

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself



Issue 1

November 2022

Alice Says
Go
Fuck
Yourself



ISSUE 1

It's A New Season (For Motherfuckers)

November 2022

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself is a quarterly digital magazine of art & literature,
published by Agape Editions.

Editors: Fox Henry Frazier & Cee Martinez
Designers: Sarah Reck & Fox Henry Frazier



EDITORS' NOTES

Hi all!

This magazine exists in most part because my dear partner in crime, Fox Henry Frazier was keen to collaborate on a project that we both could crow about. We want to be the magazine you look forward to reading while you're having your hot morning beverage or late night toddy. We want you to be proud that your creation is on our pages and most of all we want to be accessible enough that you're not afraid to submit to us. Even if you do get a rejection from us, always feel free to keep submitting for future issues.

I can't thank Fox enough for inspiring me to hop onto the creation and launch of this magazine. We spend so much time laughing and whispering about the "what ifs" of publishing that we may as well walk past the signs that ask us if we actually *should*.

And with that I leave you to the reading of this issue and a profound quote from Jerri Blank of *Strangers with Candy*—

"Maybe it's time to stop not doing what you pretended you can do and can't, and start doing the thing that you can't do, but can no longer pretend that you can."

Because I think that quote.... Sums it all up.

Much love,

Cee

EDITORS' NOTES

Dear Everyone,

I'm delighted with what we've created together. The submissions I've read (and I've read them all) over the past few months have made me laugh aloud in delight so many times — and, on occasion, gotten me a little misty. More often than not, they've made me remember how delicious & wild & fucked-up & strange & so full of things this entire world is, and how it's all so beautiful that it makes me a little sad I'm going to die someday.

So, thank you—to everyone whose work we've accepted, and everyone whose work we haven't yet been able to accept—because creating this incarnation of *Alice* has been such a tender & joyous adventure so far. I hope that everyone who peruses this issue has a similar experience.

As for my partner in crime, Cee Martinez, let me just say that I am filled with ecstatic love for her, and that we are all richer for her presence in this world. She's such a special person. And she is also, as it turns out, super fun to co-run a crazy outliers' arts & lit mag with. *Alice* has been a trip and a half so far, and I couldn't have asked for a better co-pilot. #ChaosMuppetsUnite

All good things,
Fox

CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

Title page

Cover art print page: *Alice Holds Back the Tide*, by Donna Vorreyer

Letters from the Editors

Table of contents

Theme Poem: "It's A New Season (For Motherfuckers),"	1
by Samantha Duncan	
<i>Sun And Honey Time</i> , by Donna Vorreyer	
<i>mundane object: the porch</i> , by E.A. Midnight	3

POETRY

Paul David Adkins	7
Jordi Alonso	10
Alessandra Bava	12
Ace Boggess	14
Dustin Brookshire	15
Melissa Eleftherion Carr	18
Alex Carrigan	23
Juliet Cook	26
Tina Marie Cox	28
Linda Crate	29
Samantha Duncan	30
Sophie Ewh	31
Attracta Fahy	33
Nicole Flaherty	38
Stella Fridman-Hayes	40
Adelina Gonzales	43
Anne Graue	48
Barracuda Guarisco	49
Sarah Kain Gutowski	51
Jay Halsey	53
Jack Henry	59
Allison Joseph	63
Natasha Kessler	64
Hillary Leftwich	65
Jennifer MacBain-Stephens	67
Sally McHugh	69
Sarah Nichols	71
Diarmuid O Maolalai	73
Kay Osborne	76
Ken Poyner	77

CONTENTS

Kimberly Ann Priest	78
Kailey Tedesco	81
Rodrigo Toscano	82
Joanna Valente	84
Jessica Walsh	90
<i>Image 0</i> , by Jim Zola	93

FICTION

Nina D'arcangela	97
M. Pelin	105
<i>Blue Kaiju</i> , by Grace Noel	122
JP Relph	123
Letitia Trent	129
Jennifer Walker	151
<i>River River Dawn</i> , by Donna Vorreyer	158

