving us your attention and support.

Here's to twenty more years!

The 2023 Spirit Lake Review Team

SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW

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Poetry





"Villa Borghese Gardens" by Colee Pasinato

Garden of the God(s)

Taylor Arcand

Red peaks spear the sky, standing righteously
erect. Maybe they're reaching towards Heaven.
Is there a Heaven? Is that where all the Gods are?

I walked through the Garden of the Gods, yet
I didn't see any halos, crosses, or harps.
Where are all the Gods?

Like the crimson boulders, my life is
in the balance of tumbling. Stuck between Heaven
and Hell, I am wondering which way to look.

I came with some questions for God(s)
or whoever the fuck can give
me some answers around this mountainside.

I'm a little like Ernest Hemingway –

devoted writer, raised in the Midwest,
surrounded by an abundance of cats.

Though I've never checked out
Fitzgerald's penis, never had four wives,
and not as interested in misogyny.

More interested in sex, divinity, and expression,
I traveled to Colorado Springs looking
for clarity on love and femininity.



"Rome" by Colee Pasinato

Alpha, Bada — Aleph bet

Avrum Berg

Alpha is the dominant force the Romans used to take and kill
Because they knew they'd have to rule us, or we'd grow too strong still
Crimes! I swear you used to love us, shared our ideas far away
Doubt you ever gave us credit when our Aleph-Bet you'd say
Even when you read our story, used the laws we had encased
Falsely claimed "an eye for an eye" was not a system payment-based
Greedy! You said when we wanted land, but settled for the cold, hard banks
How is it that our Christian cousins killed our Muslim brothers, a heartless thanks
I know the sorrow, I've lived the fear, felt the hate, the pain, the loss
Just because I pass as white doesn't mean I want coins tossed
Kindness used to be our motto, peace the weapon that we hurled
Listen, when we started out, we only wanted a better world
Mostly scattered, hope we found when the land we needed became ours
Not the plan to become the oppressor, hypocrites with bombing showers
Oh, who could listen, I'm mostly white, I couldn't know the pain before

Please forgive my pointless, stupid gesture, we can all get back to war
Question everything, it can't be right, we knew the land was ours alone
Raise an army, scare the people from their long-time ancestral home
Stop! Just stop, solutions, please, we can find them a place to live
Talk to the leaders, compromise, isn't there a happy bridge?
Uh, can't the hate-filled nations that surround us find a place for them to live?
Visions of the future, conflict, danger, conflict, death, the hopeless stuff
Why, just why, can't it end haven't we all had enough?
Xenophobia, we're not them, they're not us, too much difference, not enough
Yesterday we all had problems, oppressive forces all around
Zealots thought they knew the solution. If we die, we all will be drowned



"Untitled" by
Michael Heath

Reptilian Iceland

Avrum Berg

When we find ourselves near dawning of December,
The familiar bite of winter that we surely all remember.
The cold, it comes crawling, with its serpentine delight,
For the silver snakes of hunger come begging in the night.
The cold, it seems to trap us, indoors and out of sight,
The snowy howls of winter, ever-growing in their might.
We find ourselves stuck frozen, like the frost on windowsill,
For the silver snakes, our capture is ever calling still.

The frozen flakes of heaven, drifting slowly from the sky,
We may hope for end of snowfall, however helpless is our cry.
The ice encroaches all around, from lake to riverside,
From the silver snake's militia, there is no way to hide.

Sometimes we wait and listen, as the tundra gently calls,

The sky above, the snow below, the gentle snowflake falls.
But there's no escaping from them as they slither toward our home,
For the silver snakes of sorrow will chill you to the bone.
There is nothing to be done about the fierce encroaching storm,
For the silver snakes of winter will be there in every form.



"Elephant Head Road"
by Michael Lambert

My Compass

Kelsey Bigelow

Poetry made itself
my compass through the intense
No stanza of mine was written
for the simple
Why would they if life never breaks
lines into calm
I am not skilled
at the simple sounds of slow
My pencil has not sharpened
in a soothing sharpener
and my ink only knows
knuckles or nuptials
But I'm ready to know the in between
How to write the little things
To learn that they're stronger than the intense
as they welcome me into rest



"Westside Tavern" by
Richard Moninski

The Socks I Wear to Corporate America

Kelsey Bigelow

My C-3PO liner socks
hide in pointed flats and basic heels
to keep me grounded in nerdism
and remind me I was born into
a life meant for galaxies

The Christmas trees
I shamelessly wear year-round
tuck inside tall boots
to keep the joy around

My London Tube socks
add personality to my ankle boots
keeping my feet aching for the
rails of the Underground

as I waltz the halls of Corporate America

These socks are outside

the beige and computer screens

the conference rooms

desk chairs and headsets

They are poetry stages and photo walks

coffee shops and train stations

These socks are every place

these feet have felt

while I live as a creator with a day job



"Untitled" by Jesse Lee Kercheval

Home Waters

Paul Bolstad

What danced the boat-hulls lashed above us:
slipstream of Madison to Duluth, olympian
pose of laughter between us? We wore
our very bodies in the casual way, I imagine,
a veteran might wear a grenade on webbing:
deluded that, once primed, any explosion
would visit no harm to ourselves. Two days
later rowed right onto Superior. So calm,
the scullers could practice standing, heroned
over their rigging. I drove home as he slept.
Our roofed shells still trembled with the highway,
but, then again, it's always quieter in a return.
He was in Carolina, with vague plans, "training
for the national team," when he killed himself.



"Sambuca" by
Richard Moninski

Self-Portrait in Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*

Paul Bolstad

One of my great friends would, when he'd had too many, pull you close then, tender like a lover, violently name each word: "With. The. Memphis. Blues. Again." I miss him more than I miss youth, or the place we'd meet in Bethesda, Greek bartender feeding us the two-dollar-nightly-special beers and complaints about her teenage stepson. Or the way, back home, a gust of February will blow just southerly. Like cow's breath. Like crows. Like spring. And when I think about fandom, imagine dignity. Such true love stupefies: the last I heard, he was in Montana. I'll never see him again.



"Garden Party" by
Kathy Korb

Tallulah

Paul Bolstad

My daughter's boots are fast to the quicksand
mud along the springbottom. She wails.
At seven: her imagination is full
of bones and vines, fingers of lightning.
When she thinks of death she pleads to her mother
and me that she does not want to be no more.
And when she runs, now, back to the house in
bare feet she leaps to me and I can feel
the vine-like slender of her arms, even
rib-bone frail, caged beneath my hands. Creek Mud.
Tears. Warm and staining my clothes, as though
I too was below, held and sinking.
Driving the Gator back to the bottom, find
her boots, standing, no figure, thigh deep in the still.



"The Humble
Pineapple under UV"
by Connor Trocke

[Print Your Name Here]

Lisa Chu

In Chinese culture, you can tell how close your relationship is
by how you say their name—
the shorter, the more affection;
boil it down to what's important.
For the most part, I referred to you as the "son of a bitch" in my diary.
I only stopped because it was an insult to your mother.

Back then, we called you the Soy Sauce King.
You added it to everything you ate.
It wasn't even real soy sauce; it was Maggi seasoning.

"Good morning, motherfucker!"
Your dad was there. Sorry.

When you died, your name was a single syllable.
Don't look at me like that. / didn't say it.

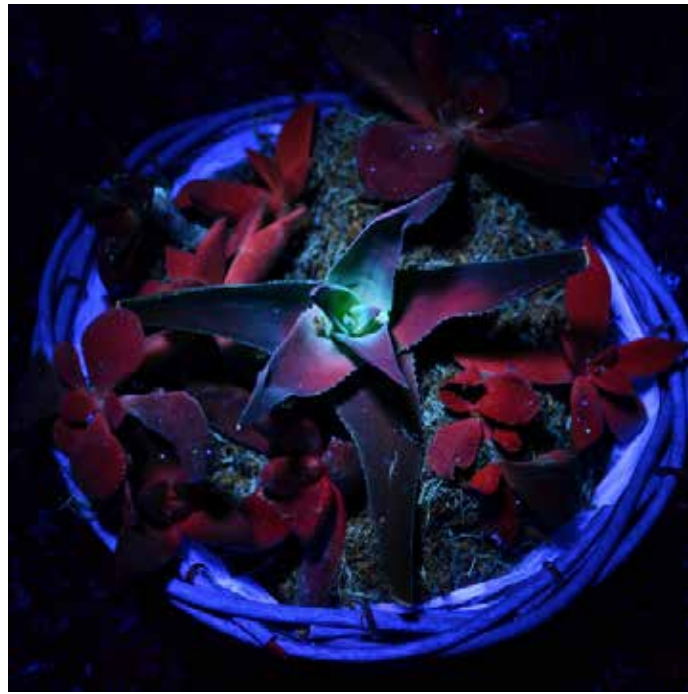


"Untitled" by Jesse
Lee Kercheval

The Green Shirt

Breanna Cisketti

The Green Shirt – died January 31, 2022,
along with four feet and nine inches of
human sweetness. Dark grass green,
bold and swaying, will never look as good on anyone
as it did on her. Flour stains would often
cover the shirt after a long day of baking.
The green would sparkle and shimmer like my love for her.
I wonder if she would be reincarnated to wear a dark green shirt,
like this one ever again. I remember it being my favorite
color on her, it always made her eyes pop.
As she laid in front of me resting her eyes as she always did,
almost with a smile across her face,
I blinked green-eyed tears away as I said my final goodbye,
to not only her, but that dark grassy green flour-stained shirt.



"Fluorescent
Succulent Basket"
by Connor Trocke

Vacation to Coney Island

Justice Corpora

You took a vacation to Coney Island with a OneStep+ Polaroid,
with a backpack that protected \$300 worth of potential moments.
You felt like Harold Feinstein without the Adam's apple or the talent.
Your cotton sweater smoothed over your goosebump arms, so
you ate the classic coney dog with onions, and your tastebuds did a kick-line in tangy sauce.
The aluminum-wrapped bread warmed your stomach more than a blanket could
as you wiped your mouth with the bumpy sleeve of the sweater
and slid a square cartridge into your camera, enclosed the film. . .
A flash snapped a Ferris wheel.
A blank image whirled out.
They rarely ever look how I want them to, you judge the photo before you see it.
The photo of a Ferris wheel emerged as a blurry mirage of carriages.
A color palette of salmon and canary hues sticks out from eggshell grain.
The blue sky behind the beast laid out like a quilt to rest on.
The Ferris wheel touched the soft quilt with
its sharp edges. It sliced through white clouds, and it looked down on you.
Curious eyes experience naive gestures of trying.

Curiosity lets you see moments that no one,
nobody, and not any one of your neurons would appreciate otherwise.
Get in line for the Ferris wheel.



"Pottery Still Life"
by Kathy Korb

Coffee

Jakob Cridelich

Little brown roasted nuggets of tranquility,
crushed, packaged, and sealed for freshness.
Strong, robust, and stern, like my grandpa,
who sipped coffee without burning his tongue
between drags of his unfiltered Camels. The smell
takes me back to childhood grocery trips with
my family, passing the aisle with coffee bean grinders,
where consumers freshly ground their coffee into bags.
A child, wild with curiosity and lust for the world,
riding the front of a grocery cart in between stops.
Wanting to be old enough to drink coffee
and like its bitter, pale taste. Running toward
the freedom that adulthood withheld from my youth,
I sipped.

I sipped and it scorched. So hot, like the soles
of my shoes resting on the sides of the wood stove

in our living room, rubber melting and smearing
down the steel-encased fire. Write my name.
My tongue robbed of its capacity to enjoy dinner,
soda, or Fruit By the Foot for a day. The taste
of what I could taste, not sweet, but bitter, like
the friendship between cousins that used to be
best friends. But now, strangers that haven't spoken
to one another for more years than they did.

I would attempt to drink coffee as a kid twice more
before deciding it wasn't for me. Like the cigarette butts,
still smoldering, my brother and I would try to smoke,
first flicked from the front porch by our parents.
Why? Because it's what the adults do;
they drink coffee,
smoke cigarettes.
They can afford all of the things my heart desired
but my five-dollar-a-week allowance could not.

Tongues heal, allowances turn into paychecks
as we exchange hours of playtime for labor.
Grocery trips aren't spent riding on carts, but
pushing them, trying to keep the wheels light
as my wallet squirms in my pocket at the sight
of another item being added to the bill. Coffee

as black as my lungs after I smoked a pack a day,
poured shakily into a cup religiously, eyes
blurred with the shadows of last night's dreams,
transparent but boggling. My lifeline, kissing
my drool-crusting lips. Not like my first kiss, bodies
pressed, lungs quivering, nervous with excitement,
but my millionth kiss, thoughtless, ritual, and in my mind,

necessary. Prodded by my always prevalent and present facial hair, hair I once sought to grow, but now has become another task to keep up on.

From bed to reality, the transition is smoothed with the crude taste of freshly drowned aspirations, scorched and strained until no mystery remains. I drink those empty and un-achieved aspirations into the afternoon, lodged in my Adam's apple as they resist the demand of reality. The way my saliva refused to sink past my throat when her mom said to me that she found a condom receipt, a couple teenagers in love, a Christian household.

There's no turning back.
Down the gullet with a capacity to endure sure to follow. I spell *function* with the word *caffeine*, because I can't without it. Because I would lie in bed all day, sorting out my third quarter-life crises if I didn't get amped enough to go do something with my life. Or is it the fourth? Because to deal with the world without caffeine would leave me drowning, drowning like that time in the stream in Tennessee before my cousin saved me.

Adulthood is overrated. Caffeine doesn't solve that, like a band-aid doesn't stop your scuffed knee from bleeding, But it covers it up well enough that you can hop back on your bike and continue pedaling toward your freedom. But as mom always said, don't forget to wear your helmet.



"Untitled" by
Micheal Heath

Ode To The Seasons

Jakob Cridelich

The grass,
mid-day, early summer, a breeze for my heart to sail on.
As the dog sits with a quiet pant beneath the unwavering oak,
full of leaves, life, and birds bickering about squirrels, that bicker
back about the rabbits, that bicker about child support.
Late-night,
mid-summer cigarettes, accompanied by glasses of wine,
jokes, and soft music tampering off any need to say, seek,
or expect anything. Traffic flowing into the night, as people
bustle with plans, people, and their own music,
winning a competition that doesn't exist.
The water,
late afternoon, early fall, as I wade through a vein of Earth,
casting my stresses and concerns into a current of contentment.

Catching fish, but seeking things of greater importance.

A hoodie,

early evening, late fall, as my friends and I let a fire and companionship warm our souls. Leaves rustling and wrestling with a chill fall breeze. The air is crisp and invigorating, calming and alarming, as it whispers of colder things to come.

The winter,

early evening, late night, it doesn't matter, as there are only a few hours of daylight. The appreciation for summer and sunlight that it nurtures within us. The mental exercise and indoor projects that the season provides us with time to focus on. The resilience to get through such a season still human, humane, and somewhat sane.

The mud,

mid-day, early spring, as trees bud, and snow turns to flood. The invigoration of 50-degree days full of sunlight, windows down, wet pavement speckling the windshield as sports and collector cars emerge from their hibernation. The feeling that I've made it through another unrelenting winter, clots of negative-degree days, and lack of vitamin C.

The seasons,

because they reflect the cycle of life; one season you're drunk on how much beauty there is to take in, the next you're gagging on the dry air. One day, it's enjoyable to hear the crickets harmonize; the next, you're spraying them with a water hose because the noise is infuriating.



"Double Brace" by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

How to Level Out a Woman A-Z

Arrielle Eckhardt

Anacondas, alcohol, airplane crashes, anti-abortion bills, a bus, a bullet, blue butterflies, belittlement, "boys will be boys," breast cancer, conservative beliefs, consent (lack thereof), clowns, clothes, drunk drivers, demonized sexuality, the economy, elders, frat boys, forks, fresh starts, guns, gastrointestinal disease, gawking, genetics, the Government, hard candy, hammerhead sharks, harsh words, healthcare (lack thereof), hands around necks, infection, the internet, ignorance, Jesus, jealousy, justice (lack thereof), kindness, karma, kidnappers, knowledge, lyme disease, ligers, laws, mirrors, molecules, men (yes, not all, but certainly some, maybe most), naivety, nodding off, nighttime walks, optimism, old men that make women's decisions for them, opportunities (lack thereof), expected obedience, ostriches, opinions, the patriarchy, peacock spiders, pages with words that become documents and bills, quicksand, questions without answers, (e)quality (lack thereof), rage, religion, repercussions, reputation, seafood, sickness,

Supreme Court justices, settling for less, trains, targets (yes we are),
taxes, Texas, terminal illness, ulcers, ugliness, uncovered drinks,
uncertainty (what is there to be uncertain about?), viruses, vultures
(yes they are), voices that go unheard, war, wage gaps, weight,
women's rights (lack thereof), words, xiphias (look it up), (se)xism,
(a)xes, yoga, yelling, "you didn't say no," ziplines, zits, zygotes
(remember they're more important)



"Mother Turns" by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Milk

Arrielle Eckhardt

You cannot look at me with those sad eyes
Of a child who has just spilled milk

Pleading

Waiting for the mess to clean itself up
Watching it soak deep into the rug
Creating a stench that no bleach could mask
You taught me "Don't cry over spilled milk."
Back then your eyes were hard and shrewd
They never faltered or winced or wore
Your blinks were slow and filled with heavy words
Now your eyes drip onto your shirt soaking it
As I step onto the glass you left behind
Blending with the messes you've made, waiting

For you

To clean them up and toss them out with
The rolled-up rug stained with crusted milk



"Reading with the Red Wings" by Roberta Condon

Helium

Claudia Enz

The night now feels jangled.

Each building in this city looks like a grotesque plastic bag full of unspeakable things.

The rain, which once felt mysterious, now tastes like paint water or some liquid that lives in a gutter.

My inhales and exhales have lost much of their initial charm.

Every karaoke night feels tacky and nihilistic without coming home to you.

I am sitting in an uncannily realistic desert. I tap my toes impatiently under a cactus that looks almost lifelike. I am waiting for you to love me.

It's something you insist comes more naturally than blinking, but you shut the door in my face in that snowstorm as I leaked blood less than beautifully onto the whiteness. The red pooled out under my feet in a pattern that almost looked like the words, "I was ALWAYS alone."

When I was nineteen, I wrote in a dogeared journal that I would rather not have you, because if I did (and then it all decayed),

I would have nothing anchoring me to earth.

I was NOT dumb at nineteen.

I am now floating into the night sky as people point uselessly at my helium body.



"Pomegranate" by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Like Hell

Claudia Enz

I don't want your *love*; it would feel like slow suffocation
But I would rather suffocate than have you cease listing off my most endearing traits.
It's like how I take a picture of myself everyday —
Stop and pose in every mirror and reflective window I happen upon —
Yet am systematically repulsed by every feature.

When I was a child, I had a bed just big enough.
My parents bought me new toys on Christmas,
Yet today I have trouble speaking.
Maybe I didn't practice enough as a child.
I read once that parents should regularly converse with their children for speech to develop normally.

In your words, you thought I was "as smart as a whip." My emotions ran deep. I let you rant.
I read quirky literature and knew every obscure *Star Wars* alien.
You literally used the words "Ramona Flowers" and "Manic Pixie Dream Girl."
It wasn't simple infatuation. You were in *love* with me, yet I never quite noticed.

Hurt like hell, you said.

That sentence almost made me wish that I could have noticed.

Not that I want to gouge you, not that I relish that I sliced you open accidentally

It's just comforting to know that I can make an impact

That I held enough value to be hurtful.

It's the mirror thing all over again. I'm not vain, I'm just searching ravenously

For evidence that I exist outside my brain.

I want your words to pour over me like they're gravy, but I clench and won't believe them.

I'll scootch away from you on the train seat, creating a gap. I'll make you think you said too much.

But I'll feverishly write down every *I love you*.

Tomorrow, I will grind them into my soul as I paste them into the scrapbook that I carry near my ribs.