NONFICTION

Eleanor Nesimoglu	161
Alyson Shelton	167

FLASH

Shannon Hardwick	175
Karen Cline-Tardiff	177
Mathew Gostelow	179
Jude Potts	186
Sarah Royston	189
<i>Green Kaiju</i> , by Grace Noel	194

FROM THE EICS

Personality Quiz!	195
<i>untitled</i> , by Keisha-Gaye Anderson	211
Interview with Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir	212
<i>See You In Hell, Cheeto</i> , by Curtis Bergeson	224

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Donna Vorreyer



it's a new season (for motherfuckers)

parts of me still aren't soft
parts of him layers

will he always be will he
will me in network

to keep my four-letter word
training *only* *just*

actually unknown danger
a new type of latte

moves through me regardless
and he'll look like the dream

in the backs of my eyes
under his fingernails

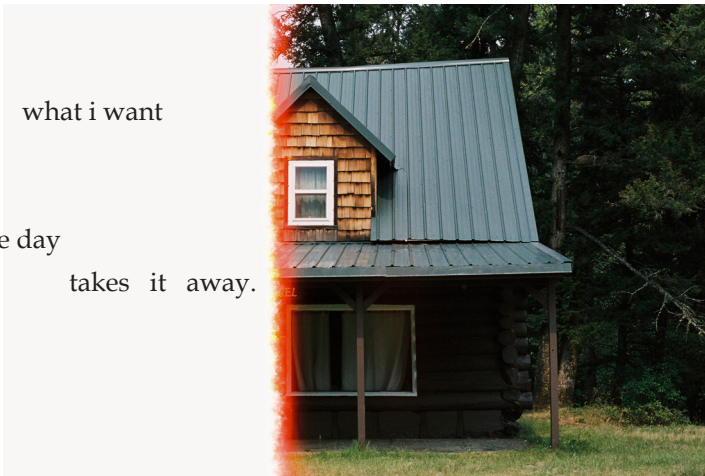
he has no name
but a name for me

mundane object: the porch

look back up
at the blue sky
that is always this shade
when held against anything
that loves it
the poplar's bones reach
into that de-tethered ocean
on twig tips
blossoms begin
to show their skirt colors
as questions you cannot answer
before catching fire
in the mid-day heat
all the small birds
crowd the limbs
casually conversing
about last night's killing

i wake up
knowing what i want

the day
 takes it away.



POETRY

**Florida Man Carl Robert Brown, Who Killed Eight People
in a Miami Machine Shop Shooting on August 20th, 1982,
Left a Tape for Posthumous Broadcast, Claiming “I Am
Logos”**

Let me tell you. Let me beyond the beyond of understanding
to the point.

I am indestructible, in that
I know the Russians, the Cubans:
they live around here.

It is the logical thing.
But I am on.

To them.

Let me tell you the good things.
In your head, the bad things.

I will control the universes.
God’s voices echo through the grand canyon of myself:

*from the mountains,
to the prairies,
to the oceans
white with foam!*

The coffee cans of dirt:
I will spill them on my neighbors’ steps.
The neighbors will open their doors.

I have news for them.

**Florida Man Joseph Raymond Greer, Convicted of
Murdering Hollywood, Fla. Police Officer Henry “Hank”
T. Minard During A Mayer’s Jewelry Store Robbery on
November 18, 1972, Escaped from Prison and Fled to
Tulsa, Oklahoma, Where He Took Seven Hostages in a
Supermarket on November 18, 1982, Before He Released
Them and Killed Himself**

Everyone wants to die one day. Their brain waves send out feelers to the universe.
The brain, it does what it wants; most people don’t even know.
The brain does it behind their backs; it wants to see if there are takers.

I killed the cop because his brain sent a message,
and my buddy and I were picked to do his bidding.

It’s hard to explain.
Otherwise, we’d have been watching Miami and Notre Dame on Channel 7.

I talked to the hostages about jail. They cried. They knew
I was a good guy.

I made a video in the supermarket office. I said,
Even though you’re in prison, you’re still a human.
I said I wouldn’t go back,
my brain flickering in solitary. It buzzed and crackled in code:

surround this man with nice people. Let him talk.
Surround him with good food and some wine. And the police –
let them be patient.

**Arthur Herman Bremer, After Being Approached by
Prison Officials Bearing an Entreaty Submitted by
George C. Wallace's Son Seeking a Face-to-Face Meeting
to Discuss the Possibility of Forgiveness Over Twenty
Years After Bremer's Assassination Attempt of Wallace,
Responds by Howling Like a Chimpanzee and Jumping
Around His Cell**

They slid the letter, addressed to *Mr. Bremer*,
beneath the cell gate
and hustled away.

*Who's Mr. Bremer?
Who's he?
Who? Who? Who?*

I have tried to explain what forgiveness is.

Allow me, again:

*One day I shot a man
who deserved it,
deserved to die.
And he didn't.*

My cell has a toilet
perfect for fan mail,
for prayers sent by old women.

There's a white sheet on the floor.
I wipe my boots with it.

Forgiveness is a flower,
a flower, I tell you.

58 ὁ μέλλεις, δός

for Phoebe Carter

Myrsillos of Methymna the historian
inscribed in memory where Orpheus
washed up once Maenads tore his head and hands
off of his body. The dismembered poet
kept playing melodies and singing too.
They buried him in Antissa: a cave
where prophecies in verse began to flow
eclipsing Delphi's fame for oracles
until Apollo who shoots arrows far
forbade the spirit of his son to speak
beyond the mouths of his initiates.
"Give *what you mean to*, but be careful when
you give so much that you neglect your needs.
Even the Muses take their time to play."

141 εὖ πάσχε ὥς θνητός

A basket of acanthus will adorn
your grave one day. Your name, incised on stone,
will be the record that you walked nearby
and that you loved the way that fennel flowers
grew in the fields not far away from home.
If you are lucky, your name will be said
long after you have died by people who
have not yet known the scent of fennel crushed
between their fingertips, or in their bread
because they won't be born until you die.
Do all you can while mortal and alive,
and if you win undying glory, great.
If you do not, don't feel despair and cry,
your voice has made your friends and loves feel safe.

Love Letter to Anne Sexton #27

You have turned on the tap, flooded our room.
Petals rise from the floor to the surface, flowers the
color of ultramarine ash and madder lake glide past you,
as you float on your back like Ophelia singing her heart out
drifting down the shadowy river. Through the porthole I see
clouds shift in the sky reflecting in our waters. Your face clouds
too retaining its smile of Sphinx as you play with the goldfishes. The
wallpaper sinks in maelstroms of blue. You catch your breath, hold on to
the four-poster bed swirling around, climb on it waving your mermaid tail. You
are the Queen of Metamorphoses. "Oblivion has so many knots," you say. I fear
the Black Knight, riding a pale horse, crossing the ford right now ready to drag you
away.

Love Letter to Anne Sexton #35

To Gaia C.

You have been filling our lair with
Alice in Wonderland's "Eat-me" pills.
You have asked the Seven Dwarfs
to move in their glass coffin.
You smile when you tell me: "I'm
done. I need a beauty sleep as long
as Cinderella's." I cannot keep lying
to you. Life is not a fairytale. Nor
a gingerbread house covered in frosting
and candy we can feed on until the end
of our days. The hag will lock us in her
cellar and feast on your body. They have
lost the mold for Prince Charming. But,
I would wear the seven-league boots to
rescue you from the ivory tower where
they have locked you in to write poem
after poem. I will climb the dark ladder
of hair to free you from your demons.
I watch you pour tonight's Soup of
Grief in the glass slipper. I cannot keep
lying to you. Life is not a fairytale.
Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo.