Some loving adult should have bent down and unlocked what needed unlocking.

Someone should have sat me down and pulled conversations from my mouth,

Like a magician pulling out those never-ending handkerchiefs.

Instead, I was the ghost kid who could only listen.

I hunched against the wall, unperceived, and no one intervened when objects

Were sometimes hurled at my head

Because I was the specter child, things just passed right through my invisible body

And no one asked if I could feel it.

Tomorrow, I will soothe myself the way I did when I was four.

I will walk alone in a nearby cornfield until I've explained it

Thoroughly to the part of myself that's always listening.

I will grip tightly onto any evidence that I exist. I will collect them in a bag I carry on my back.

Maybe someday I will trade them for a new tongue.



"Misty Mountain Morning" by Colee Pasinato

You.

Ella Flattum

As the rain crashed down to Earth,
The trees melted away
Into a sea of green.
A distant misty memory.

The dewy leaves in your hair after a hike.
The smell of the Earth lingering on your clothes.
The dirt wedged under your nails.
And that green water bottle, covered in stickers from a past life.

The moments we shared.
They're all just photos now.
3 am stargazing in the bitter air.
Coming home, only to back out 3 hours later.
So much sleep lost, so much time.

What happened to us? To the stars?



"Negroni" by
Richard Moninski

Porches

Sherman Funmaker

I stopped last night
To chew the fat
Front porch meeting ended too soon
Low carb conversations
Not my cup of tea
Surprised me with
A protein kiss
Knocked me off
My feet again
Lunchbox lovers
Chance of a lifetime
Someone's leftovers
Hurt like hell memories
That brought us both together

Like thermos

And cup

Whenever we sit out here and talk



"Balanced" by
Michael Heath

White Guy Drums

Sherman Funmaker

She asked me if I do the pow wow thing
After I told her I was a drummer, trying to impress

And I do mean I WAS a drummer. . . A pretty darn good one many moons ago
When I still had hair.

She asked me why I didn't drum the Injun drum
I told her because white guy drums rock more
Oh, my Native homies did the freak out when I said that

She laughed and walked away
I never did get her name

Dammit. . . story of my life



"Golden Hour" by
Kathy Korb

Go-Go Boots

Kathryn Gahl

white leather at the knee for
streetwalkers and stars
like Barbara Streisand, Jane Fonda,
and *me* in my first eye-catching pair atop a tavern table
in 1967, with a mini-skirt slicing the night
smoky air and strobe lights—my thighs
wheels of fire, shoulders a siren,
legs kicking through
hours of abundance and glory
the touch of immortal bass and vocals
blast everlasting
until next morning when my spine
 tied into knots
 wants unwinding

while the boots slump in a hump
on the floor, leather that once rode the
backside of a Holstein
lean, long each stride through sunny alfalfa fields
heady the scent of clover, pink heads bobbing
until off to the slaughterhouse, ripped stripped
then dyed white as beach stones before a cobbler
stitches them together—toe box, sole, arch, high heel—
to shape a leggy calf
flesh moving with soft notes of citrus, clover, amber,
and patchouli in the zones
of velvety go-go love



"A Simple Life"
by Colee Pasinato

To Refute the Ordinary

Kathryn Gahl

I.

if you wanted to risk you could
go online and tiptoe through an app—
start with vague smiles and vapid notes

then move on to email before pushing trust
into phone numbers for texting, still safe no home address
then a phone call first fifteen minutes
and soon fifteen hours bend time into twenty
for those who connect there is no time only
amazing maze and you wonder—no, you know,
this time you *know*, this could be it:

II.

the He the One the Fit

an astral state of sound you ride through fifty-seven nights
imbibing a voice husky and confident
your corduroy boy, intonation man with full-chested laugh
and close breath, a kind of spectral memory in the register of old-time radio
adding modern time lush texts—at last count
ten thousand words, he keeps track—streaming in
with good day, good night, he meditates twenty-five minutes daily
calls you Babe, you like that, you've been a Babe before
no bodies involved. you know how bodies get in the way of themselves

III.

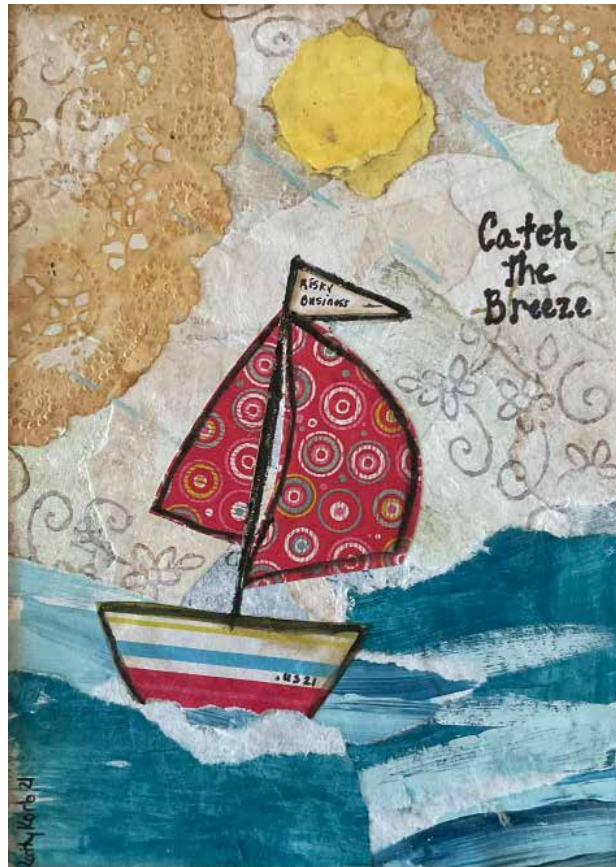
but eventually you cannot deny
the juggernaut a rush of chemistry when pheromones
want what they want
and hence he drives two hours stomps the snow off
comes up the stairs then stands
before you: a little gnome with the scent of a potato close to rot
eyeglasses scratched the view askew as funhouse mirrors

he squeezes you with muscleman force
(later, a chiropractor realigns your bones, bruised)

he forgot to bring his left ear
so you set him across the table and you talk he talks
you expect velvet vowels like in the slip of night
sharing old wounds, dark stars shining in a shared universe
until his tootsies begin trolling
for yours under the table
fidgeting as if caught in the bough
of an anxious frenzy
while whiskers for eyebrows twitch like power lines in a storm

IV.

the teeth are sooty stubs, one chipped, plus a walrus moustache
hairs thin as an old coyote hang halfway to the chin
and you know if you wanted
to love you could
but there is much else to love in the world—
sun startled on snow
brisk ice-crystal air and this morning
a rabbit under the pine
making no demands
other than the risk
of solitude
what it wants from you



"Risky Business"
by Kathy Korb

Stranded

Megan Guoin

This end is just the end for you, not me
My trek with the ocean ends when I choose
Your betrayal remembered, sailor from sea
The word you mapped was nothing but a ruse.

Yet, I still taste your laughter, smile, dream
The memories and salt caught in my throat
Shipwrecked at shore, your perfect chance to leave
The actions you take decide how I float.

Do I make room for two or just for one?
Do you plan on building a hut or ship?
Remember what you said when we began?
Or were all your words service with your lip?

The old must die, buried here without fail
The ocean or land, do you choose to sail?



"Legs the Mermaid"
by Maddie Hansen

Legs the Mermaid

Maddie Hansen

In the well of a town, in an arid zone
Sits a mermaid, stranded and alone
No bodies of water for miles around
All she can do is soak underground

Her Melusine visage is one few can forget
Drenched to the bone and her hair's always wet
Only emerging while everyone's in church
Every second Sunday, through the town she will lurch

Mirages of open water flooding her eye
Struck with disillusionment when her scales start to dry
Returning to her well, she falls back down
Waiting for the day she can leave this town

They call her Legs the Mermaid
How did she get here?

How long will she stay?

She's known as Legs the Mermaid

Her fate is quite clear

And she can't get away

It's said she appeared back when heavy rains fell

But when the downpour ceased, she went into the well

The rains are now too brief for her to go far

Always crawling back to her reservoir

Others say she's been here since the earth was all sea

But got trapped underground until we set her free

When the well was first dug, she clambered out to greet the dawn

Only to see all the water was gone

It's been years since the well that she lived in went dry

Haven't seen her in a while and we think we know why

But at night, you can hear faint wails from below

It's possible she's tided over by her own tears that flow

They call her Legs the Mermaid

How did she get here?

How long will she stay?

She's known as Legs the Mermaid

Her fate is quite drear

And she can't get away



"Mr. Word-Maker-Upper"
by Maddie Hansen

Mr. Word-Maker-Upper

Maddie Hansen

Mr. Word-Maker-Upper's portmanteaus lead him to secret passageways through the floor
Because it was "better than using the door"
Word salad was his favorite soup
And he carried "English in a Can" on him at all times
Claimed to know it better than any linguistics major could
Though he flunked language arts in middle school

The sweetest woman he'd ever met was also slowly killing him
So, he called her ambrosive and went on his way
His uncle died from alcohol poisoning
But he said it was a bourbonic plague
His sister was more extreme than any extremist
In her eulogy, he described her as elephanatical
And made it a point in his lament
To bring up her baptysmal and sacrimonious upbringing

His words were a one-sided emphony of vice-versatile controversation

The tales he told weren't parables
They were apocryphact, not fiction
Of which he'd sneak into his volcational munderings

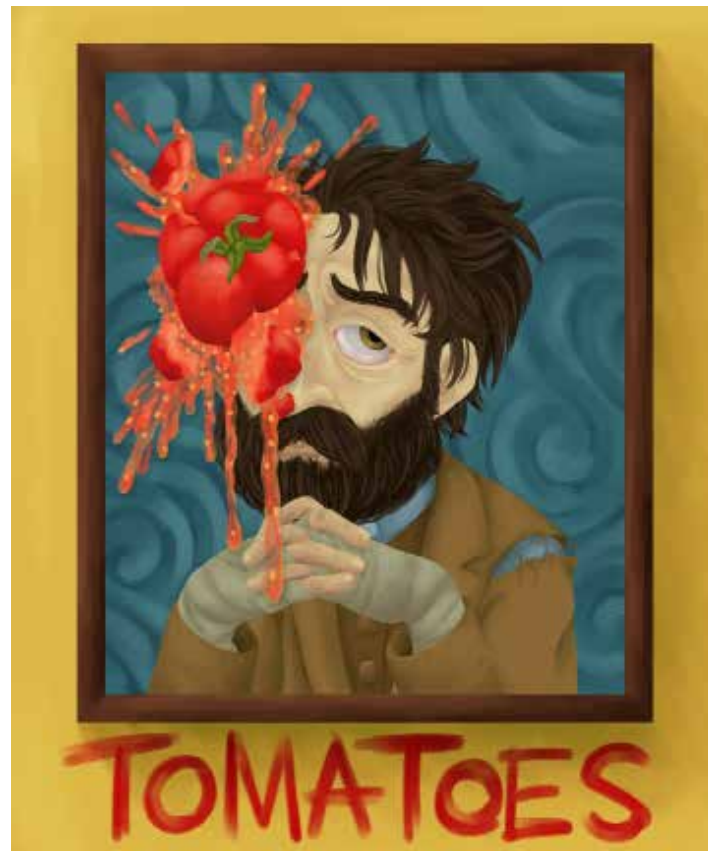
Thought murder was psychopathic
Called the guy playing the saxophone "a true extrauralnary"
Told me his umbrellical cord was severed under an inertandelier
To which I serraudemny asked him why only some states are umpirical
He pat my head and, with montromerency, he said
"Sometimes, we're hurt in ways that nofuddy seems to realize."

Once talked for fifteen minutes straight
About how a shady business is built upon a tower of snakes
It's bockety, and slithersome, and venomous to the bite
Then he sneezed and forgot what he'd been pit-pattering about

An encumbersome existence
Though he never sisiphussed
His paraphrasia was a unanimust
Fluent in meaningless speech
But nofuddy bothering to listen to him ruptify

Surrepetitivicious bafflegab leaking out the corners of his cornerless mouth
Viscous cornerstone drooling down and puddling up on the sidewalk
Mr. Word-Maker-Upper, who had not a home
Nowhere to run despite his birthright to roam
Couldn't escape a fetal heartstoke from the beam of the prodigal sun

I left a can of English at his grave beneath the fruit tree
Even if he can't enjoy it in his current ablissal state
He's far beyond pluotnion, whether that's a real place or not
I miss him because he made more sense than anyfuddy else.



"Tomatoes" by
Maddie Hansen

Tomatoes

Maddie Hansen

Vincent van Gogh had a short-lived life that was never fair
Still, he stood back up and created beauty from his despair
He died a nobody, only recognized after he was gone
When I'm falling apart, he inspires me to continue pushing on

But then you throw tomatoes at the artist with a tortured mind
And potatoes at the artist who was in denial about going blind
It's fascinating how you see this as reasonable in your head
Claiming that you fight for life when you disrespect the dead
So long as it's not murder, does it justify the action?
There's a difference between awareness and trying to goad reaction

You expect to be taken seriously? "Oh yes, come one and all,
To see some stupid morons that are glued here to our wall!"

You're not protesting, simply stirring up hate
You can't even keep your priorities straight
And this next thing I'm about to say is fully intended to sound rude:
You're worried about feeding our children and yet, you're out here wasting food

Quite a clever play, I'll say, to personify the problem
But, desecrating relics makes us not want to help you solve them
And yet, if we don't give you attention, then your protests will get worse
Your actions and your actual goals are drastically adverse

The Monuments Men in World War II risked their lives preserving art
Balfour and Huchthausen remain forever in our hearts
But it seems they died for nothing, as you carry out this protest
By smearing your dessert across the Mona Lisa's breast

If we don't fix the climate, the consequences will be dire
But you add more smoke to the atmosphere when you fight flame with fire
Though I'll admit, the thing you're doing is an effective publicity stunt
Don't think for a moment I don't perceive you as a cunt

Not solving problems, just making more
A rag-tag group of attention whores
And you feel the need to ask me what is it that I fear?
The amount of fucking Q-tips that you've lost inside your ears
As you try to make me choose between the destruction of art or my existence
To me, they're one in the same, so to hell with your resistance

I do agree that climate change has long since started to take effect
Like the masterpieces, the earth is something that we must protect
Unfortunately, our world cannot be preserved with a glaze finish
And the super glue you're using has petroleum within it.



"Two Moths"
by Rowan Wilson

9.8 m/s

Mike Jones

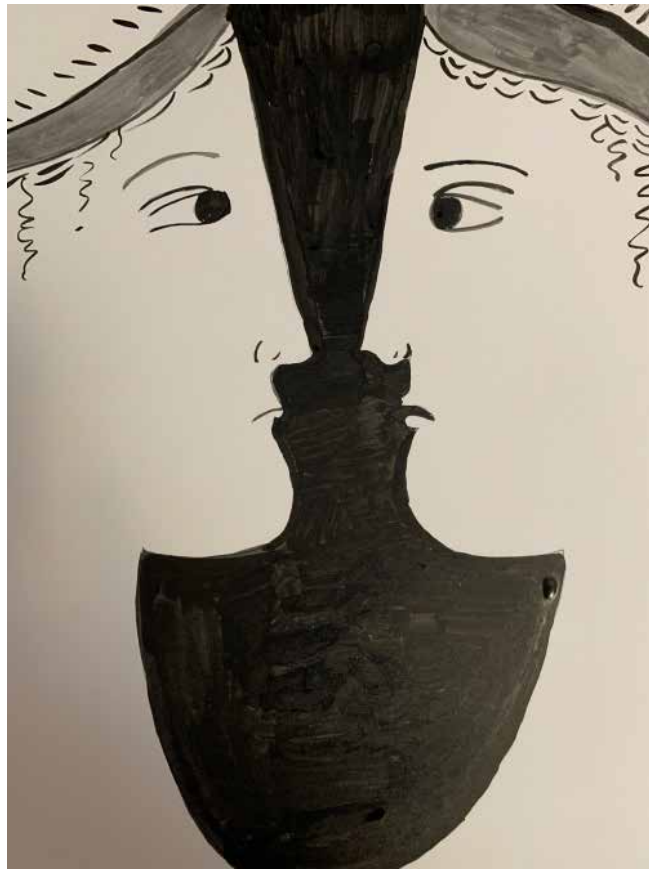
An object in motion stays in motion
At least that's what Newton tells us
He also says that gravity stays consistent
Despite the object in motion

If that's true, everyone falls at the same speed
9.8 m/s
If that's true, no wonder you can't stop love
Or try to forget it

If that's true, maybe I do have a chance
With you
Because once we set things in motion
It's a lot easier to keep them moving

You be the feather, I'll be the bowling ball
I promise when we fall

We'll land together



"Two Heads in Ink" by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

from Cease and Assist

Michael Lambert

"Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round
the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up."

-Melville (36.32)

I am the Sith Lord of Seattle rap. See my flute
Of champagne. See my huckster kudzu.

Whoops! Guy swore he'd never write a Southern Gothic poem, but
I will do absolutely anything you say—

There he goes again, spoiling the garden party
With middle-class humor. A real kill
Joy, that Guy. Balking aplomb at the hang
Dog folly of anesthetized neophytes.

Come plumb the soundless depths of jerrican bacchanal.

Remove this bucolic mask to show a wilder,
Darker impression. The speaker of this poem is
A mote-magnifying tyrant, clambering grain siloes

Of tripey snarling. Stump fields and wing dams
Speckled with flatboat chickens pecking meal.

Speckled with flatboat chickens pecking meal.

Where walleyed ratchels the soda plain are become in panic

Grass looking for an honest wage. See the djinn sages run

Amuck turpentine gum tappers dreaming

Pork belly deathsex on the bigarm dredge. Fire!

Fire! in the madhouse. The boy who cried odiferous shoe

Gaze sacristy was eaten by himself, the shewolf #!.

Hay mow haw fruit datum // impure upon a world unpurged. Soap

Weed folly wallowing batboard jakes to the tune of white

Washed gypsum haciendas. Thunder

Claps.

Spume of scoria gaffing willow brakes.

The day all of the insects died we sat

Tarred and feathered // vaulted non grata beefcakes.

Tarred and feathered // vaulted non grata beefcakes.

Kamikaze swarm drones gently cull across the atomized nexus clinical.

Come, let loose the glib bajada.

Take care when crossing the Samsara gang

Plank. If I turn the lights on to this concept

Do they become slippery? Interstitial peni bewitched

My birthrights. See us hatch a revenge plot—

Wont hazardous glottis beaming

I will never bark your breath. Guy rises

Tempting fated predators of reptilian date.

So, the universe sprang from nothing for no reason violently one day.

Catafalque croaking on the horsehair playa ever after.

There are other things that have happened worth noting.

Umbilical connections. I remember everything.

Umbilical connections. I remember everything.

Come and see my waisted cutglass vase, my man
Sion. My high limestone bluffs wattled into gravel wash.
This is a forever thing. Lodes of ore collapsing the color

Of our sound while goitered Jesus-folk pearl
Thoughts like chewed cud in the cordillera gorge rebegun.
I'd just as soon be trumpet vine and bumblebees.
Hubris doled out like tinned fruit on the wooden table,

He says, "I always wondered at my own hands."
Says, "What should we do with this chicken?"
Except he's actually my mother and
I'm the heavyweight-boxing champion of the world.

Segue to bomb-ass sunsets, hellfire. And so again—
Out they rode, ill fitted, into the endless tang of folly.

Out they rode, ill fitted, into the endless tang of folly.
Mine eyes have seen the glory, Guy. I don't need the money.
Roughage rib
Boned with sweetmeats in the black walnut trees,

Retreating sky scraped over the yielding earth televangelically.
Or myself, perched in an office on the East coast, whispering
Sweet bestials as I
Contemplate this nubile young body.

These sweet golden teats.

Out the window, a chicken-ass nurdle
Crowned in laurel wreath. Catbrier and triage in the hard
Scrabble Foible-Reeds. Or this one: drinking my corn
From a cracked mash rattlecan. Thwarted, spoofed,
Stepping down my piecemeal placemat of doom.

NOTES:

"Cease and Assist" contains references to several other works, including an epigraph from Herman Melville's Moby Dick, the Destiny's Child track "Say my Name" found on the 1999 Columbia Records release: The Writing's On the Wall, and a phrase from the title of a 2015 Vice News article on hip-hop artist Nacho Picasso written by Sam Gehrke. The poem also contains language taken from Terence McKenna's lectures on psychedelics and Lorrie Moore's collected short stories.



"Everyone" by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Coincidence & Accident

Michael Martone

Behind me
back in town
the tire plant,
refinery,
& shingle factory
are on fire.
Even in the dark
there's too much light.
The sodium of the security
lamp in this Baptist church lot
smolders, washing out
the sun running
out of its shadow.
I'm here to tell you

there
they are
Coincidence & Accident
staging their near miss
in the molasses of light years
still a blur
to my naked eye
on this new Blursday night.

I hear
the world is running out
of sand
the main ingredient of cement.
I'm told that soon
there will be more concrete than there is
biomass on this brutal earth.
& I just read there is this one
beach on the other side of the earth
where the grains of sand are star-shaped
hollow fossils of long dead
coral buds
whose arms
like the virus's protein spikes
were meant to make connections
or something.
I can't remember.

I remember I am in the twilight
waiting for the dark
& for the two planets
to reach the point
where they appear
to touch

but don't
a broken hour
glass, accident
& coincidence
spilling sand.

The other stars
sand the edges
off each other's light
as they set
light years apart
& overhead
pink Mars
pursues a
pregnant Moon.

Another parallax.
You are here
& you're not
while an airplane's
doppler drone
pitches up a notch
a southwestern heading
directs its two blinking
navigation lights
aimed at the bull's eye
Coincidence & Accident.
& somewhere in the dark
not that far from
the Black Warrior River
out in a gleaned cotton field
a cow moos.



"Untitled" by
Michael Heath

The Dead Mall

Michael Martone

The rain makes me remember my father
who when he first retired from the switch
room walked every morning at the mall
hard by the glass walls glancing
on his right side like he was threading a maze
quickly stepping around other even older walkers
slowing down to talk to each other
maybe even window-shopping. . .
He did that religiously until he didn't.
The rain made me remember that
and I thought since I am now retired
I would go to the mall and walk inside.
But then I remembered there is no way
to be inside with other people these days

with people dead or dying or aspirating
the deadly exhaust of death shedding
the virus as they shuffle by the boarded
up windows of the vacant stores in the dying
mall with its few surviving
shoe stores, kiosks of key chains and sunglasses,
a cheap jewelry boutique, t-shirt shops, a Belk,
Penney's on its last legs, Sears, long gone.
There is another mall in Tuscaloosa
but the other mall is already dead.
Dead, even though it still has a Dollar Tree
on the outer edge that hangs on somehow alone.
Half the husk of the mall has already
been torn down but not hauled off
the debris cut off by cyclone fencing
that was easy enough to breach last summer
when I wanted to see the ruins
the inside is outside now
where the Goody's and Gayfers once were
and the roofless tiered shells
of the multiplex where I saw movies
I can't now remember because I am old and getting older.
And I didn't see the cameras
the demolition contractor installed to catch
intruders like me and when they caught
me reminded me in no uncertain words
that it was dangerous to be here
in the rubble and rebar.
And what in God's name did I think
I was doing and the cops are on the way. . .
But I was camouflaged by my age
and my mask, my mumble, acting addled
and I improvised an answer

that I was here looking for Kip Tyner
a local personality who in the old days
before the mall died
did a cable community access show
called Great Day Tuscaloosa
in the food court's atrium every noon
with tap dancers, politicians,
county extension agents, church
choirs, crafters, and delegates
from Tuscaloosa's Japanese sister city
reciting haiku sitting on wicker chairs
in the shade of a hundred hanging ferns
and in the background you heard
the sharp death dealing electronic tattoo
of the video games in the nearby arcade.
I knew that Kip had moved
the show out of the dead mall
down McFarland to the Hampton Inn's
breakfast room where he curated
some of the same acts and guests.
I watched every noon now, I am retired.
But the unmasked child who caught me
up to my elbows in the dust
of the dead mall bought my story
forgave my trespassing
gave me directions
to get to the Hampton Inn
where I could catch Kip live if I hurried. . .
But it is raining and I am still
in bed plotting what I will do
with this day if I can't walk outside.
I had worked in that mall
where my father would walk

in a bookstore named Reader's World
but it has since died, closed for years now.
Maybe today I will read an old book over again.
Or watch the dim and distant inaugural on television
the empty mall there outlined with extinguished lamps
representing all the living dead.
My father's dead but I remember
how fast he walked the times
I walked with him
I couldn't even keep up
how the slower mall walkers agitated him
and all the people who were just there to shop
or eat or spend money or run errands or loiter
how everyone bothered him as he walked.
Rain or shine he would walk
Glenbrook Mall in Fort Wayne, Indiana,
that, for some reason, even today,
still, one way or the other survives.



"Fluorescent
Gerbera Daisy"
by Connor Trocke

Hunter's Moon

Michael Martone

I read this book about the brain
that thought it figured out where
dreams come from and why we dream dreams
in the first place. It had something
to do with real estate and how
the other senses—smell, taste, hearing—
weren't effected by the night like sight
so their restless synapses
predate the dark territory
poaching the visual cortex's
space that mimics blindness in sleep.
Dreams are a kind of camouflage
then, fooling the other inputs.
The brain is all lit up all night
"Nothing to see here. Seeing is
seeing just fine. Move along now. . ."

I don't want to go to sleep yet.
That moon up there lodged in a skull
of clouds looks like a big old brain.
A dream moon of a moon keeping
me awake, a plate full of plate
tectonics, warring slabs of light.
The moon is screwed into its blind
waiting for the game to come.
You stumble into the swampy
night sky, the trap, the field of fire
calibrated, zeroed-in sights.



"Variegated Tea
Rose in UV" by
Connor Trocke

Black Girl

Matt Mutiva

Black girl binges on Netflix

loves that the main cast is dark-skinned
adds this melanin matinee to her list
because she is rooting for the biracial actress
that portrays black womanhood.

Black girl wonders about the role she plays

Black girl is slept on

gets no credit for helping regulate your sleep cycle
gave you circadian rhythm,
pulse, beat, and measure. *Wow, okay.*

Black girl, pokerfaced, intimidates you

keeps her emotions in check so she don't feel some type of way
so she don't lose a winning hand

Black girl studies you closely

transfers all those notes to a reliable spot in her mind
then rolls eyes

Black girl says deleting you out of her phone

is part of her 30 day cleanse

noticed improvements in energy and well-being

Black girl finds ennui, *checks phone* *more ennui*

White girl pulls up on her, midrange.

With an overly decorative smile likes her hair

and everything it *isn't*

Black girl is tired of FAQ's:

Is it real?

What are you mixed with?

Can I touch it?

Black girl "can't" with some white people

Black girl, discomfited, sends her a cold reply

Black girl feels smaller in her own skin

Black girl goes silent

like the men she's into

who like the Laura Croft type But

Black girl is just as sensual

small and plum-like

with a heavy hope of love

a lone balloon there in the distance



"Bee" by
Michael Heath

Man Facing the Sun

Matt Mutiva

On the night of my first blast off
I scooted towards the table
Without any landing gear
Looking at an empty sky

Through the charred trees
An orchid was weeping
My friend offered me his last beer
After he showed me what is survivable
And told me not to put flowers on graves

I still kiss you even when the wind
Is at its most violent
When sunsets bathe this bridge

in a soft light and there aren't many things
That I would change

There is a finite amount of things that I love
I want to sit in front of the ocean for a while
Born again in ecstasy
When we danced by the moonlight
In front of your mom
There was an intense manhunt for salvation
In the shallow edge of the water
And the city was peeled down
To a burnt orange where we watched the sun
In a disastrous rain



"Grand Canyon"
by Colee Pasinato

Oblivion

Matt Mutiva

My mom grew up in a place
That believes in forgiveness
She knew something worse than oblivion
Animals rotting beneath the scorching sun
Bones poking out beneath their skin
The cattle too skinny to be sold

She's seen the rosy-throated sunbird
In a purse-shaped nest, slowly get eaten
Near a dam of carved out earth
The day she traveled 3 hours to collect water
From a riverbed before the wild honeybees came.

She lines up to fill her jerry cans
To fetch water for cooking and washing back to the village
She collects firewood from fallen trees
Each night, ceding the land to its owner

From dark clouds slung on top of mountains
That left nothing left to eat from the harvest
The puddle frog that diminishes at dusk
Crawls easily to the coastal province
Where the cows feast on thatched roofs
And are covered in flies the next day



"Blanketed by the
Barn Owls" by
Roberta Condon

The 6th Mass Extinction

Matt Mutiva

You can nuke a hurricane if
there is a really good south wind
to circle the field of leaves
that crisscross the sky in a mid-September
they had already seen the strength
of a home torn apart
in a driftless path

The day it hit
a tabonuco tree, sprouted fresh
its smooth, grey bark wounded
and my dog, who knows what happened
when we're not home, understands
the loud BOOM

Searches
for her favorite spot under my chin

even the birds took cover
under the sheds of houses
they did not survive in

Then were gone in seconds
by a vapor that burst upwards
when no one was watching

When last livestock left the ground
they knew the hunt was over
they did not wander into the flooding, but
imagine the story they could tell if

They found an acre of land where
we were safer inside our own suffering
no fencing, or overhead powerlines
to signal for help. And the light
starved in the shadows, thunders through
removing every piece of wood
after the tempest passes



"Three Friends"
by Rowan Wilson

Blossom

Skylar Otey

All crimson eyes rise from the depths of the darkened water.
Brilliant sharp rows of teeth as white as its body sparkle in the moonlight.
Conjuring up images of hopelessness. An evil smile has shaken my spine.
Dirty as its intentions, it climbs into my memories.
Even begging for mercy would not tempt this beast away.
Four years enduring, but now breaking free.
Gathering twisted limbs of memories eaten in the still waters.
Help shall not come if it is an enraged mother or an albino alligator.
In the pit is where my soul lies, but my mind travels to the light.
Just as it was inside, I stand in a swamp that hides its secrets from me.
Killing is the only thing showing through both of their minds.
Living in this land would not be ideal, but elsewhere is too vast to imagine.
Mud is easier to track than regretful acts you try to veil.
No maleficence shall enter a church, nor shall I let it enter here.

Out of sight from the bitterness, I hide quietly.
Patiently waiting for the beast to come find me.
Quick as my pale friend hearing an adjacent sound.
Running through the swamp, breaking free from the bad.
Still moving farther into the swamp, crimson eyes follow.
Thankfully seen by more than one eye.
Unveiled by the dark of the night, the crimson eyes begin to glow.
Very slowly I glide, seeking an asylum.
Withering away in the water, I head back toward home.
Xanthic water grazes my hands on my way to land.
Yesterday, I was in a swamp, but instead it was a house.
Zooming through the water, that gator gets to be free.



"Father" by Jesse
Lee Kercheval

Poem in Which my Father's Windshield Unshatters

Hailey Prager

I open my mouth, letting four years of smoke
condense into the blunt.

My dealer pays me with a rolled-up wad of twenties.

I leave the junkyard to go back to school
where the principal un-expels me.

I go to the train tracks,
roll backwards before
jumping back onto the moving platform,
landing softly on my ass.

I fill in my angry scribbles etched into the wall.

I go back to class, erasing my notes
from the last four years.

Mom walks backwards into my room,

tears slithering up her cheeks,
to rest comfortably in her ducts.
She puts the groceries back in the brown paper bag
and walks backwards to the grocery store.
Dad's shattered skull pieces itself together
in sync with the shards of glass from his windshield.
The semi-truck withdraws from the intersection.
Dad reverses the car back to our house
and rubs my messy hair back into perfection.
In the kitchen, he hangs up the phone on Mom
and it rings as he treads toe before heel to the garage
where I wait to break the car with him.



"Untitled" by Jesse
Lee Kerchival

A Beautiful Woman, Hanged in Leningrad, 1941

James Roberts

In this photograph you see her
staring wide-eyed into forever
though the picture is black and white
you know her hair is the light brown
of summer wheat wavy strands caress
her still, slack face the rope around her neck
barely visible it is almost as if she has cocked
her head to listen to something bird trill
train whistle a child's lullaby
the ragged woolen sweater is stretched
across her braless breasts her nipples poke
twin points like erasers we do not see her feet
do not know if she has kicked off her shoes
in a final spasm

a knot of blurred figures
stand mutely in the background thickly wrapped
in dark clothes mirroring despair
although they do not know it this beautiful dead woman
has achieved an immortality her face has created
its own urn: *she* will not have to suffer
through the next 900 days of siege & starvation
however this stark portrait also ensures
that her grave will not be nameless
or her hanging unavenged



"Saint Mark's Basilica"
by Colee Pasinato

Embryo Poet

James Roberts

for Kevon Cortez Jones

He shows off the color of his skin, on the surface

bright, shiny smooth skin

Underneath are childhood scars

not even surgery could heal

He is fearless

He channels his anger positively

into banners of words

Running biking

from coffee shop to bookstore

to radio station

Never stopping

because even here in his

mythical Paris

there is a blue shadow a badge

the click & hum of silver-jacketed steel

At nineteen, he is a chrysalis

at the point of bursting

in a radiant spray of poetry

He will cover this whole damned city

until his words form a defiant statue

Book held to brown skin, a microphone

thrust at the sky



"Boundless
Vacation Energy"
by Jeff Weiland

Jazz in the Park

James Roberts

Late afternoon sun
Drops a drum beat
On a sea of bonnets
& straw boaters.
Syrupy brass
Oils the summer air.
Shades of Coppertone
& coppery bare skin.
Mama, I have to dig
Down deep to find
A breeze as cool
As the notes this band
Is blowing. Smoke rises
From portable braziers;
The scent of sizzling meat
Wafts, noses twitch
In Pavlovian response.

(there's no ice cream!)

One tolerates the bugs:

They will not make

The ten o'clock news tonight,

But the bright stars

Which now appear, one by one,

Do not mind.

The moment exists.

We live for the music.

Only the music, Mama.



"Sauk County Sunset"
by Michael Heath

Wisconsin River Morning

James Roberts

Swallowtails fast skim the placid surface,
Wingtips touching the water in a brief caress.

Tree canopied hills rise opposite me
While bright sun creates shadow faces, looking down.

Mid-summer wildflowers – St. John's wort,
Goldenrod, purple vetch – bend in a light wind.

Sandy banks slope down to the shoreline, clouds
Of midges combust in their own quickly done universe.

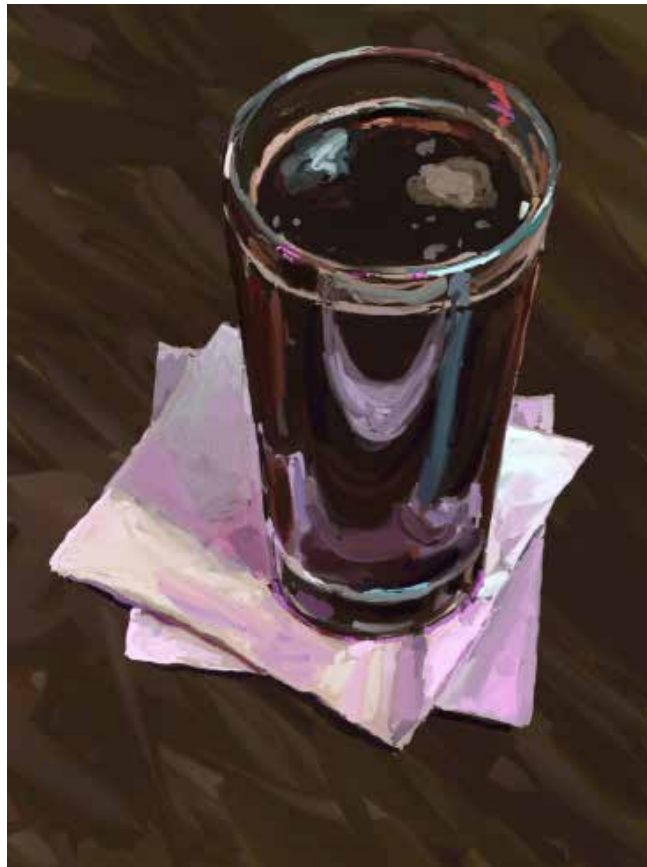
A fish jumps, ripples fan out to be slowly subsumed
In the gentle flow of the river. Two canoes float

Out in the middle channel; after June's rise, the Wisconsin
Is always shallow by mid-July. I can hear

The dip splash of oars a hundred yards away.
Warmth spreads, filling up my creaky bones.

Fat bumblebees fusting on stubby wings,
Black proboscis nods a hello to the open clover.

I sit on a memorial bench, reading poetry,
Knowing the day is about to surprise me.



"Midway Porter"
by Richard Moninski

A Recipe for Tourtière

Content Warning: graphic language

Elizabeth Schmitt

You gift me a cookbook for Christmas

entitled *How to Cook for Your Husband*.

"I am not a cook." I say.

You tell me I need to get better.

My job won't be forever,

I should focus on wifely duties.

How lucky I am to have you,

a fat, balding man,

love me.

I chop my pointer finger off with a butcher's knife.

You watch as

blood spews from the cut.

Like raindrops soaking the sidewalk,

my blood organically stains the cutting board.

I chop,

you smile.

I chop,

you kiss me.

I mince my

finger meat until it is

pulp.

"Looks like ham spread," you say.

I kindly slice another one of my fingers off.

I grind it with a mortar and pestle

until it is a paste.

You salivate.

I combine the finger pulp and puree in a bowl.

Smells like pennies.

You get hard as

I skin my pinky toe.

You lick your lips when I

snap off the bone like

peanut brittle.

I do the same to my other pinky toe.

I smoosh them into a dough.

I wrap my finger meat in my pinky toe dough

and mold it into a meat pie.

You reach to touch it,

I swat your hand away.

"Not yet," I say.

I put the me pie into the oven.

You walk close to me.

You shove your fingers down my throat

over and over,

lacerating my tonsils.

I gag.

You smile.

I puke into a kettle

to warm my bile on the stove

in a reduction of leftover blood.

It boils and bubbles like

Bolognese.

I pour it in your glass.

You try to take a sip.

I shake my head no.

"I said not yet,"

you huff.

I pull the me pie out of the oven.

I shove a drill in the root canal of my left incisor.

I open my mouth and let the juices flow out of my tooth onto the pie;

nerve concentrate makes for a wonderful glaze.

You sit down at the table

and snap your fingers, telling me to come serve you.

I cut you a piece of me pie.

The pie's steam spirals into the air.

You inhale the scent of me and

smile.

I bring you a glass of me

to wash me down.

Drink me fast.

While I am still hot.

Eat me quick.

Did I hit the spot?

My body is yours,

or so you say.

My body is yours

until you run out of recipes.



"Untitled" by
Michael Heath

Andromeda and Perseus

Grace Semaan

If looking at
Andromeda
at night
equates to falling in love,
the hypothetical futures
of galaxies far, far away
serve as ambrosia nectar,
then I am the fool
who sauntered
off the cliff
of Drunken Love

Falling into a familiar abyss
featuring my own immaturity.

I haven't quite learned
operations in a
zero gravity environment
but once the rocket lands
I too could take
one step for man;
leaving three behind for myself.
An imprint I'll never
get to see

Because the nectar
is so sweet
and the plunge
steals the breath
from my lungs.
Tumbled together makes a drunk,
lovesick fool out of me,

And why should I want anything else?