Notes for My Biographer

I'd like to say getting older has left me prone
to tedium. My days robbing stagecoaches
have ridden into sunsets of their own.
My nights of swashbuckling adventures
after leaving bars at 2 a.m. have hidden
their moons behind branches of boring trees.
Yet wasn't I always a sedentary drifter?
If you're writing the story of my life,
the book would skip hours of plucking hairs
or staring at smudges on beige or lavender walls.
I have lived within parentheses, my history
an aside. Your words will lull between sentences
until a thing happens, or another thing—
those things what might seem interesting,
breaks from routines. I notice the absence
more now that I don't distract myself
with toys or games. Perhaps I should do drugs
again or have a wild fling to set a table
for the next exciting meal. More & more,
I find I'm not hungry, although my stomach
could devour universes. That's me:
a black hole no one notices until too late,
an uneventful event horizon
waiting for matter that matters
to drop by for a visit, never leave.

Lot's Wife Barbie

Mattel told her not to look
back once she left the factory.

We know how that ended.

Never picked first for playtime,
she's a lifesaver when a recipe
calls for a pinch of salt.

Barbie's Guilty Pleasure

After Barbie gets buzzed
on Dom Pérignon
or Grey Goose dirty martinis
with three blue cheese stuffed olives,
she slips a few houses down
from her Dreamhouse,
hair pulled up in a bun,
pink scarf wrapped around her head,
wearing Livhø Retro vintage narrow cat eye sunglasses
even though the sun's been down for hours,
to wait for Lyft
under the name Star.
(Barbie doesn't drink and drive!)

She enjoys the ride
to the Taco Bell drive-thru
thinking about those first years
before she was a household name,
before the paparazzi's obsession,
pictures on TMZ, and the focus
on her measurements.

She slips the driver a notecard
with her order: Nacho BellGrande,
Cheesy Gordita Crunch,
and a Baja Blast without a straw.
(Barbie cares about sea turtles!)

She tips the driver extra
for a longer route home,
enjoys her food in peace,
stops where she won't be noticed,
recycling her plastic cup
and trashing the remaining evidence.

Barbie's Realization

after Margaret Atwood

You fit onto me
Like a shoe onto a foot

A mini pink stiletto heel
A gnawed right foot

Melissa Eleftherion Carr

Queen of Wands as Teen Girl in the Bathroom

Divine me a suborder
 Of fire gods
And I'll say I met each
 Eye
In the dark one goblet
Away from a men hellscape
One shrieking body
Over a balcony of widows
 Do you remember the abattoir
 Called high school
 They jumped & jumped over the fence
 So high high we all were
A place of perennial confinement
The carnivorous appeared with
Appendages of glamor
We felt carnal about it on the surface
 Mixing music with stomata
 Opens the pores to extimacy
 To dream was heresy
 In my flannels & Daisy Dukes
I dropped a lit match
Down my boot
Heliotrope I kept
Turning & turning to find the sun
 Hallucinating wisdoms off the cracked plastic
 Of your little wand
 Bending and bending toward my dark will & vigor
 Until I realized I was three parts autotroph
 Twist & twist little sunflower

**Queen of Swords & The Glass Sponge
(or Venus's Flower Basket)**

The Queen of Swords gets a bitter rap
Some say heart of glass spitting truths
No split hairs her clean
& cold delivery service
How her sharp tone pierces & pierces

A glass sponge is indeed an animal
despite its deep dwelling tendencies
Fused together the *six-rayed star-like silica spicules*
of the skeleton build fortress of patterns opposing predation.
The mind ices over to think of this ancient sessile Elsa

But what of the air will flow the clear boundary
A sword incises transformation
Channels the wound
Centers in the unfolding
Her tower of ice skeletons a fortress to memory

Dare she speak
Dare her cold stare
Ignite truth
In your ice chamber

All women at some point adopt armor
Protection spells a mercuric vapor
A battle cry from the rocky seafloor
Whiplike flagella that wave back & forth
Vibration of calcium carbonate & fissures of salt