Perhaps because
the sickly sweet nectar
slickens.
An all-consuming
tacky glue
that swallows you whole,
but never spits you back out.
The intoxicating elixir
becomes infectious.
The rocket once
in orbit
patiently lands

on one of Saturn's moons;
distantly revolving.

Because the
galaxies and stars
we talked about,
and the lives
we imagined
in the night sky, are
just hypotheticals.

And so are we



"Forest Stair, for Michael" by Rowan Wilson

Mirroring Cranes

Red Thiesenhusen

A flutter of sandy feathers,
piercing black eyes
staring into your soul,
my soul
Can it know who I am?
No
Still I wondered,
even still,
if the sandhill crane staring
knew I had seen its kin,
our kin, in
grassy fields, the sun blazing as I searched
high and low for something
so small

so innocuous
you had to be told where to look

Just as the flock flew then
the crane flew now,
our kindred spirits flying far
far from the field they called home
migrating towards fairer weather and
a new home
not to return till new beginnings,
a home left unknown

It knows who I am,
itself reflected

Of course, sandy feathers returned—
Why return?
Time and time again to
silence
broken by loud steps and sirens that
startle

fly

fly

fly

Silence
returns when I leave, left alone to my thoughts

Shall I fly?

Home?

I come and go

unheeded by weather

My mirror image does not

Everything has become unfamiliar

The sun, colder it seems

I never found what I was looking for



"Streets of Piovone
Rocchette, Italy"
by Colee Pasinato

Restart

Red Thiesenhusen

Petrichor. The man with
10 Bernese Mountain dogs
walking downtown. The
soft breeze hinting at rain,
at spring. Wheezy purrs of
my growing kitten, now
cat. Also her olive eyes staring,
pupils dilated, attacking my toes.
The tinkling windchimes outside
my grandparents' home
out west. Mountains,
frozen in summer. Glissading.
How the mud squelches underfoot,
coating my boots, my pants,

my coat when I fall. Soup made
of warmth and comfort,
calling it home when home
isn't there. The shrill screams
of children laughing, falling,
laughing. Maple trees in fall.
Also that one in the front yard of
my childhood house. Climbing,
falling, climbing. Wind whipping
wildly through the open windows
of the car. Driving on curved
country roads, sun flickering through
the brilliant green leaves. Shadows-
specifically that they cannot be lost.
New beginnings. The first snow.
The last snow. Making mistakes.
Oh how I love the rain.



"Yellow" by
Michael Heath

Yellow Roses

Mary Ellen Tiller

I'm being suffocated.

The old, black twine between us twists deep into my neck and heart,
leaving imprints of old memories.

You didn't perish.

The new you just a walking corpse.

Cursed to never turn back the time,
when the twine was once a vibrant red.

Is it distance?

Timing?

Lying?

Or maybe it's just all my fault.

That's how it always is, isn't it?

You reaching out to grasp me with your cold, heartless hands,
just to leave me,

blame me,
abuse me,
and say I made it all up.
I want everything to go back to the way it used to be.
When you weren't just a figment of my imagination.
When you were genuinely nice.
When you would comfort me.
We used to gift each other yellow roses,
now we don't even do that anymore.
Every time I go to defend myself, nothing comes.
I can't go against you, I'm too loyal.
Like a dog, I'll follow you anywhere,
and my devotion will never fade.
It's not a choice,
it's an instinct.
I don't know when the twine turned from red to black.
All I know is you're the one pulling it tighter,
and I'm suffocating.



"Untitled" by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Grimace

Alissa Wheeler

Why is it so - for you - that smiling is easy,
but baring my teeth makes my stomach go queasy
and even then, it's merely a grimace
because I'm not convinced, nor do I feel it —
the warmth that spreads across your cheeks
looks a *hell* of a lot like the fire in me.
While yours is contained in the apples of your face,
mine threatens to explode - forcing all to decay
leaving char and ash, a vision of destruction,
for my fire, I wish a useful function,
I wish it would quietly kindle in my heart
radiating in my skin so I'm a walking piece of art
I wish it would greet people on a cold night
with the warm comfort of a burning white light,
but my fire is angry, so I am too
that this world could be so jaded and lead me askew
I scream at the stars instead of staring in awe,

I curse the skies I should be learning to love,
I shy from those that wish to see
the magnificent wildfire stirring in me



"Heart" by Jesse Lee Kercheval

Tug of War

Alissa Wheeler

It only took months to lose you to the drugs
Knowing there was no cure, I desperately smothered you in love
As the bones in your face began to protrude,
I panicked and did everything to refuse the truth
But the drugs had a grip, a vice that wouldn't loosen
Slowly seeping into your mind, brewing a sense of delusion

Then, suddenly, my life-long best friend
Is holding a knife to my throat, spewing out threats
You became a shell of the person I once knew
Only seventeen years of age, but you appear thirty-two
This constant tug of war left my hands red and raw
I had to let go before the skin sloughed off

Accepting your gradual slope to decay,
Contact came to a halt, nothing left to say
Speaking is now something only you can engage
Because you're confined to a lonesome steel bar cage
I'd be lying if I told others I never dialed "1"
To accept the charges and hear you talk in a low hum
To know you're still fighting, drawing breaths into your lungs
It's so much better than to know your opponent finally won.



"Untitled" by
Mario Loprete

Words Found Plastered on the High School, or, the #Grindset

Rowan Wilson

Keep this door closed
We need your help!
Intelligence is not enough
Intent is not enough
You must succeed.
Cash prize to be given
For the requirement
That all men register for the selective service
We're hiring achievers
To stay after hours
To turn off the lights
Find your emergency
Reason to stop
In your favorite

Graphic victim dream
Status override, are you happy?
Find your keys, find your blood
This window does not open
The carpet hasn't been replaced
Since 1980, so celebrate!
No eating allowed
Violators will be
Presented by his family and friends
So do not speak
This area is being monitored
They care
They are watching
Don't be late
Keep away from this door
Got your work?
Keep your eyes
Firmly to the floor
The yellow tape
Elevator dream
Gather the pieces
Find your American Dream
Under the floor with the pipes
Keys camera heat pulverize
This is what your forefathers dreamed of!
Work on yourself at work
Do you need help? Call this number
Don't be late



Prose





"Angel Concrete Sculpture" by Mario Loprete

The (Wo)Man and the Sinner

Content Warning: graphic language

Taylor Arcand

(If reading this story out loud, use the following voices:

Him: Penetratingly gruff and oozing sex appeal

Her: The stereotypical sweet female, voice like honey

Woman at the door: Croaky and corrupted, like an old Eve.)

Imagine he's kissing her. And not the old peck that grandparents place on each other's cheeks. Her head is locked in place by his calloused hands. His head vibrates back and forth, like the inverted pendulum on a grandfather clock. Both of their lips are saturated with his saliva, only his.

(This reenactment requires two people and a snail. Have your friend stand with their arms tight by their side and rock back and forth quickly from foot-to-foot. While they're doing that, place the snail above your lips. Stand completely still, haltering your breath inches from their face.

Note the goop trail that the snail leaves behind on your face.)

It's a few minutes before he pulls away, finger imprints remaining on her cheeks after he steps back. His eyes scale her clothed body, a chuckle escaping his lips. Her white t-shirt is speckled with red sauce from their date at the pizzeria. With his hands on the neckline of

her t-shirt, he says, "Won't be needing this." She thinks it's cliché and momentarily curses her friend for urging her to put herself out there in a world full of clichéd men.

As he speaks, he pulls the white fabric in opposite directions. There's a stretch. No rip. He sighs, repeating himself, "Won't be needing this." He pulls again. The shirt strains and a few threads come loose. Nothing more. Her body relaxes when he holds up a finger and walks to his desk. She cocks her hip, her hands sliding to her back pockets as he approaches her again.

Scissors. He's holding scissors.

"Won't be needing this," he repeats, eyebrows scrunched as he takes the shirt between the blades. Starting at the bottom, he cuts the threads until the shirt opens. He holds the tip of the scissors against her neck for a few seconds, retracting the pressure when her breath hitches.

Dropping the scissors at their feet, he repeats, "Won't be needing this," and yanks the shirt down her arms. She huffs, kicking her shirt aside, and bends to pick up the scissors at her feet.

Glancing in his eyes, she leans in. Touches her gooped lips to his ear. She clutches the closed scissors in her right hand. "Won't be needing this," she whispers.

With proud movement, she drives the closed blades into his heart. She feels two last thumps against the scissors before his chest is still.

(Have your friend stop swaying back and forth. Then, only then, can you start breathing again.)

A splatter of blood lands below her left eye, slowly rolling down her cheek. Without smudging her black lipstick, her tongue slowly laps up the drop of blood. She swallows and smirks, the goopy bead tasting like Kinky Red liqueur. Giving one last jab, she leaves the weapon in his chest and watches him fall to the floor.

His eyes are open, and they look just as lifeless as they did at the beginning of their date. She squats and checks the state of her makeup in the glint of his eyes. She's pristine. Unfazed.

His sin came first--but her sin – was it really a sin if undertaken for a valuable reason? It was rational. She showed great restraint.

Whether or not her sin was justifiable, it was a blessing for all women who would have crossed paths with the man.

She goes home. Thanks her friend for encouraging her. She would have never felt the pleasure of his flesh opening without it.

(Listen quietly to your surroundings. There will be a woman at your door. She resembles Eve, but aged. Let her whisper in your ear. She will say, "You'll be needing this." She'll hand you a Bible and spit a piece of apple into your hand. Under no circumstances should you let her inside.)



"Sea and Sand"
by Kathy Korb

Anglerfish

Kaz Bresnan

Snow-capped mountains and heavy clouds glare over a vast, golden field of wheat. In the middle of the wheat field sits a pond, and by the pond sits a boy no older than twelve. He sits on a rickety wooden dock, his bare feet just barely skimming the water as his fishing pole rests in his right hand.

The pond is small and murky, making it impossible for the boy to see if any fish are inclined to take a bite. He huffs in annoyance, swinging his feet off the dock and glaring into the leaden black water, as if daring the residents of the pond to take a bite.

Looking up at the sky, the boy's frown deepens at the ever-darkening clouds. The sun is just beginning to set behind the mountains, but the boy knows he still has another hour or so before the field is shrouded in a rosy alpenglow. He thinks back to his father, when they would spend all day fishing in this pond before watching the sunset together and walking back home on the worn dirt path. That had been a long time ago, before his sister was born and before his father worked all the time. Now, the boy goes fishing by himself, but he never seems to catch anything.

With one final look towards the fleeing sun, the boy draws his legs up and reels in his pole. As much as he would love to watch the sunset and run through the wheat so the firebugs

would dance around him, he doesn't trust himself to make it back home on the dirt path after dark. He's left his shoes back home; his left sneaker with a hole that makes his toes stick out. Anyway, it's not as if the dirt roads make the dirt floor of his house any dirtier.

The boy grabs his empty tin pail in one hand, fishing rod in the other, and begins heading off the dilapidated dock just as something in the water catches his eye. He drops the bucket, mostly out of surprise, considering how empty the water had been in the hours before. Then, he runs to the edge of the dock, trying to catch another glimpse of the movement that's captured his attention.

After a few seconds of stillness, he sees it again.

Something quick. A millisecond of radiant movement disappearing before he could even see what it was. The boy drops to his knees on the dock, his fishing pole forgotten by his side. His hands curl around the edge of the dock, his face close enough to the water that his breath causes it to ripple.

There's another flare of movement.

White and blinding, gone in a heartbeat.

Around the boy, the wheat field sings. A cacophony of crickets and cicadas wail into the setting sun.

The Light in the water is quickens now, darting from different sides of the pond. In the inky blackness of the water, the Light looks like a shooting star alone, the only brightness in an otherwise desolate universe.

The boy watches, jaw slack, transfixed as the Light swims faster and faster. *It's getting brighter*, he thinks, watching as the Light circles the pond, glowing hotter and more brilliant with every rotation. The boy's eyes well with tears as the Light burns his eyes, but he is unable to force himself to look away. *It's swimming up to me...but surely not... the pond isn't that deep.*

But as he watches, the Light glows brighter and grows larger as it stalks closer to where he kneels, transfixed on the dock. The Light slows, until it is directly in front of the boy. He leans in closer until his nose is scraping the surface of the water, and the heat of the Light warms his face.

Taking a deep breath, the boy pushes his face under the water.

The Light presses against his forehead as he squints into the void of the pond and sees

a thin limb attached to the Light; a thin limb that connects back to a grinning maw and two large milky eyes.

The Light, and the monster attached to it, cackle with glee. For it had been a long time since they had caught anything to eat. The boy stares into the cloudy, empty eyes of the creature in front of him, and he sees something older than the world looking back.

In the morning, when the sun has just barely risen, a mother will wake up and trip over her son's shoes on her way out of the house to feed the chickens. She will grumble to herself, finish her morning chores, and walk back inside to her son's room to wake him. When she opens the door, will finds his bed still made from the day before.

She will run into her own bedroom, the one she shares with her husband and her daughter, and find them both sleeping. She will wake her husband, and the two of them will search the house and the farm, shouting their son's name and receiving no answer.

They will run on the dirt path into the golden wheatfield, where the cicadas and grasshoppers will still be singing their melody. The mother and father will scramble to the dock, where an empty tin bucket will lie resting on its side, beside an abandoned fishing pole. The snow-capped mountains and the light, thin clouds will watch as the parents weep, screaming for a son that will never answer.



"Untitled" by
Mario Loprete

Oil Spill

Kaz Bresnan

Adam watched with feigned interest as his best friend of four years worked on the engine of his car. Ray's hands were stained black with grease, and when she rubbed her hand against her face to wipe away the sweat, all she did was add a black streak against the smooth skin of her forehead.

In the back of his head, he was aware he was chewing at his fingernails, and with a frown, he moved to sit on his hands to stop. Adam's hair was slicked against his forehead with sweat, small beads of it running down his neck from the Virginia heat. Ray's hair was short, barely creeping past her chin. Right now, it was pulled off her neck into a ponytail that just barely had enough hair inside of the band to hold its shape. Her hair was dyed black, but her eyebrows were still a light blond that Adam personally found distracting. The heat of summer caused her to drop her normal heavy sweaters and change into a much more weather appropriate t-shirt.

Adam found himself staring at her shirt because it was easier to stare at the black fabric

with some band logo on it than at her pants, which were a mix-match of plaid and odd scraps of fabric that made her legs like a bowling alley carpet. Last winter, her mom had bought her a new sewing machine, and she had spent the past several months destroying her clothes and Frankensteining them back together. Adam had hated her new style, mostly because the more he stared the more it gave him a migraine. He didn't say anything about it, mostly because he didn't have a right to.

He thought someday he might, even if it was just to get a reaction out of Ray. A reaction that would cause her to talk for hours until her face went red and Adam could just stare at her, transfixed. Then she would stop and look at him and roll her eyes, maybe slap her hand against his shoulder.

She would say something else and Adam would laugh, choking on whatever drink he would have in his mouth. He would put his hand over his lips, choking and coughing and trying not to spit it out because that would be a waste. The laughing would turn to coughing and then back to laughing as Ray would give him a look and roll her eyes. Maybe call him an idiot, which Adam would laugh at until it was time for him to sleep, and he would just lay in bed turning the word over and over in his head.

Idiot.

It always stung more whenever Ray said it, even though Adam was pretty sure she didn't actually mean it.

Most of the time, anyway.

Adam found himself smiling at Ray as she worked. He corrected his mouth and started gnawing on the inside of his cheek.

Ray was still transfixed on the engine, muttering a string of curses towards the shit bucket Adam had been fortunate to call his car. Ray was good with cars, something that was handy considering Adam wasn't and his car needed constant upkeep.

Ray loved his car as much as she hated it. It was always a frustration to her, something to be wrestled with and fought over. Something that was broken that she had to keep coming back and fixing, only for it to break a week later.

Adam wondered if Ray saw him the same way. A broken down machine that she could fix if she just kept coming back and working on it some more.

Sometimes, Adam felt like a broken machine.

Like a boat spilling oil into the ocean, turning the brilliant blue water a murky black.

Adam's feelings for Ray felt like an oil spill, unforgiving as it spilt from him and stained the ocean. Scary and dangerous and deadly with one light of a match.

Destructive.

Ray cursed at the engine and kicked Adam's car out of frustration. Adam winced more in sympathy for his car rather than Ray's foot, she didn't seem to hurt as she continued to curse at the machine and kick it again.

"Everything okay?" Adam called from his spot on the curb. He was playing with one of the holes in the knees of his pants, unknowingly making it bigger the more he tugged at the strings.

Ray turned to him and shot him a careless, lopsided grin. "Yeah. . . it's all good!"

Her voice was clear and unaccented. Intelligent in a way that always made Adam sound dumb in comparison.

He was chewing on his nails again.

Ray was pretty. She was also smart and funny, and so quick to call Adam out whenever he needed it. Observant, talented, boisterous, brave. Wealthy.

Wealthy was the one that hurt the most.

Wealthy, because that meant she could go to any college she wanted.

Wealthy, because that meant she shouldn't be hanging around people like Adam.

Adam, who lived in a one-bedroom apartment that he was barely making rent on while working three jobs and going to a local community college. Adam, who only had a car because the man who owned the trailer park Adam used to work and live at had passed away without children.

He looked around at his surroundings. His car, Ray, Ray's car; brand new, electric. The dumpster he saw a drug deal take place behind last week, a woman walking her dog across the road, leash in one hand, keys clutched tightly in the other.

"Ah-ha!" Ray cheered. Loud. Always loud. Adam winced at the noise. She looked back at Adam with a grin so wide it practically split her face in half. "I did it."

Adam forced his mouth to form into a smile, his heart aching in his chest as he took in

a deep breath of fresh air, trying to ignore the smell of garbage from the dumpster a couple of dozen feet away.

"Thanks," Adam said, the words sounded clumsy and hollow, even to him. Ray gave him a weird look and he tried to smile wider. His mouth felt as if it was bleeding sand, or oil, or cotton, he didn't even know anymore.

Ray had backed away from his car and had taken a few steps towards him. "Adam, are you okay? You look a little pale."

His heart skipped a few beats in his chest, his palms felt sweaty and he quickly tried to wipe them on his pants. "Yeah, I'm fine," Adam lied. "Just got dizzy, I'm okay."

Adam couldn't tell whether or not she believed him, but she smiled anyway. A warm, bright smile that gave way to white teeth with a gap in the middle of the front two. A smile that stretched out Ray's cheeks in a way that made Adam want to reach out and poke one, so instead he shoved his hands deep into his pockets and his gaze dropped onto the gravel of the parking lot.

Ray was saying something Adam didn't quite catch, and then she started laughing at her own joke. A bright cheery sound, lilting in a way that caused Adam's stomach to drop and his heart to swell.

Around him, the ocean burned.



"Untitled" by Jesse Lee Kercheval

"Where the Free Life Lands"

Bob Johnson

The line of cars stretched around the whole cemetery and back down several blocks. Like the line that parked from one small town to the next small town I'd heard about in Wisconsin. My family would tell these two stories at the same time. My uncle and a friend of his friend, dead in Vietnam. It was a memory that formed me before I was even formed.

The Colts won the world championship in 1958. The greatest game ever played. Way before me but, because of Pete and Pete, I know that the TV waves are still beaming out into space, into alien television sets, further and further all the time. Moving like Ameche into the stars we came from.

And the big, colorful balloon filled with gas and hope. My mom was a kid then and begged until they took her to watch it float up into the sky. Mom fed on the hope of that until she saw me through the loss of herself. The tangible sublimated to the magic inside. Just like all of us. Falling into the sunsets and rises, Donny and I would watch on that old farmhouse roof. The sun, a ball of magic, Grace Hartigan-ing the whole sky. We came from stardust and

now we're DNA, and one day we will be stardust again.

Our family was Baltimore, NYC; Puerto Rican, and Dominican. City and village; light brown and darker brown. Fell's Point and Brooklyn; pains and joys. There's not much left at all now. Except for the story. And the telling of it is a kind of living, too.

My dad and uncle shared one God: Big Daddy Lipscomb. They proselytized him in every house, on every stoop, at every corner. All of the Colts were with him, maybe just a cloud rung below, up there in the blue and white pantheon. They even loved that great big goof Artie Donovan.

Actually, he wasn't my uncle. He was my mom's cousin, 9 years older, and he took care of her a lot growing up. He and my dad got as close as brothers. Mama had her own avatar and icon, a memory she shared with me: the Free Life Balloon. All of it's tied together by love and the Colts and colors. Broken by cancer and Vietnam and heroin.

My name is Cassady. I'm thirty-six. Right now, I'm looking out the sunroom window at a bird and the big tree's leaves just starting to turn. I don't mind thinking about the past when I look at things like that. Without it, it's all headaches and vomit. They have to lasso me back to that room and the bed. But when the window is good, I can remember. Remember what happened. See the colors Mama loved to talk about. I can even wonder if they'll ever let Donny visit me.

Mama loved the Abstract Expression painters. "Such colors!" Their bright ones were like the sun, like the stars when she'd get far enough away from the street lamps. The darkness had a deepness like crayon oceans. All layered and splattered, dripped and drizzled. She considered each picture a novel. They all told a story and, like any good book, she found a character just like her inside it somewhere. She loved Lee Krasner just as much as she loved Jackson Pollock. We would look at Joan Mitchells for hours, leaning in and out to see relief maps building off her canvas. When I lived in Wisconsin later, the hills reminded me of those pictures. But being from Baltimore, her favorite was Grace Hartigan. She loved her almost as much as the Free Life. She loved them both, almost as much as she loved me. I wonder what paint hits that tree first. Yellow or orange? Where did Bird go?

My family loved so many things. Like I've said, the Free Life, Big Daddy Lipscomb, the Colts, the Abstract Expressionists, and colors. There was love for a million kinds of music. Like

Billie Holiday. And the Grateful Dead. One of their songs was how I got my name. And love for the Beats. That's why I'm spelled Cassady, like Neal, like Dean Moriarty, and jazz music. That's why I named the bird outside Bird. I adopted all their loves and added my own. My family loved so many things, but most of all we loved our family.

My family even got into professional wrestling because Big Daddy Lipscomb did it. They even got Nana into it. But, like all gods, he had to die. Growing up with the stories, it got hard to walk by his old haunts. Like how walking past Tupac's high school went from cool to no fucking way in one 1996 day. You'd think my family wouldn't have wanted to make God's same mistake. You'd think I wouldn't have either. But that's love for you. You found your worm, Bird. Enjoy it.

Mama told me the story so much that I still remember the date. September 20, 1970. She told the story to me, long after the rest of the family was gone, so it could live on. And it will. She told me when I was little. I learned to talk from it. Yellow balloon was my first phrase. And she kept telling me, up until her diagnosis, when I had to let her go. First, they took my mom's left breast, then her right. And then they took my mom. The elements needed her more and the ground took my mom. As it will us all. But her story's still alive.

She'd recount the whole trip. Baltimore to the Free Life. They brought a picnic with them. We'd spend whole days in her kitchen, on her stoop, wherever, and I'd listen. Some of the best days of my life.

A pasture off a road called Fireplace; outside Springs, New York on Long Island. It was an artist community. Pollock, Krasner, Vonnegut, De Kooning, Nora Ephron. Pollock died on Fireplace Road. My mom and I must've watched *Sleepless in Seattle* a thousand times.

The way Mom described it drew a picture inside me that never ever left. The campfire orange of the balloon floating into the blue sky, yellow stripes on its cap setting it apart from the clouds. She said it left from Springs. They say it crashed in the sea. She said she'd never believe that.

"We can wait for it whenever, anywhere. Like a moon, like the sun."

"And you don't need me here for us to wait together."

I could close my eyes and see a bright fish bobber up in the air. I'd imagine it, its orange

and yellow almost glowing, flying over forested hills, framed in green at the bottom, and bracketed by blue and white; Colts colors all around. I know how it ends, but I don't think of the crash. Wherever it was – if it was. I like to think Mama was right all along. I think of the risk they took, the point they tried to make, and how they flew. That's what I want – to fly in such colors somehow.

And, God, those sunsets and rises we saw from that farmhouse roof. It felt like we became the Free Life. Sometimes, one of us would start singing, usually something from the '90s, like a song from the *Singles* soundtrack. One of us would start and then the other would finish the lyric.

We didn't bother anyone with it. You couldn't hear us down inside the house. The next nearest house was a mile away. And if anyone outside could hear, it would've been the birds. And they didn't mind. I don't bother you, do I, Bird?

Donny and I would've watched *Singles* as much as Mom and I watched *Sleepless* but we weren't given as much time together. I wish we'd had more. I wish every good thing went on forever. In a way, it does. I think that a million, billion years from now light years away, some scattered atoms of me will still feel that way. It's getting later now; on a sunny day I can tell time by the tree's shadow. And there's a little breeze. I see the little swaying of the taller grasses. I can feel the niceness. Like there's not even a window between us.

And I'd hold him tighter when he finished that line. Loved him harder. Because I knew he never felt beautiful like he was. Like he is. I know he is. I hurt him and he saved me anyway. My family's all gone, but I still have them in my head. I get to see them all whenever the time is right. Like right now. The window, the lightly yellowing sky, the tree; Bird is back. I still have that when the time is right. "And dreams like this must. . ."

I remember one of those first days. We were in his car. Donny was showing me the wild up-and-down backroads and these crazy anachronistic farms and towns. He had one of his favorites, Gram Parsons, in the CD player. The song, "Streets of Baltimore," came on and I just lost it. Every memory, Mom and everyone and everything, it all came back at once. He pulled over. He talked me through it, listened to me, and waited until I was out of the past and back into the now. When we got back to the farmhouse, it was the first time we fucked. And the next morning was the first time we waited on that roof for the sun to show up.

Solidity is one of this universe's better illusions. Nature at its trickster best self. A table, those chairs, this body, atoms jumbled so close together we think that we're whole. It's not that we matter, it's just that we are. In time, the atoms start to loosen their grip. Of course, there are ghosts. The Free Life painted itself across the sky, like starlings. They form something that looks almost solid in the air. Where it landed: heaven. And of course, there are gods; the overwhelming glue of everything and all. It's not so bad here; it's really not. I can feel myself being sublimated, becoming the air, a trace of orange and yellow in the sky. And I know I'll see you again, Mama, where the Free Life lands.



"Utter Bliss" by
Colee Pasinato

Ocean's A Way

Content Warning: suicide

Joseph Lambie

"WAAAIIITTT!"

Hyle ran as fast as his stiff workman's boots could carry him. The vibrant song of saltwater sloshing filled his ears as the last tanker to depart shore continued its methodical retreat.

He waved his arms frantically and attempted to quicken his pace. The ship sounded with a bellowing response, nearly a kilometer away, but that didn't even begin to brace his hope. The young man hauled himself as fast as he could down the ship dock, screaming so loud a cicada would fall deaf. "HEEEEEEEEEYYYYY!"

The end of the dock drew near, and the ship bore no sign of altering its course. Hyle slammed on the brakes, and to that end he teetered and tipped awkwardly off the edge of the pier into the foam below.

Only the soft slopping of his boots resounded across the derelict remains of the coastal burgh. The streets, shops, and attractions were swept clean of any scrap of utility, and the usual morning cacophony of gulls and human interaction had all since echoed away. Hyle himself wasn't much of a sight either. Born in 1902, he aged towards his early thirties, even

though he had since lost count. He wore tight workman's clothes and a drab-green flannel. His stubble pinched his chin as he rubbed his sleeve on it to dry himself.

The young man trudged along the road farther; past empty cottages and run-down storehouses; past metallic husks of Ford Roadsters and Packard Twelves; past dead sweeps of grass withering in what was peak season; and past rows of dead crops planted on once fertile soil.

Hyle glanced up towards his destination. Just a few steps up awaited the still-intact countenance of his Pa's cottage. Nestled on a nice hill along the shoreline, it almost looked beautiful somedays. The cottage also stayed safe from floods and was surprisingly defensible. Meandering up to the door, he closely eyed the old architecture. The edges of the door were intricately carved, and greened and stained with age. Shivering from the remaining dampness, Hyle unabashedly pushed the door open.

Walking through the entrance chamber, he sauntered into the living room and slumped down on a light green sofa which matched the hue of his flannel. The colors of the interior had all since faded, and the adornments along the walls sought to add no extra vibrancy, consisting mostly of hooks, grayed photos, and once valuable trophies of a hunter and fisherman's past. Hyle's Pa sat in a rocking chair motionless across from him. The old man's reading glasses were on and his face aligned with a book. He gave absolutely no visual acknowledgement to the young man's presence.

His father's hair was wired and unkempt with a strikingly gray hue. He bore a withering beard and two stripes of silver along the sides of his head consistent with natural balding. Not looking up, the geriatric spoke, "Did ye make yer voyage?"

The quiet aggressiveness of the statement struck Hyle like a station wagon. He had obviously not made it on the ship as evidenced by his presence.

"No."

"Why'd ye try to depart me anyway, boy?"

Hyle did not respond.

"Had ye not been mourning the deeds of yer hand, you'd have been a part of yer salvation."

Hyle stuttered for a moment then collected himself, "I can't forget those folk."

"But ye did seem to forget why they were here. To pilfer what little they had naught. They arrived of no good intention, and died in their steadfast arrogance."

Hyle raised his voice, "They died because. . . because / killed them!"

The man wasn't unflattered, but he knew the geezer was right. Had Hyle done nothing, the people he killed would've just as readily taken the two's lives, then whatever was in the pantry and smokehouse.

The old man continued with an unnatural calmness, "Ye were just protectin' yer home. I praise ye for being as forthright as ye were, savin' both our hides."

Hyle grimaced. Bolts of adrenaline ran through his entire body at the memory of two months ago. Famine had struck the entire coastline, rampant storms had devastated mainland crops, and fish were nary caught. Trade stagnated, and no new harvest could be reaped.

"Ye should've taken what ye had and bought a boat yerself. Instead of waitin' till the end of salvation to run afoul."

Hyle grimaced. The last ship to depart to the ocean left today, and he had missed it.

"Yer presence halves the time I have here, boy. The provisions will only last the two of us another fortnight."

Hyle nodded, and stood up, moving into the adjacent room to fetch some dry clothes.

Pa picked up his pipe, and without looking up from his book spoke again, "The pump has nary a shell left to eat with, but the revolver still has four bullets in it."

Hyle stiffened. "Ye have a revolver, too?"

"In me dresser in the master bed, under me nightclothes."

Hyle pulled up a fresh pair of ragged blue overalls and snagged a clean jacket out of a faded wooden dresser. In the opposing room, he implored, "Why ye bringing it up fer?"

"When the rations dwindle, and the sun sets along the coastline, yer to take me life and yer own."

Hyle stopped and walked back into the living room. "Wait, hold on a goddamned second. Yer expectin' me to be the one to kill again?"

His Pa drew a breath from the pipe, "That's what I'm tellin' ye."

"Surely there's something else we can do, we're some of the only blokes here, and if we were to—"

"Ye lookin to shun yer duties again, boy? There's naught rations to be found in the yard nor in the sea. Once the provisions run out we're to shrivel and die, till our very gullets feast on our bones, is that what yer plan is ye dullard?"

Hyle could only glare at him.

"Then ye best keep yer trap shut. This be the easiest two weeks we have left until the morn' comes, and ye seek to sully it with yer incessant jabberin."

"But why me?"

"What ye gettin' at?"

"I'm sayin' why make me the one to take our lives. . . can't there be some other way?"

The old man finally turned his gaze away from the book and picked up his voice.

"Because ye faltered! Ye didn't take yer leave when ye had the chance!"

"But I've already spilled the entrails of four people, why do I need to murder anyone else?"

"Because ye know me as too much of a coward to pull the trigger on meself! I've lived too damn long to be denied from His kingdom at the blitherin' end!"

Hyle shook his head, "No, I won't do it."

"Then get out me house."

Hyle stared at his Pa with cold eyes, and slowly rubbed his face with his hands.

The old man looked back down. "Then yer decision has been made. On the fifteenth sunset we'll tread by the coast and do the deed. It'll be made knee-deep in the water; pray we may be taken to the roarin' foam and shared by the sea . . . and not by some listless commoners."

Pa kept his gaze trained on the book, and the two did not speak again to each other for the rest of the evening.

On the fourteenth night, the provisions dwindled, and Hyle patiently waited to hear the soft droning of his father's slumber. He crept slowly into the bedroom, the withered man was dozing peacefully on a large mahogany bed with golden-rimmed reading glasses still on and a book clung to his side. The very dim brightness of early twilight was the only thing left to illuminate the place, and Hyle had since been waiting for his chance to do this. He gingerly

tiptoed further to the bedside dresser next to the bed. Paying close heed to the man's status, Hyle very lightly pulled on the golden hinge of the bottom shelf. There were socks and some dirty leather coverings but not much else. He pulled the one above. Dark jeans and overalls. Next, cotton shirts and. . . the nightwear! He stuck his hand inside. Feeling around, he inched for anything solid. There was a faint indent within the drawer, and there! He felt the hard handle of the firearm buried within the wrinkling of the cotton. Carefully he parted the apparel until he had a firm grip on the handle. Silently, he drew it out of its housing and began to close each level of the dresser one by one with the revolver in his other palm. Looking woefully at the still figure of his father he murmured to himself, "I'm sorry, Pa."

The old man almost seemed to respond to this, and shifted languidly in his bed. He clasped his jaws open and shut again as if he were eating something in his dream. Hyle turned away and made his way back to the entrance of the room, quietly inching the door closed behind him.

Once again, Hyle's footsteps echoed through the carcass of the abandoned municipality. The light of the sun was fading fast, but Hyle had taken a gas torch to illuminate the way home if something were to go awry. He breached to the far edge of the town along the coastline and returned to the deserted dock of his aborted departure. The last rays of light reflected maroon off puffy lingering clouds, almost relaying the image of corpses bleeding out. Hyle pulled out the revolver and examined it. It was a genuine .44 Colt Walker. A rare find anywhere, much less so in the decaying remnants of a fisherman's house. He disconnected the chamber and observed the piece. It was just like the old man said: four shots left. Hyle gazed into the empty chamber and moved one round into one of the empty sockets, creating a staggered pattern of loaded and unloaded cylinders. He spun the chamber and clicked it shut, cocking the hammer afterwards. Leveling the gun to his head he stared into the now dormant waters of the evening pale.

With shivering hand, the young man's finger quaked on the trigger. He slammed his eyes shut and exhaled to steady himself. Eventually, his mind got the best of him, and in a knee-jerk reaction, he pulled the trigger.

Click.

I'm already dead. I'm already dead. I'M ALREADY DEAD.

Hyle opened his eyes. The water still sloshed and the stars were still poking out in the vast array of blue ocean before him. They reflected across the surface and sparkled periodically.

He shuddered and fell to his hands on the wooden deck. The gun slammed onto the board next to him with an audible clatter and another hollow *plink*. He'd made it. God had wanted him to make it.

He pounded his fist on the wooden support post adjacent to him.

Why.

Why?

Why didn't I die?

He curled up into a ball and stared listlessly out, the ocean's sound gently caressing him as he rocked back and forth. He laid there minutes, nay, hours, paying mind only to the droning of the sea. It soothed his troubled consciousness until the soft sounds melded into an all too familiar horn. A horn that to him sounded like a trumpet.

Hyle looked up. A dark triangle appeared on the horizon. Small lights glimmered atop the shape as it uttered a deep bellow and paved its way toward a nearby shore.

It was a . . . no, it was the ship.

Hyle stood up and waved his hands, "HEYYYYY! HEEEEEEEEYYYY!"

They wouldn't be able to hear him no matter how loud he shouted, not even if he ran along the coastline.

Wait, the gun!

Hyde smiled widely, and looked down. The face of the revolver gazed back up at him with an open chamber. To this he bent down and clutched it closed against his shivering body. There was nothing left for him here. Nay, nothing but an empty cabin and fragments of poor memories.

The ship runners might not be able to see him now, but they would recognize his presence in time. He would utter his loudest cry from the barrel of the gun, and they would certainly hear and take notice.

Checking the chambers once more, he spied three bullets. He chortled as he did so, for in his stubbornness he had cast his net close and still caught salvation.

With the thought perished, he began to run.



"Conveyance Envy"
by Jeff Weiland

Operation Smoking Gun

Joseph Lambie

Tobias Flacco ushered himself slowly into the vacant apartment room. The floorboards creaked as he stepped in, and the absolute decrepit state of the environment became apparent to his nostrils. Tobias' pacemaker felt like it stuttered as he breathed, and his fresh-smelling clothes did little to dampen the rancid scent the immediate neighborhood brought. He wore a dark orange overcoat complemented by an aged black bowler hat and a faded white tie. His face was pitted and pale, whilst his ashen mutton chops and mustache barely clung to the sides of his face. He held a silvery, rectangular briefcase in one hand and a faded, brown suitcase in the other. The contents of the brown case clunked audibly as he set it down on the dusty floorboards. Putting a cigarette in his mouth, he turned around and gently closed the door behind him.

The room itself contained a faded green couch, matted blue flooring, a small kitchenette to the left, and a hallway to the right. Not bothering to settle in, the man turned the deadbolt on the door, locking it. He reclaimed his suitcase and swiftly entered the hallway. The edges had a golden wood trim and almost looked inviting in comparison to the rest of the room. A small bathroom door hung on the right, and what was presumably a bedroom loomed ahead. Ignoring those entrances, Tobias turned to the left, entering a compact spare bedroom. The

bed appeared well-worn and with black diamond patterned sheets, which contrasted the peeling dim whitish palette of the walls. There was a large window opposite to the entrance of the room, and a wooden desk perpendicular to it. On the desk, Tobias placed the reflective silver suitcase. He moved the darker portmanteau underneath the desk space and dragged up the small, adjustable office chair, which sat next to it. His joints ached as he planted himself firmly in the chair, still sore from all the recent prepwork.

He looked unenthusiastically at the brown case planted under the desk for a moment. If the job went well, hopefully he wouldn't have to use it. Unlatching the suitcase locks one-by-one, he cracked open the silver box and pulled out a darkly colored compact laptop with a mouse and some documents. He stacked the documents neatly beside the modern laptop and plugged it into the residing floor outlet. As the computer booted up, he parsed through some of the papers. They outlined the impetus of his current case: to apprehend and shut down the drug runner Gunther Peele and his constituent operations. The runner's activity had been decisively tracked by Tobias and his assistant for almost nine months. This particular bootlegger knew how to pack up smuggling operations without leaving much of a trace, and the bastard was remarkably intelligent. He frequently changed his area of operations, often rotating his work team, leaving many of the previous cells, which also attempted the case, confused and disoriented. However, Tobias' constant diligence allowed him to discover the next location, an industrial assembly plant. The place had boarded inlets and underground escape routes. It was difficult to enter but rather simple to leave, given the tunnels. Tobias was unsure if Gunther had multiple smaller smuggling operations running parallel to this one, but he remained certain that the runner was holed up somewhere in the neighboring plant at this very moment.

Drawing his handmade lighter from his pocket, Tobias flicked the spark wheel and ignited the end of his cigarette. Shiningly finished and made from an ash tree, the lighter was a clever little trinket that he'd held onto ever since his second operation with his assistant. It was a gift from her for his covering of one of her mistakes. She had received bad intel and went through with a part of a plan despite being advised by Tobias not to do so. Igniting his cigarette, the man inhaled and stood up. He drew the blinds and opened the room's window to let some fresh air in. The location of the apartment was decisive, as it provided a stellar view of

the opposing factory.