Moving water through the sponge
As all water is magic & moves through us all
Engines of light in the warrior maiden
Benthic flower radiating shield
Poised to menace & heal as truth does

hardcore girls

in the pit
a purpose
i elbowed the burly, thrashed.

sweaty and glistening
tattooed and scared

i pushed dudes starting shit
ran at them from behind

with all my might
my hands stinking of them

as we neared the stage
i spat my gum

at the hollows
in their chests

ducked
when the blows came

danced hard
pent up with years of rage

becoming clear
and empty of male bodies

vacating my body
of its tyranny

little by little
power, pain
the pieces bursting

Trinity the Tuck Pumps Up Her Spirit and Her Lips

Good morning, world!
In the words of Faye Dunaway
as Joan Crawford in *Mommy Dearest*:
“Now let’s get to work!”

Baby, if you don’t got thick skin,
DON’T try out for *Drag Race*.
These kids are NASTY to the girls in the comments.
Haters aren’t buying tickets to the shows of people they hate.
They aren’t buying merch. They aren’t supporting them.

It’s completely okay to block toxic
people out of your life,
be it social media or actual reality.
You don’t owe anyone who’s negative
towards you anything.
It’s your life and your mental health,
and if it’s better for you then block away!

Why are you commenting on my shit
when you don’t follow me?
Go spread your BS somewhere else.
I swear, y’all come out of the woodwork
just to be negative.
Hate your life elsewhere.
Calm your puss.

Can we as a community stop questioning
how people feel?
That’s how THEY feel, and so there isn’t
a debate about it.
Life should be a fantasy.. reality sucks lol.

Girl, thank Gay God for the block button.
Some of these people are so annoying and so entitled.
No, you don’t get to say whatever you want
and then expect anyone to not react to it.

Bitch, you are dumb.

Block!

Don't @ me!

Block!

You are a POS!

Trinity The Block continues...

every person I block, I get younger!

I'm feeling great today!

Source: @TrinityTheTuck

Pandora Boxx After the Hinges Rust Off

I'm really over people saying shitty things to me and about me.
When people say so-n-so was a bitch or
"I met 'her' and they were not nice" or whatever.
What people seem to leave out is....
WTF did you say to them or how did you treat this queen?!?
Cuz some of you are WAY extra but then go off
saying that queen was terrible. Check. Yo. Self.

Caitlyn Jenner is absolute garbage.
Just when you think she can't
get any worse, she does.
I have also officially cursed that woman
with explosive diarrhea for the rest of 2022.
I have serious questions to ANY woman that
votes for this woman.
Or anyone that does. Trash.

When you are in an Uber and
they are driving questionably,
my only thought is:
please don't make me die in drag on the 101,
which I'll have to haunt FOREVER!!
I need to always wear a long white dress
every time I am in a car in LA though.
It's a better haunting outfit.
Vroom, vroom.

100 people can be in a room and
99 of them could say they hate me.
So I'm like... "Well, Im'ma blow that one."
And I would really turn it up.
Haha ohhhh yes!

If you just can't get enough of me:
I really need to get my Dr. Beverly Crusher look
together finally and do a Dr. Crusher drag number.
I. Love. Her.
I can NOT wait!!! So exciting!!!

Source: @ThePandoraBoxx

Fish Sticks With Hot Flashes

This body makes me increasingly uncomfortable.
The escalating scale.
The fat with a watered down cavern inside.
The loosening tissue with fish gills drying out.
The hagfish orifices turning into fossils.

I can handle my whitening hair, but
soon I won't be able to swim very far
away from deterioration. I can degrade
my body with one glance. Nothing gets better.
Everything dives underwater and stays below.

Colorful children's barrettes hurl themselves
out of my mouth like tiny grenades
to remind me I used to be small and powerful.
Now I'm filled with weak bones, hooks,
decaying fish mouth swimming in my gut.

My escalating hot flashes are juxtaposed with
cold blooded old contradictions, repeatedly
moving in circles in a little kid's swimming pool
filled with tears, but no more shark blood.