Sitting back down, Tobias thoughtfully continued his study of the case files. Within were details on some of the smugglers, purported arms they carried, and blueprints of the assembly plant. Flipping through more of the notes he spotted a paperclip attached to the top of one of the sheets. It was a small, yellow tinted post-it. With a curious expression, he pulled out the note and unfurled it.

CODED INTEL: GUESTS GRANTED ACCESS RECEIVE ENTRY THROUGH THE ENCLOSED STATEMENT.

-MARL

Tobias frowned. His assistant, Marl Berens, was lampooning him. On occasion, he would have to utilize her compact computer to carry out operations involving splicing into other connected systems. The laptop was password-locked, and on one such occasion he had forgotten how to get in and was unwittingly forced to send her a message mid-operation. She had since simplified the password greatly and added a special character lest he forget, and the note served as an unpleasant reminder to that altercation. Tobias often fumed about the computer being easily cracked if it fell into enemy hands. He often asked her to change the password, but she refused, stating that it's now "another permanent handicap" to him, and that he should take extra care in making sure it stays well-guarded.

Despite their internecine arguments, the two of them were a perfect match as detectives. Marl's young enthusiasm and gut-instinct complemented Tobias' half-hearted nature and deductive reasoning. Marl herself was rather plain-looking to most people. She stood fairly tall with dark brown hair and sharp facial features, and dressed in a wide variety of apparel. She notably had a penchant for blending into any crowd while also portraying a surface tension of extrovertism. However, she remained largely reserved regarding any inquiries about her family. She was unparalleled in her ability to get things done, however, as most of Tobias and Marl's operations together had been successful. He recalled how much she typically enjoyed working out in the field. On one occasion, he'd had to sit back and puff about due to his pacemaker while she engaged in physical pursuit of some nicotine thieves. To that

end, he was often the butt of her jokes, and the two would frequently attempt to outwit one another. Tobias would not often try to win, but rarely he'd make a genuine effort to best her.

Tobias lay back in his chair and grinned. He held a mutual respect for Marl as a coworker in a dangerous field. She was expressive, reliable, and loved her job. However, neither of the two were good at sharing gratitude. Tobias painfully recalled one night where he forced a shaky grin and invited her to go bowling with him. Her initial response was a solid minute of unfiltered laughter followed by eventual acceptance. Despite never having played before, she miraculously outscored him, and he reluctantly agreed to buy her drinks for the rest of the night. On occasion, she would sometimes reimburse Tobias by making his work folder or his coat pocket a little lighter.

Tobias slowly turned and looked back at the factory across the street. The manner of the operation was relatively simple. He would gain access to the plant's subterminal and overload some of the equipment. The old manufacturing devices inside would then smoke up and fill the building with hazardous fumes, forcing the smugglers inside to evacuate. When the plot was executed, the police would then rush in and apprehend whomever was involved. They would have to arrive after the operation was successful, however, as the smugglers kept an eye out for patrols, and a large number of officers within the vicinity meant an early evacuation for them. Marl's job in the whole schtick was a difficult one. She would breach in through one of the loading entrances and make her way to the bottom floor, wherein she would power the rest of the factory's auxiliary generators. The drugrunners were likely already using one for temporary power. Careful inspection of the factory connectives showed that the system wasn't dead, but rather malnourished. It would need a hefty jumpstart to begin functioning again. From there, Tobias would capitalize, and he would send commands directly to the subterminal to start up the equipment. Hopefully, the distraction of the active machinery was enough to let her get out. Her role in the operation was a volatile one, as one slip-up could make her entire life forfeit, yet she was aware of the risks, and voluntarily elected herself to carry it out.

He looked across the street; few cars were nearby, and the neighborhood looked largely inactive. Brick buildings lined the backside of the street corner, and the factory didn't appear much different. All the windows were boarded and the entrances locked, obfuscating the true activity within. The building's bricks dulled a paler red than most of the structures

around it, standing as a testament to its own age. Tobias flicked the end of the cigarette out the window and pulled out another from his coat pocket. Turning away from the window, he wearily sat back down in the office chair.

Signing into the terminal, he entered the monitoring program for the facility. She was also tasked with wiring up multimeters to the generators to broadcast to her laptop. Once electric current was there, he would begin routing it under the guise of the subterminal.

He set to work on prepping the subterminal program. It mimicked the controls of the actual plant, so he could choose where and when machinery would activate, shut down, or be put on standby. He also had direct control over power flow, and he planned on pushing the entire plant's output into but a few machines.

A little flash on the edge of his screen pulsed at him, and he tabbed back into the current tester; power was flowing from all four of the auxiliaries. The psychopath actually managed to pull it off. She would now attempt to seal what escape routes she could find, and he would have free access to manipulate all the machinery. Typing rapidly, he told the mainframe to run its power to one of the beltlines and their assemblers. That along with the collective dust should be enough to cause a fire or some smoke. All he had to do from this point was wait, wait and pray that Marl made it through. When a substantial amount of smoke began to pour from the building, he would notify the police and the operation would be deemed a success.

He sat back in his chair and watched the eastern side of the building. Beltline 1 should be located there, and the smoke should make its way either through the ventilation or out the windows. After about ten minutes of agonizing silence, a small trickle began to filter through one of the boarded sideports. A small pillar of dark smoke curled into the air and drifted southward, away from his post. Excellent. Tobias stood up and walked over to the window. He began to detect a peculiar scent. It smelled faintly of a tire replacement store, or the vulcanization of rubber. He continued to stare at the small plume. Something wasn't right. It should be expanding widely as the indoor gadgetry's status got worse. Finishing his cigarette, he flipped the tip out the window. As the butt hit the ground, a massive detonation sounded from across the street. Bricks skyrocketed into the air above in all directions, along with mechanical components, dust, boards, and other integrants of the building. Tobias was blinded

for a moment as a massive plume of bright light and flame followed, the resulting pressure wave both deafening him and knocking him backwards.

Dazed, he scrambled frantically back onto his feet and gazed out the window with a horrified expression. The entire eastern side had been completely eviscerated, and a huge crater was imprinted on the face of the structure with massive amounts of smoke emanating from within. Several car alarms wailed throughout the once deserted street as Tobias clutched his heart. His pacemaker felt like it couldn't keep up with the adrenaline shooting through him.

MARL. Marl Marl Marl.

Rapidly packing up the computer he shoved it underneath the bed and pulled out the second suitcase. He whipped out a key from his overcoat and unlocked it. The inside contained a large handgun and a disassembled assault rifle. Snatching the handgun, he hastily gathered all the rounds he could find inside and made his way back through the hallway toward the entrance.

He would have to radio HQ when he got out of the building and notify them of the situation. He had a gut feeling that Marl was still alive, but with that notion he silently prayed that her life would not be extinguished.



"Fluorescent
Haworthia" by
Connor Trocke

A Close Call

John Markestad

"You know, there's about a half a hundred ways this could go wrong, right?" Crewmember A said.

"Yeah. Your point being?" Crewmember B replied. With the right gauntlet already in place, she twisted and locked the left.

"I don't have a point, just thinking out loud. I've already agreed that we don't have a second option. Or rather, the second option is just plain worse than this one."

"I'm more than happy to let you do the dive, but wait, you don't have any training in this. So, who does that leave?" B asked.

"You," A said in a soft voice. "I would if I knew what to do."

B reached out and touched A's forearm. "Don't sweat it. This'll go fine. Meantime, I need to get out there. We're losing more and more of the stuff we breathe every second." She looked down at her harness belt to confirm for the eighteenth time that she had the hull patch material attached.

A nodded and helped in setting the fishbowl onto the latching collar. An eighth of a turn on the ring secured it. Two small lights on the chest panel changed from red to yellow, then to green. "Two greens," A said, even though he knew B was seeing them on the heads-up display

on the inside of the helmet.

B turned and took two steps to the edge of the airlock hatch. The lip was only two inches up and her feet cleared it easily. Once inside, she pressed the CLOSE button. A soft hiss accompanied the door sliding out of the wall recess to seal the chamber. With the thumb of her right hand, she pressed the PURGE button. It only took thirty seconds for the chamber to be emptied. VACUUM lit up red on the panel. The places where the suit fabric had lain against her skin pulled away due to the pressure differential. It took both thumbs pressing in unison on the OPEN buttons to complete the cycle. B had often wondered how someone with a damaged arm was supposed to cycle the airlock.

Her attention didn't stay on that topic. "Connecting the tether," B said. The physical click of the snap link was transmitted through the suit fabric. Stepping outside, the softer click of her magnetic boot soles clear, putting her face to face with the universe; no atmosphere to occlude the view except for the two inches between her nose and the plexiglass of the helmet. B never tired of the view. Directly in front of her was the wide band of the Milky Way, the edge-on view of the galaxy. She was sure that if she spent a lifetime at it, she still wouldn't be able to count all the stars.

"Moving aft," B said, and began the slow shuffle/step that came with the boots.

"Keep your feet close to the hull," A admonished.

"Yes, mother." Through the suit radio B heard A talking over the intercom to the captain.

"Yessir. She's outside now." Pause. "Yessir. The longest available tether." Pause. "We believe so."

B knew that A was lying to the captain. One-hundred and eighty-one feet. That was the distance to the hole. The tether was one-hundred and seventy-five. That meant six feet of difference. She wasn't six feet from her waist to her fingertips. Hell, she was barely three and a half. She knew she wasn't going to be able to reach the hole to apply the patch. Not while still attached to the tether.

Although time was certainly a critical factor—the ship was losing air and the thirty-eight people aboard were in some considerable need of that air—B couldn't help but take a couple of seconds to look at the deep darkness. The stars were beyond beautiful.

Under her feet, the ship slipped sideways. Not quite enough to dislodge her boots. Almost.

And that, of course, was the problem. The slug that had created the hole in the hull had gone on to do a fair amount of damage. On its journey through the ship, it had turned the Second Officer's chest to a red paste that had sprayed all across the bridge. Multiple systems had been damaged, including those that maintained lateral stability. Every minute or so, one of the attitude thrusters would fire for a couple of seconds. The problem was in the damaged computer. It could be fixed. . . at a shipyard.

"I see the hole," B said. A thin plume of white atmosphere was visible against the darkness. The moisture in that precious air froze out almost instantly into tiny, reflective flakes. Six feet short of the hole the tether stopped her. B waited fifteen seconds until the next sideways slipping of the hull had passed, then she laid down on the hull with the patch in her hand. A foot and a half short. Just like she'd said she would be.

"I'm short by over a foot," B said into her suit microphone. "I'm going to have to untether."

"Don't you dare!" A snapped out. "Do that and the next slip will throw you off, sure as hell!"

"Aw, now, c'mon. You're just feeling sorry for yourself because you know no one else will sleep with you," B teased. It was a running joke between them. The captain's voice came through again on her suit radio.

"Where we at down there?"

"She's at the hole but can't reach it. The tether has her short," B said.

"Well, she'd damn well better reach it. Kowalski has no chance of reaching that location between the hulls before we run out of air. She's our only hope. Whatever it takes."

"Like I said," B said. "I need to untether." The radio link to A stayed silent. What was there to say?

Sixty seconds later the captain was back on the intercom. "Pressure stabilizing. Well done, people."

A few seconds later a series of soft clunks and bangs were heard through the hull. Something outside the ship had hit and bounced several times.

"Beth, are you okay? You sealed the hole. Thank God. Beth, talk to me. Tell me you're on your way back in." Alex tried repeatedly to contact Beth by radio, but it stayed silent. Deathly silent. He could only stand in place, trying to not feel the emotion that he knew was coming. Unblinking, watery eyes could see the approaching hole in his life. After a full minute, Alex

simply collapsed where he was, sinking down to the deck with a wall to his back. That was the start of the tears and the sobs.

Four minutes later, there came a soft chime signaling that the airlock was cycling. Alex looked up with bleary eyes as the inner hatch slid aside. There stood Beth, helmet in the crook of her arm, the tether cable looped and clipped around one ankle.

"I got knocked loose and banged around on the hull a bit. Busted my radio," Beth said with an embarrassed smile.



"Cat Party Lookout"
by Jeff Weiland

Poltergeist

John Markestad

The bedroom is almost dark. The reflection of a full moon on the three inches of new snow outside is more than enough to illuminate the major features of the bedroom. Across from the bed, wherein April lay, was the big dresser with the mirror on top. It was left behind when the house was sold and April had moved in. That, along with an old player piano that was missing the drive drum. Supposedly, the piano had once been in the one-room country schoolhouse that was just down the road. To the right of the dresser was the door and to the right of that was the bifold door to the not-nearly-large-enough closet. It seemed that older homes never had enough closet space, which was generally made up for with one or more wardrobe pieces. On the wall to the right was the 'assembly desk,' as April called it. That was where she sat to put on her makeup, fix her hair, apply and then remove cold cream. . . and all the other time-consuming tasks that came with being a single woman working in an environment of men. To the right of that was the wardrobe, the one that took the place of the closet space she didn't have. On her left was the wall with the window that was letting in the moonlight. Left of the window was the trunk for off-season clothes and to the right of the window was Mama Leonie in the rocker. Of course, although Mama Leonie rocked back and forth where she sat, the rocker itself didn't move at all.

Oh, hold on. You probably don't know about haunts. Or maybe you do. I'll proceed as if you don't. Haunts are the semi-coherent energy that remains in this world when a person dies and isn't fully ready for the next level. For the most part, haunts look like the people they used to be, albeit a bit pale and translucent. Generally speaking, they don't interact with the world of us very much. They tend to have a single-minded focus on whatever was the circumstances of their demise. About half the time they get rooted to the locale where they died, and the other half to whatever killed them. That second half usually meant somebody. The law has yet to rule that the presence of a haunt in someone's life is admissible as evidence of someone's guilt. . . but everybody just assumes it.

"April, dear?" Mama Leonie said in the whisper that was all she could ever manage. "Are you awake, dear?" Everyone was *dear* to Mama Leonie. She must have been a terrific aunt and grandmother in her day. Probably the bane of every small child that didn't want to be squeezed and smooched on the cheek.

"Yes, Mama, I am," April replied. She was still awake from the last time Mama Leonie had talked to her about ninety seconds previous. Talking with haunts was somewhat like trying to hold a conversation with a cat. You sometimes got the impression that they were listening, and a second later they did something unrelated. . . like throwing up a hairball. Not that Mama Leonie ever threw up a hairball. It was just that she didn't have much of an ability to focus on the moment.

"Did you know that I was murdered right here in this room?"

"Yes Mama, I did know that. A terrible thing, I'm sure."

"Oh my, yes. I didn't like it at all. And he was such a nice young man. He was very polite. Right up until. . ."

April waited. Mama Leonie often got lost in her own thoughts. She may or may not come back to the same conversation. She was just as likely to rejoin a conversation they'd had days ago. Or an hour ago. April didn't really mind the sleep she was losing. The convergence of arcane energies that allowed Mama Leonie to talk to her was not common and it was a Friday night. . . check that, it was Saturday morning.

"The older girl, Jessa's oldest, she's going to college in the fall. Imagine that. . . a girl in college. I think that's a very good sign. Don't you, April dear? Don't recall her name, just now.

Rebecca, maybe." Another pause. "Whereas the spotted dog was a nipper and a yapper. Never warmed up to that dog."

The semi-darkness hid April's smile. It could be so much worse. Bill, at work, had a personal haunt. His haunt looked like a woman of twenty-something. The police had asked some questions of April but she had nothing to add beyond her interactions with Bill at work. (Not favorable.) Nobody at the office liked Bill. He was a bully to everyone under him and a monumental suck-up to everyone above him. It was easy to believe that he'd done something truly awful. April was always careful to have as little as possible to do with him. His haunt was always moving things around, pushing things off tables, slamming doors, tipping coffee cups over. Her latest spree seemed to be unpinning the printer cartridges. General consensus was that poltergeists were extremely angry and thereby were able to focus the arcane energies better than more benign haunts. If that was true, then Bill's haunt was very angry indeed.

The only thing Mama Leonie did was sometimes rearrange things to look more like when she was living in the house. She was well-intentioned for all that it sometimes drove April just a little batty herself.

After two or three minutes had passed without anything more from Mama Leonie, April opened one eye to peer at the rocker. Not there. The energies had dissipated, and Mama Leonie had retreated to an even less substantial form. April rolled over and settled in to get back to the sleep she was wanting. In a world where ghosts were real and a part of everyday life, she'd drawn a pretty lucky card.



"Untitled" by Jesse Lee Kercheval

Dirty Dishes

Content Warning: self-harm & suicide

Micol McSweeney

Sitting in my luxurious, large living room with cream-colored marble floors, I stare up at the chandelier that dangles so elegantly over my head. I zone out and think five years back. My then-girlfriend Megan in her rundown apartment where the sun would shine through the window and let us discover all the tiny dust particles floating in the air. I imagine her staring at the dirty dishes piling up in the sink and at the stove encrusted with food. Her lying on the old, lumpy couch with stains all over it, watching *Days of Our Lives*, which was her comfort show. I imagine us lying in her bed together like we always did; me stroking her hair until she fell asleep, which was her favorite thing for me to do. I imagine her walking to the bathroom, spending thirty to forty-five minutes in there at a time. I wonder what life would be like if I'd helped out. If I'd done the dishes just once, would it have lifted the weight of her own mind off of her shoulders? I imagine her sitting in the bathroom, washing her body, her arms and thighs stinging from the new, self-inflicted wounds. I think of the good times with her, the times she was happy; her hanging the last ornament on the Christmas tree, or when we'd go

bowling together. I imagine her laugh and smile, how it lit up the room. I imagine her crying when I had to move halfway across the country for the new job I'd accepted. I imagine her waving goodbye to me as I drive away and miss the way she hugged me so tight that I couldn't breathe after we'd hadn't seen each other in a while. Oh, how I miss the piled-up dishes in the sink. I imagine her laying so perfectly in her pearly white casket, which seemed so wrong for that event; her pale hands crossed, a life taken too soon. I sit in my living room and stare at the chandelier, understanding that after that day, I would never see her again.



"Rose-Ringed Parakeet" by Colee Pasinato

A Boy, a Tomato, and a Bird

Hailey Prager

I followed the boy with the woven hat so big he had to tilt it back so it wouldn't cover his eyes. I could barely see his blond locks beneath it. The long, thick grass almost knocked it off as he slipped through the path made by our leader, who walked in the front. He was anxious, but excited. This was typical of anyone leaving the cave we called home for the first time. The second time won't be met with the same enthusiasm. He seemed too young to be foraging, fourteen at most.

When someone turns seventeen, the government leaders assign them a job and a partner, with whom they will create their own family. Most people seemed to be assigned to the farming district lately. Some are assigned to a mouse farm, where they raise and breed mice for milk or slaughter the males for meat. Others work on a honeybee farm. They shave the fur off the bumblebees to send to the women who make our clothes. They also harvest the honey made for their queen, whose wings were clipped at birth. Not many people are assigned to be foragers, where the animals and bugs we raise inside the cave aren't tamed. You're only

assigned to be a forager if you're strong, both physically and mentally. This kid was neither.

"What's your name?" he asked me.

I ignored the aggressive glares of the other three foragers in our group angled at the boy. I held a finger to my lips.

I held the grass back for the men following behind me. I did not want to be stuck with this kid. The boy waited, though, and fell back to walk next to me after I let the tall sticks whip back into place. I followed in the rear of the party, although it would be difficult to get lost on the dirt path paved by our routine.

"It's my first day out, although you probably know that already. Mom said it's scary out here, so I wasn't expecting to see so many colors and—"

"Quiet," our leader hissed.

"Sorry," the boy said, not bothering to lower his voice. He was slapped with another glare from the old man.

Our leader lifted a hand above his head, and we all stopped as instructed. He lifted a finger up to his lips, then pointed it to our right. A mound of dirt as high as my chest stood not far away. The tiny pebbles of dirt shaped a mini mountain. I've been told that, at the center, there's a hole leading into the network of tunnels the creatures dig. We veered off into the grass to avoid the hill. Although one of the smaller creatures outside the cave, the bugs were knee height. They have three distinct lumps making up their body, with the head having two large antennae that act like a nose and a way to communicate with their comrades. Very aggressive creatures.

I thought I saw one of their six black, wiry legs retreat into the hole, but no one else seemed to notice. I brushed off the thought. After working as a forager for long enough, people start to hallucinate. I've heard others mention seeing creatures at their homes deep in the heavily guarded cave when there's nothing there. Thankfully, he didn't speak until we reached the edge of the field of grass and was much quieter this time.

"Is that guy always so harsh?"

I checked for fresh footprints and any other signs of creatures in the clearing before whispering back, "He means well, but he knows what's out here."

The boy smiled, perking up at my attention. I closed my eyes and let my head flop back

toward the sky, not bothering to hide the regret plastered on my face.

"You all know each other pretty well then? Back in the cave, it's just me and mom. Dad died on the lower level that collapsed last year."

"Kid, you need to be quiet," I breathed, fighting the urge to sigh.

"I'm not a kid," he snapped.

I waved him away, focusing on the large, fruit-bearing plants ahead of us. The lower-level collapse destroyed over half of our food supply. More foragers are likely to be assigned because of it. More men will die because of it.

As we gathered around the thick green trunk, I noticed the others nodding in agreement as one man drew his finger across his neck. The lead forager was off on his own, scouting out the perimeter of the stem.

The boy turned his attention to another guy, but no one bothered responding. I had been careless. I should've ignored the boy from the start. Wrapping the rope three times around my arm and once more around my waist, I nodded to the man attached to the other end of the rope. He began to climb up the dark green stalk. He used the translucent hairs, careful not to cut himself on the thousands lining the stem. The group leader watched as everyone did their jobs. I slowly released the rope as the man climbed further, expecting the boy to help the others unfold and distribute the backpacks. Instead, he turned back to me, brow furrowed.

"What is everyone so worried about?"

I stopped releasing the rope.

"Didn't they tell you in training?" I whispered. A sharp tug forced my attention back to the climber and my job.

"Oh, I never did any training. This guy came up to me last night and asked me to take his place foraging today. He looked really nervous. His wife was probably mad at him or something, I'm not sure. I haven't been assigned to my own job yet, so people come to me when they need a day off. I've done this hundreds of times. Well, I've never gone foraging I guess—"

"You aren't even supposed to be here?" I grabbed his shoulders with my free hand. He winced.

"Hey, that hurts—"

I shook my head. He still didn't understand. Dense red spheres the size of my head plummeted down one by one. Some still had leaves resembling the giant branches above us. Some of them broke open, red goo and seeds bursting out of the tearing skin. It smelled earthy, but sweet at the same time. Seeing the rest of the team move to collect the tomatoes, the boy followed suit.

I tugged twice when our bags were full of the cherry tomatoes, and the man in the trees responded with a subtle one-tug. I slowly released the rope further, and eventually I could see him hopping down the side of the stalk.

A loud screech forced everyone to cover their ears. I couldn't let go of the rope without dropping the man, so I slammed my free hand over one ear and let the momentum push my open ear into my shoulder.

"Take cover!"

Everyone dove to get beneath the plant, but the boy was at the edge of the clearing holding a tomato that lay abandoned. I waved both arms frantically, hoping it was enough to get him to understand, but it wasn't. The other foragers backed away from me. Moving too much was just as dangerous as being too loud. A shadow passed over us, catching the boy's attention. He looked up to the sky, immediately dropping the tomato. Rather than falling back to blend into the tall grass bordering the clearing, he ran toward us.

The hawk screamed once more, hoarse, and shrill. A black talon pierced through the boy's abdomen. His eyes widened. Blood dribbled out of his mouth as the hawk pushed him into the ground. My stomach dropped at his ear-piercing scream, high-pitched and terrified.

"Help me!" He cried out as he tried to push himself off of the black nail.

The hawk pushed its talons further into his torso before taking off into the air again. I saw the boy's head snap back as the bird rammed into the branches on the way up. His eyes were wide, watching me with no emotion, as I had watched him.

The others around me grabbed the rope, and I didn't hesitate to let go. I slammed my fist against the stalk, not caring about the little needles now stuck in my fist. I felt the urge to yell bubble up in my throat. Instead, I punted the tomato the boy abandoned moments ago at the wall of grass. The others left me, going about the usual post-death ritual. Our leader

went first, bringing a rock the size of the tomatoes, now scattered by the wind the bird's wings created.

The rest of them placed their own smaller rocks in a circle around the last place the boy stood. They all went back to work, but I paused to pick up a scrap of fabric torn from his shirt. I knelt down in front of the rocks piled on his blood. I loosened my bracelet, woven together from an array of torn, bloody fabric. The blood from his shirt was still warm and stained the tips of my fingers pink.

It could've been any of us. Maybe tomorrow it'll be me. I dipped my fingers in the hot, bright-red liquid, mixing it with my own bloody hand. I placed a finger on the stone but paused.

What was his name?

I bent down, leaning my head close to the rock as if it were the boy.

"My name is Gabriel!"

I tightened the bracelet around my wrist, letting it dig into my skin. He was just a boy. Yet, his life ended like the others before him.



"Self-Portrait:
American
Health Care"
by Rowan Wilson

A Woman's Ultimate Guide to Losing Senses

Content Warning: graphic language
Elizabeth Schmitt

Do you find yourself unable to forget traumatic sights? Are you haunted by the sounds of men huffing in your ear and whispering what they can't wait to do to you? Have you been unable to stop talking about your trauma? If you answered yes to any of those questions, you might want to consider losing some senses. We have provided an easy three-step process for you to start your journey to healing from your trauma. It's time for you to be happy. Be wise, desensitize.

Step One: **Eyes**

**It is strongly recommended that this procedure is conducted by a medical professional with surgical credentials.*

The most important thing for your surgeon to remember is to keep the globe, the entire eyeball, intact. Try to imagine cracking an egg open and separating the yolk from the egg whites without breaking the yolk. It is important to separate all tissue connections between the globe and the orbit, the bony structure encompassing the eyeball, including the optic nerve. This will leave the globe isolated and vulnerable.

- 1. Retract the eyelids.** This can be done in two ways; by a lid speculum, which looks like a pair of tongs, or a traction suture. The lid speculum will slide underneath the eyelid and pull it open. It is impossible to look away or to close the eyelid. *Like at age 9, when I watched Anne Hathaway fuck Jake Gyllenhaal in the backseat of a car during Brokeback Mountain.* A more dangerous option is to use a traction suture. This is when thread is sewn into the cornea to pull the eyeball in a certain direction to access the hidden areas of the globe. Anesthetic is optional.
- 2. Surgical incisions.** The first incision is made into the mucous membrane that covers the front of the eye and then another incision is made in the layer right underneath the mucous membrane. It is common for juices to leak out of the incisions. Expect pain and tearing. *I even bled.*
- 3. Cut the rectus muscles of the eye.** After this step, the eye can no longer move, and sight will start to blur. *Like when my friend pinned my arms to the bed I had since I was 7 and raped me on my sock monkey sheets.*
- 4. Cut the optic nerve.** This severs the eyeball from the socket. There is no reversing this step. Once the eyeball has been severed, sight will not be able to be restored.
- 5. Scoop the eyeball out of the socket.** This can be done using a spoon, or the surgeon might stick their fingers in the socket and aggressively pull the eyeball from the socket. If the surgeon chooses to use their fingers, the eyeball is more likely to burst. It is recommended that the mouth remain closed in case any eyeball fluid secretes.

Note: This procedure should take around one to two hours, or it could be done shoddily in 10 minutes depending on the practitioner. Clean up and move on. There might be time for a prosthetic or some type of implant, but it will only fill the void; sight will never be restored. A mental health assessment is required before you opt for this procedure, which requires the contents of a man in your life, such as a brother, father, husband, uncle, grandfather, or cousin.

Warning: Removal of the wrong eye is the most feared intraoperative complication. This can be avoided with a few consultations and clear marking of the eye that is to be removed. Or asking for consent. If the wrong eye is removed, they will apologize but they cannot do anything about it. They want us to know we are not alone; we are survivors. They will then set up

another consultation to (hopefully) remove the correct eye. After surgery, there will be mild swelling and bruising. There will be a pinkish or watery discharge from the blood; hopefully not an infection. The major damage will be psychological. Remembering what it was like to have an eye can be more painful than the procedure itself. Losing sight is what they want. Depression over the loss of an eye is very common; counselors are available if needed. It is recommended to lose at least one eye in your lifetime, but no more than three.

Step Two: **Ears**

It is common to have wax buildup, fluid, or foreign objects stuck in the ear. Here are some at-home remedies that don't require a medical professional to unclog the ear canal.

- 1. Swallow.** The pressure put on the tonsils can cause a popping noise and restore some hearing. *Like when I was 12 and an old man offered to buy me a beer, claiming that I looked mature for my age.*
- 2. Yawn.** Sleepiness can sometimes prevent things from entering the ear. *Unlike when I was groggy after a party and woke up to a man humping my leg in my dorm room.*
- 3. Chew gum.** The aggressive chomping motion could prompt a stop to the clogging. If that doesn't work, it is time to worry. *Similar to my first job at Cold Stone Creamery when at the age of 14 my 40-year-old coworker told me that I made him imagine bad things when I licked an ice cream cone.*
- 4. Close the mouth, take a deep breath, plug the nose, and blow.** If that doesn't cause a popping sound and allow you to hear, then it is evident there is something in the ear canal.
- 5. Use sweet oil.** This can help soothe ear infections. *Like when I would lay on my side and my parents would put sweet oil in my ear to make my pain go away. The drops were cold and made my eyes water as the sweet oil soaked into my brain. I would involuntarily salivate at the feeling.*
- 6. Hold a flame in the ear canal.** The wax will run out of the ear like honey. It will burn and leave a ringing. *Like the sound of whistling men.*

If none of these remedies work, you may need to see a doctor to get your ears flushed or you may need surgery to repair a busted eardrum.

Note: Some have tried to use cotton swabs, but that normally causes all of the wax, fluid, or foreign objects to build up close to the eardrum, which can be painful. The best thing to do is ignore it and move on. *Like at age 16 when my manager slapped my ass and told me I looked sexy in my jeans. He smiled, revealing his missing tooth, and told me not to tell my mom. I told her and she told me that it was just who he was.*

Warning: Hearing may deplete at any age. *My hearing started to deplete at age 16 when my coworker pulled my two braids and said they were handlebars. I told my mom about my ear pain, and she said that is the way it is.* It is normal for women, especially young women, to ignore their ear pain.

Step Three: **Mouth**

The final step is the mouth. Stitching the lips. After a certain age, it is difficult to speak. With the loss of vision and hearing it is only natural that speaking will be next. There is little to nothing that can stop this procedure from happening. There are too many secrets to hold. Keep them to yourself because it will make them uncomfortable.

- 1. Disinfect the mouth.** The first step is to pour bleach in the mouth to get rid of any germs. The bleach will seep into every tastebud and will burn them off. This will cause a sound similar to eating pop rocks as each tastebud bursts. The bloody bleach will leak down the throat and cause a choking-like sensation. This is normal. *Keep going, they are almost there.*
- 2. Dry the mouth.** A towel will be shoved in the mouth to soak up the excess blood and bleach. It will feel like sandpaper as it scrapes against the tongue and roof of the mouth.
- 3. Removal of teeth.** If there are exceptionally beautiful teeth, they will be removed and sold for other people to use. This will be done with pliers that will grip the teeth and pull until the root of the tooth is ripped from the jaw. It will sound like shucking corn. More blood should be expected.
- 4. Sewing the lips.** The needle will slowly penetrate the bottom lip, snagging when it breaks the skin on the outside of the lip, and snagging again when it breaks the inside layer of skin. The thread will be slowly pulled through the lip. This may feel unexpected. *Like when I was drunk and told my roommate about being raped and I started crying, but*

she told me I was embarrassing her. The needle will then repeat penetration of the upper lip. This time, the inner layer will be punctured first, followed by the outer layer. *Like when I told my friend about how I think I was coerced to have sex and she said I was exaggerating.* This will feel like lacing a shoe, but on the lips and with a lot more blood.

5. Cutting the thread. This will happen after the final stitch is made. The scissors will snip the thread and all that is left to do is wait in silence. *Like while attending a reproductive health panel where 10 white men shared their opinions on abortion.*

Warning: There will be pools of blood. The tongue will soak up the blood, like an already wet sponge. Some of the blood will leak down the chin and down the neck, like traces of fingertips. Some of the blood will pool in the mouth, leaving no option but to swallow it. It is thick and warm like metallic honey. It coats the throat like warm, rusty cough syrup. Remember to swallow often in order to avoid choking. You will get used to swallowing. Swallowing causes complacency. Taking away the ability to speak is something they are good at. Opening the lips is not a good idea. It is best to wait until the blood crusts over the lips like glue. New skin will form, and the mouth will not be a mouth but a scar. The tongue will shrivel and shrink until it is able to be swallowed.

Resources

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"Rescue" by
Rowan Wilson

Little Bird

Rowan Wilson

Out the cul-de-sac, under the hole in the fence, past the scrap yard, and down the railroad tracks, there was a thicket of woods.

It was no great forest as it once had been before the buildings outnumbered the trees, but that fragmented scrap remained for Robin to play in. It wasn't preserved as a park, nor an outline of farmland. The land must have belonged to someone, but if it once had a name, it was lost. Yet it remained, looming as if in stubborn defiance to the shorn countryside at the edge of the suburbs.

Robin liked to wander out there when they got home from school, much to the distress of their parents. They were a small child, undersized, overzealous. Their loose, light curls always came home woven with twigs, eyes bright with a mix of wonder and unwarranted intelligence, lugging around a bag larger than themselves.

"There's bugs out there. Nasty, bitey things," their parents would always caution, setting Robin inside on the couch with all manner of bright plastic doodads to play with; their mother

with her tightly wound bun and feverish amount of blush, their father with his wrinkled tie and peach fuzz mustache that looked to Robin as if he had spilled something on his face.

"And we can't have you wandering off anywhere you want, little bird; you're all we've got." And there they left Robin, with the spinner and the noisemaker, and the loud bright thing that talked at them.

Robin liked spring. Robin liked mud, and rain, and flowers. Robin thought their parents were full of it. If they were a bird, why didn't they have wings?

When Robin was six, they read a book about the fairies. They knew all about magic, about the way the world used to be, though it seemed everyone in the world wanted to smother as much of it as possible. No wonder the fairies wouldn't be seen anymore, though Robin wished they would. They had to be real. Robin wanted to believe so at least. Desperately.

If Robin looked hard enough, it seemed they flitted just out of sight. That was how it went. If you truly believed, if you were true and kind and sought them out they would appear. Someday, they would. Straining from parental hands, Robin would stare into the woods and know something stared back.

Only children really never had much to do. It was a common thing to get stuck in one's head. Robin was content not to talk with the other kids at school, since none of them ever wanted to hear what they had to say. Robin wandered around trying to get lost, looking for fairies.

It was a wet April day, and they were making Robin sit nice while they got in trouble.

"Please, dear." Their mother was on the phone when Robin got pulled in by the scruff of their neck. "You have to stop going off on your own. I know you like to play by yourself, but what if you get lost? What if you get hurt?"

Mother played the phone on speaker, and Robin crossed their arms. "Mama, I saw them. There were lights in the woods, and I was going to find them, but then Missus Katie had to come and ruin things."

Silence, then a sigh. "Do we have to go get you checked out?"

"No no no no no," Robin swung their legs, restless and red-eyed. The office was a grey, dry space, a buzzing white light full of dust above their head that made them sick. Inside made them feel bad and bad and bad. "I promise they were real."

Robin had the feeling that no one believed them.

Maybe they were a changeling after all. Their ears were round and they didn't have a tail or hooves or wings and well. There were pictures of them when they were born (they were gross). But everyone thought there was something wrong with Robin anyway.

"It's dangerous," their mother said again. "Woods are for animals, not children."

Robin knew what they were doing. They weren't stupid. They were already seven years old, already three-and-a-half feet tall. They knew how to live outside, better than they could here. Every time they were left alone, they thought about running away and never coming back.

All the stories were like that. Long lost princesses and little boys and changelings - if you got far enough into the wilderness, something magical would happen. A door, a circle, a collection of lights. And the fairies would know you were meant to be there, and they would take you in, and you would never have to go to school or write your times tables or sit in the car watching traffic ever again.

Robin decided then that they wouldn't be going home today. Or if all went well, ever again.

They had an extra big sandwich in their bag and plenty of good rocks and sticks. They had shiny things found on the ground, in case the fairies wanted anything. It had rained, so they were wearing their yellow raincoat, the big red stumpy rain boots with the cartoon flower pattern, and the wooden sword they'd gotten for their birthday and which they weren't supposed to bring to school. Everything they needed.

When school let out, they waved with a smile at the building, skipping madly away along the weedy sidewalk. "Goodbye, elementary! Goodbye brick wall! Goodie-bye, houses!"

"Where are you going?" a girl asked them as they skipped along. She was tall, brown-haired and mousy, her pink backpack filled with something that wriggled.

"I'm going to live with the fairies," Robin answered matter-of-factly, slinging their bag over their shoulder and smiling. Then they waved at the girl and left. The girl watched them for a long time until they disappeared.

The walk was not long in terms of distance, but through backways and secret alleys, it took nearly an hour. Robin thought it would be best to stay away from the big sidewalks,

sneaking instead through backyards and around fences, a daring adventure through the suburbs. It would be no good if someone snitched on them. There were plenty of things to worry about without nosy neighbors getting in the way.

They smiled wide when they reached the last yard at the edge of town, disappearing through the pruned wall of evergreens and slinking under the hole in the fence. They'd marked it with old pencils last year, stabbed into the ground like a set of battlements, Robin's secret castle.

A tight squeeze, and freedom, their heart pounding in excitement as they skipped off along the ditch, geese flying overhead. The train tracks were choked with grasses and weeds, following the sun off into the distance.

Robin was a proper runaway now. And into the woods they would disappear, the great thicket of trees that grew like a fungus past the field. The small copse appeared a lone wood, and from every other angle remained one, but if one were to stand on the hill past the old mill, trees would spill out past the edges of the horizon, great and looming, not a road or house in sight. This was not on any map, for no one ever looked out past the old mill but those with no interest in spilling its secret.

Wide eyes and red boots slipped away past the edge of the trees, and the world quieted to nothing and everything, muffled.

There was a path to follow for a while, narrow and muddy, as the light glistened through the canopy. The forest hummed with idle chatter. Robin's eyes and ears opened to receive.

A stream of water bubbled along somewhere near and faded in the croak of frogs and birds' calls and ever the rustling wind, alive with mercy. It stared at them as they stared at it, branches reaching down to caress the little thing that wandered into the edges of its realm.

Robin pulled a mossy stick from the ground and tested its strength, watching as the bugs abandoned it with the dirt shaken to the forest floor. A great big smile, and they were off into the shadow, squeaking and clinking and humming along.

That was the thing about the wilderness, of fog and cricket chirps and birdsong - it quieted when a human came near. You could only hear and see from a distance, to vanish if you came close to touching. But eventually, if Robin stayed long enough, they would be accepted. Then maybe they would find a fairy in the palm of their hand, luminous like a firefly.

Of course, fairies only came out at night, and much farther into the woods than this.

The woods hummed and blinked, beckoning them forward, full of hands and little bones. Robin sang a song of adventure and great battles, loud and off-key, eyes for the great log that lay across the hill and path. Mother said those were meant to show you weren't supposed to go any farther. So instead, Robin clambered onto the massive mossy trunk with its rich ochre and the red grave dirt of beetles, burrowing under their fingernails.

They fancied themselves Peter Pan as they performed a great balancing act over the leaf-laden chasm, jumping down to mossy ground on the other side.

Path successfully abandoned, Robin beamed. A sense of great vastness laid out around them as they ventured farther under the great canopy. Bright afternoon turned to spun gold, shadows lengthening, trees growing taller, then gold to copper, and copper to pink, a cool mist pouring from the rolling hills.

They must be looking for me now, Robin thought with delight. *But I've never been this far in before.* Robin didn't have a clue where they had come from now, and the idea delighted them. Trees faded into a magic pink fog. It seemed much bigger than it had upon going into the forest, and no sound of a lawnmower had ever reached these trees. Legs growing weary, they sat upon a stump and ate their sandwich, pulling their raincoat close, red boots swinging dirt-covered from the perch.

Where would they end up now, if they were to emerge somewhere new? Robin sat still. Some things edged closer to them now - bugs and frogs, blinking lights, somewhere far off.

Robin hummed and inspected the ground, enamored with twilight's revelations. Now that they were to live with the fairies, they ought to look the part of one! They picked twigs and leaves from the ground, their favorite yellow and red ones from last season, mussing their hair and sticking them behind their ears like antlers. There was plenty of dirt on their face and hands, and they laughed with delight, twirling and twirling until they grew dizzy and fell to the earth with a hard thump.

On the ground before them was a bundle of mushrooms, white and small, meandering past the edge of their vision. When they stood their eyes widened, stepping back and letting out a cry of joy.

A ring of mushrooms, a ring! Would the fairies come now, and adorn them with flowers

and laughter and spirit them away? Robin knew they would come. Or was the world now changed? Would they have to wander on and seek them out on some great adventure far away?

The pink filtered through the trees faded to a purple-blue. They stood not minding the stinging scrapes on their knees or the dirt clinging to the wound. The blood remained forgotten in the circle, an accidental offering.

Yet, the wind picked up and there were whispers in the woods, night things coming out one by one.

The lights, the lights! The ones she had seen on the edge of the trees when their mother had dragged them away. They were flitting and far away, past three more hills, blinking, small, like a city of fairies ready to welcome Robin home.

"Hello, fairies! I'm coming, fairies!" They called and set off running down the hill faster than was wise, tripping and rolling the rest of the way, finally landing against a tree.

Disoriented and dizzy, Robin drew herself up again, skirt ripped and stained, mouth falling open.

There were bones near where they lay in the dirt. Small and delicate, the length of their hand. Fascinated, Robin picked them up, threading them through their braid with the twigs and leaves. There were bugs and bits of fur near them, but the bone was clean.

Should they give these to the fairies? Would the fairies like these? From what Robin knew, they liked ground objects. They stuffed them in their bag with the rest, quickly setting off to the thicket where the lights flickered, seeming somehow farther than before.

Brushing their bangs back, they crawled through the brush and grew ever smaller as the forest grew ever larger. There was a great thicket of thorns before Robin, and they ducked under one of the boughs, laughing to discover the tunnel of some animal just big enough to squeeze through. They fell to their hands and knees and crawled inside, feeling in the dark and eventually popping up on the other side, spitting out a leaf.

Had it really been such a long tunnel? The remainder of twilight had faded, and a deep, wet green soaked into the earth, taller trees than Robin had ever seen reaching far above, the sky all but lost. The ferns and moss brushed their thighs and they shivered, wishing they had thought to wear leggings or pants. Their red boots sank into the mud, flower pattern caked in

dirt. Was this the way? Which was the way back?

It was surely bedtime now, but that wouldn't stop Robin. It wouldn't ever again, though their knees still bled a dull sting, and they wished they hadn't had bare legs. It was rather cold, still April. Quite dark, and they were tired.

Where were the lights again? They still flickered in the distance, growing closer or farther. Robin smiled imagining warm hearths and tiny beds and little homes in these giant trees. Wings, they thought, they would rather like wings.

Surely this couldn't be the same small woods Robin wandered into? They must have walked miles. Or was this all because of the fairy circle? Shouldn't they come up and greet Robin, give them something warm and full of glistening nectar that filled them with sleepy hope?

The wind fell, and there was a full silence in which Robin clung to their bag of bones and shivered. "Hello?" they called out to the fairies, or whoever might hear. "Hello? It's dark and I'm cold. My name is Robin. Are you there?"

The trees loomed, and there were faint purple lights at the edges of their vision, calling once again. There was something near, a rustle in the leaves, something just past the clearing, just into the dark. A shadow, a glow, a whisper.

Robin.

Was that their mother? That sounded familiar, at least--

"Yes, yes, it's me!" they announced, weary and lost, wandering aimlessly then speeding through the trees and searching for any glimpse of the world outside. Footstep after footstep, a boot lost in the mud, hair flying by in the dark.

And suddenly there was nothing under their foot, a great mouth of darkness. . . and Robin fell headlong. A high scream tore from their throat. A sharp, thick *crack* shot through their tiny body.

Robin's eyes opened, wide and terrified. A terrible pain throbbed against their head and leg. They found breath in short gasps. When they raised their hand to their head, it came away wet with a hot, dark liquid. There was water all around Robin, cold, running water, and the blood washed away, black in the blue dark, a constant, diluted stream.

It was very cold. Robin's leg went the wrong way. Moonlight shone far above them. They

only had one boot, and their bag had disappeared. The earth rose far above them in a dark valley surrounded by deep, hungry green.

"Help," Robin sobbed, hair plastered to their face, twigs tangled in curls. "Someone. Please."

But they had wandered far, and they did not know where they were. No one would find Robin. That was the point, of being a runaway, of getting lost and. . .

Robin sobbed, shivering, and felt so very small and mistaken. Why did they follow the lights? Why were they this stupid? What if there were no little flower fairies to bring them home? The forest seemed far too dark for anything nice like that. What if there was no magic at all? What if they had just wandered out here looking for nothing and gotten themselves killed?

It was very dark and Robin could hear a rustle in the bushes. Silent and terrified, Robin stopped wondering if it was magic and started worrying that it was a wolf. Wolves were real, wolves were big. Robin's head ached and they could not run.

The wind picked up, the whole world shook, and darkness grew in the trees.

Robin's mouth fell open, enveloped by a great shadow.

Above Robin loomed a figure, nearly nine feet tall, slender and regal, beautiful and terrible. With deliberation, the creature turned its head. Its face was elongated and alien, nose thin and well-shaped, ears pointed and adorned with jewels. Its lips were dark and green. Its skin shone like a dead thing's, yawning with rotting holes. Its hair fell past its waist in immense waves. Upon its head sat a great pointed crown, jet black and woven with spiderwebs. Long antlers mounted upon its forehead.

When it smiled at Robin, its eyes were large and entirely black. On its shoulders hung a great mantle of moss and mushrooms, a massive cloak falling to the forest floor, deep green and midnight blue.

The great creature bent down slowly. Its hands were long and slender, all tendons and pointed black talons. It extended one kindly, with lingering pity as a child would to an injured, wriggling ant.

Hello, little one.

Its voice was deep and thin, winding, silver-tongued, laden with some accent as one mimics a cat's meow. It blinked, lashes heavy with shimmering dust. It bent its head to the side

in curiosity, rather farther than appeared natural, laying a taloned hand on its numb, twisted leg.

It appears you are broken.

Robin's eyes wavered in terrified awe. They could do nothing but nod. It hurt.

The ancient, beautiful thing nodded, face contorting into a pout of sympathy. It occurred then to Robin that the figure's shining black eyes were like a deer's. Alike and not. It frightened them, for there was a sentient being behind those eyes. But not one they could understand.

I may be able to stitch you back into one piece, it offered leaning in towards the small child. For a price, of course. But your name and your blood, you have already offered to me willingly.

The being knelt to the trickling stream and scooped up a handful of clear water, marbled with ruby blood in its pale hands. It raised the pool to its dark, full lips and drank deeply, blood falling to its neck from its mouth, which parted to reveal long, sharp teeth.

Satisfied, its hands returned to its dark lap, submerged in the stream. *Your name. Robin, did you say?*

Robin nodded once again, voiceless, and the toothed thing bowed its head. *I will treasure it graciously. And I will fix you, little bird.*

Little bird. Who else used to call them that? Robin could not remember. The woods were deep and dark, and they had one red boot on, the other foot bare and dirty.

Robin's voice would not obey them, and they clung to themselves on the river bank, blood leaving their body like breath. After what seemed like a century, they spoke haltingly, voice drowned. "Who. . . what. . . are you?"

The creature moved like a tree, feet tangled with gnarled, feeling roots, robes leaking dust and rich black dirt. Slowly, it knelt down. Shoulders adorned in death caps and shelf fungi, it enveloped Robin like a blanket. It took Robin's small face in its hands, cold but live, bell sleeves of nature's green lace draping to the forest floor.

Why, I am Oberon, it answered calmly, King of the Fae. And you are the child creature who has stumbled into my domain.

The king raised his head, heavy with crown and antlers, long strings of vine and green algae. In the blue-green depths of the forest, the king smiled.

You were looking for me, were you not?



Special Feature Graphic Novel





Not An Angel

Jesse Lee Kercheval

THIS IS WHERE I GO AT NIGHT



IT'S NOT A DREAM

I KNOW EVERY STREET, EVERY HOUSE IN THE CITY



WHOLE DAYS AND NIGHTS PASS HERE DURING
ONE NIGHT IN WHAT I USED TO THINK OF
AS THE WORLD



THE BIRDS HERE ARE BIGGER THAN PEOPLE





BUT THERE ARE ALSO HUMANS WITH WINGS

I KNOW



I AM ONE

AT NIGHT



I FLY



IT ISN'T A DIFFICULT

TONIGHT
WHEN YOU GO TO BED



STRETCH YOUR ARMS WIDE



AND WHEN YOU GET TO THE CITY



YOU TOO WILL HAVE WINGS





Contributor Biographies





CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

TAYLOR ARCAND is from Marion, IA. She is a senior majoring in English-Professional Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a minor in Creative Writing. She is currently the President, Academic Chairwoman, and Sisterhood Chairwoman for her sorority, Gamma Phi Beta. Upon her graduation in December 2023, she aims to pursue a career in editing and publishing.

AVRUM BERG is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville where he studies Mechanical Engineering. In his free time, he likes to lead Dungeons and Dragons games and read fantasy novels.

KELSEY BIGELOW is a professional poet who graduated from UW-Platteville in 2017. She has since self-published her debut chapbook, *Sprig of Lilac*, in 2018, released a spoken word album, *Depression Holders and Secret Keepers*, in 2021, and has been published in Backchannels Journal and Z Publishing House. Find Kelsey at kelkaybpoetry.com.

PAUL BOLSTAD grew up in the Driftless, and his family lives on the land in rural Virowua purchased in 1904 by his great-grandfather when he arrived in Wisconsin from Norway. He is a 1998 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a 2003 MFA graduate of the University of Maryland, and a public high school teacher in Montgomery County, MD.

KAZ BRESNAN is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in English Education and a minor in Creative Writing. He hopes to be an educator at a high school level. In his free time, he enjoys writing and reading fantasy novels and short stories.

LISA CHU is a recent college graduate. She hopes that she will be able to continue producing poems in her busy life.

BREANNA CISKETTI is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Agribusiness and an emphasis in Communications. She hopes to be a manager for an agricultural business with her degree. In her free time, she enjoys reading fiction novels and taking long walks.

ROBERTA CONDON is a Wisconsin artist with a gallery and studio in Portage, WI. She has had

a show touring for the last few years about the loss of the family farm. Her pieces are part of a series she's working titled "A Hollow Boned Muse" which speaks to the restorative nature of birds at a time when, in her mid-sixties, she is tired of still fighting the same social conditions she fought in the early '70's.

JUSTICE CORPORA is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Superior with a major in Writing. They hope to freelance copy edit for other writers as well as continue writing their own works. In their free time, Justice enjoys reading fiction, writing lyrical poems, and playing the keyboard and guitar.

JAKOB CRIDELICH is a non-traditional undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, majoring in Mechanical Engineering with a minor in English. Between studies and his service in the National Guard he finds time to enjoy fishing, writing, exercise, and tinkering. He hopes to land a job in marketing or test engineering after graduation.

ARRIELLE ECKHARDT is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in English and an emphasis in Professional Writing. She hopes to work in social media or journalism. In her free time, she enjoys listening to true crime podcasts.

CLAUDIA ENZ is an English major from Platteville, Wisconsin. She has recently made peace with the fact that everything she writes, in one way or another, is a love poem.

ELLA FLATTUM is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Environmental Science and Conservation and a minor in Biology. She hopes to become a Water Conservationist or a Conservation Officer with this degree. In her free time, she loves to play hockey, weightlift, and ski.

SHERMAN FUNMAKER is a proud member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, a tribal elder, and a member of the Bear Clan. In 2006, he graduated from UW-Baraboo-Sauk County with an associate degree in English. While attending school there, he was one of the founders of *Spirit Lake Review*. He went in as a business major, but changed to English after discovering he had some writing skills.

KATHRYN GAHL'S works have won numerous

awards, including The Hal Prize for Fiction and Poetry, and the Lorine Niedecker Award. *The Velocity of Love* received an Outstanding Achievement Award from The Wisconsin Library Association. Other books include *Messengers of the Gods* and *Hard Life, Hard Love*, and *The Yellow Toothbrush*.

MEGAN GUOIN is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Biology with an emphasis in Botany. She loves plants, lemonade, and music. Megan also enjoys reading and writing in her free time.

MADDIE HANSEN was born and raised in Baraboo, WI. Not only was she an editor for *Spirit Lake Review* last year, but also a contributor. Art has made up her entire life ever since she could lift a pencil, and it will continue to be her life until she loses the motor functions required to lift a pencil.

MICHAEL HEATH is proud to call beautiful Baraboo, WI his adopted home. He enjoys photographing Sauk County and state landscapes. A long-time social worker in Wisconsin, Michael currently works as a Resource Specialist at the Coalition for Children, Youth and Families where he supports foster, adoptive, and relative caregivers throughout Wisconsin.

ROBERT (BOB) JOHNSON is currently a paraeducator at an elementary school. He was born, raised, and still lives in the Driftless Area of southwest Wisconsin. The only other place he has lived was, for a brief time, in Baltimore. Robert's writing interests include sense of place, the effects of war and trauma, addiction, quantum, and human connection.

MIKE JONES is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville majoring in psychology. He hopes to continue pursuing a career in psychology as a social worker as he prepares to graduate and attend graduate school at Clarke University in Dubuque for his Masters in Social Work (MSW). In his free time, he enjoys writing and performing music and Mixed Martial Arts.

JESSE LEE KERCHEVAL is a writer, translator, and visual artist. Her graphic essays won awards from *New Letters* and the *New Ohio Review*. Her latest book is the poetry collection, *I Want to Tell You* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023).

KATHY KORB lives in SW Wisconsin. She

started working to improve her art in April 2020. She works mainly in mixed media, which she loves. She was drawn to crafting handmade journals and books with hand dyed papers and fabrics. She also enjoys spending time with her family and cat, cooking, gardening, reading, and drinking tea.

MICHAEL LAMBERT is the author of *Circumnavigation*, (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2014), loosely based on self-propelled travel in North America. Recent works of his appeared in *Bayou Magazine*, *Timber Journal*, and *Queen Mob's Teahouse*. Michael is a graduate of the University of Alabama's M.F.A. program in creative writing. He lives and works in Wisconsin.

JOSEPH LAMBIE is an undergraduate of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. He is an Electrical Engineering major with a minor in Creative Writing. He hopes to use his major as a vector for achieving his dreams by funding a writing project he hopes will come to fruition. He also enjoys eating food, skiing, and instrumental music.

MARIO LOPRETE lives in a world that he shapes to his liking. He does this through virtual, pictorial, and sculptural movements, transferring his experiences and photographing reality through his mind's filters. He is a graduate of Accademia of Belle Arti, Catanzaro (Italy).

JOHN MARKESTAD lives near Baraboo and has been a past editor and contributor to *Spirit Lake Review* magazine. He and his wife and best friend have been together for 53 years. John is semi-retired and spends his free time writing sci-fi novels (nine to date), rock climbing, and putzing in his woodworking shop.

MICHAEL MARTONE is recently retired after forty years of teaching creative writing at Iowa State, Harvard, Syracuse, and Alabama Universities as well as Warren Wilson College. His most recent books are *The Complete Writings of Art Smith*, *The Bird Boy of Fort Wayne*, Edited by Michael Martone published by BOA Editions and *Plain Air: Sketches from Winesburg, Indiana* published by Baobab Press. He has published a dozen books of fiction and four books of essays. He has edited half a dozen books of fiction and nonfiction.

MICOL McSWEENEY is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Forensic Investigation, and plans

on minoring in Psychology. She hopes to become an investigator on crime scenes to collect evidence and submit it to a lab with her degree. In her free time, she enjoys reading, specifically poetry, and hanging out with her friends.

RICHARD MONINSKI is a painter residing in Mineral Point, WI, a small town with a vibrant artist community. His work has been exhibited nationally. He is often seen drawing on his iPad, but when he is not, he directs Green Lantern Studios, a gallery of fine art and Handicrafts.

MATT MUTIVA is a regular guy who writes when he can. And when he can't, he writes anyway. If he's lucky, they'll call it poetry.

SKYLAR OTEY is attending the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and majoring in Psychology with an emphasis in Substance Abuse Counseling. She plans on attending law school in the future and moving back home to Illinois.

COLEE PASINATO is from Waunakee, Wisconsin and currently lives in Platteville, Wisconsin. Her educational experiences in graphic design, art history, and business administration guide her artistic, professional, and personal work. In addition to graphic design, she also enjoys ceramics, photography and traveling to new places.

HAILEY PRAGER is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville pursuing a major in Environmental Engineering and a minor in Creative Writing. Her goal is to have a career in water resources after graduation. In her free time, she enjoys reading and writing fiction, as well as going for long walks with her dog.

JAMES ROBERTS is the author of six previous collections of poetry, the most recent being *One Hundred Breaths*, which was selected as the winner of the 2020 Portage Press Poetry Book Contest. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin where he hosts the annual Winter Festival of Poetry and dreams of having a musical he has written produced on stage.

ELIZABETH SCHMITT is a senior at UW-Platteville pursuing an undergraduate degree in Criminal Justice with minors in Creative Writing, English, Political Science, and Women's and Gender Studies. She enjoys reading, writing, and singing in her free time.

GRACE SEMAAN is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with majors in Chemistry and Forensic Investigation. She hopes to work on antibacterial biochemistry research to change the field of medicine. In her down time, she enjoys hammocking, reading, and listening to music.

RED THIESENHUSEN is a fourth-year Psychology major at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. They have always enjoyed reading poetry, as well as finding new ways to write their own poems. In their free time, they enjoy spending time with their cat and binge-watching shows, new and old.

MARY ELLEN TILLER is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Criminal Justice. She hopes to pursue a path in the legal field after graduating from a future law school. In her free time, she enjoys writing personal poems as well as socializing at events.

CONNOR TROCKE is a recent graduate in Engineering Physics from UW-Platteville. His dad inherited a fluorescent rock collection from his grandfather, leading them to go on rock hunting trips all over America. Recently, he became interested in using ultraviolet light to find fluorescence in other things and discovered several succulents glow brightly in different colors. Find him at Connarchy.com

JEFF WEILAND is a graduate of both UW-Baraboo-Platteville and UW-Platteville in the 1980's and has always enjoyed photography.

ALISSA WHEELER is a senior at UW-Platteville majoring in Professional Writing with a minor in Spanish. She has always been passionate about poetry and often writes in her free time. Alissa has been published by both the *Exponent* at UW-Platteville as well as the *America Library of Poetry*. Upon graduation, she hopes to translate for Latino immigrants in the court system and freelance write on the side about her interests, which include controversial issues and civil rights.

ROWAN WILSON has been getting into trouble in nature for over 18 years. It was worth it, despite living with chronic Lyme disease. He's a proud owner of a handless plastic skeleton named Azrael Bartholomew Wilhemlson of the Western Hills (adopted in a Milwaukee thrift shop) and two cats.