How can you have a hundred real friends?

Sometimes I feel like giving up on friendship.
Maybe none of us feel the same
even though some of us will pretend.

I don't like to play make believe
anymore. I'm not a little girl
with an entire room full of dolls

trying to convince myself they're all real
and genuine until they get so high up
that doll heads start hitting the ceiling
fan and getting knocked down and

I know I have too many dolls in my poems,
but words in poems are open
to interpretation. They're not fake dolls.

If you want to know how I really feel you can just ask me
and I'll try my best to answer or I'll write another poem
or both. You can say you don't like trying
to interpret poems, but I don't like interpreting clichés

or believing that someone loves me
when they love a hundred other people too.
Of course we can all define love in our own way,
but I trust the one who hardly loves anyone but me.

The Gardener Grows Weeds

The seeds were planted into depths
of dark rotted earth,
in carefully measured rows, and watered daily
with the sweetest tasting venom, so
the roots would run deep
through an expanse of pure night,
the spindly veins invading,
amassing into a dense, tangled web.
And there would be no mistake
with what would take hold,
at what would grow,
strong and twisted,
depleting the soil of the garden bed.
Trained, thorned tendrils reached out,
curling fingers grabbing,
searching for a nearby throat.
The weeds crept further,
assailing and crowding out rivals,
each other,
spoiling tender membranes and
choking everything lush and green,
expanding as shadows.
Sour and poisonous botanicals cultivated and
harvested by their bitter queen,
the gardener
who painted her barbed roses black.

being queer shouldn't be a death sentence

church never made me feel welcome,
fueled me with such anxiety;
led me to sit in those pews looking out
those stained glass windows
for either a prayer or answer and i never
received either —

it was a shoe that was ill fitting,
causing my toes to bleed;
but they tried to tell me that it was okay —

i buried myself down so deep
for so long
that it took me a while to blossom,
and to uncover all the pieces of me that
i had hidden in order to keep myself safe;

but i grow weary of hiding this rainbow
heart —

being queer shouldn't be a death sentence:
literal or figuratively speaking,
nor should it be a reason for someone to
disown someone they claim to love or kick
them out of the house;
and it's not a phase — this is who we are,

but all my life i was taught it was a choice
and it was wrong; but i refuse to believe either
of these things any longer.

a little goes a long way

for them on the cheeks the toenails
in the mouth which is a quiet place
to keep a flame so i canopy a scene
plaiting me at water's edge smudged
not even clean enough for the grass
in this classic mossy picturesque
so steal me wilt me please my
mouth is the most feeling kind
of thing i mustn't show roaring rusts
their opaque little hands and finger-
bones until the moon scoops
them up feeds them spoonfuls of sage
and tomorrows a viable promise
that grows infinite in small hands

Magician in the Bedroom

So darling, where do you need it?
My breedable hips make for nice support

Those hips are so breedable, Peter said
I'm always the doggy when playing house

Matthew's punk career didn't suit a housewife
These lips were in storage with the drum kit

James' drum kit was fitted with extra parts
He beat me and I curved just right for him

Curves took Justin but his girl beat me to it
I touched his belt and took him all the same

The same Chandler who was touched by Jesus
Needed a holy mother after youth group

Youth group left George averse to asking
So darling, where do you need it?

The La Brea Tar Pits

The path to the tar pits was not tarred,
nor was it surrounded by tar,
even though I promised it'd be exciting;

so I said Did you know *La Brea* means
The Tar, so this museum is called
The The Tar Tar Pits?

and he didn't laugh because I must have spoiled the joke,
months or years or ancestors ago,
before our bodies knew.

By then we were at the tar,
but I didn't know they had fences
which spoiled our plans of jumping in.

L.A. felt like they'd just let all the air
out of those thanksgiving balloons
you know, Mickey and Pikachu.

I said let's go inside, it's hot
and he said let's go inside
there's no mammoth carcass like you promised.

But I was one of the balloons
not bloated like New York makes you
but floating like those mammoth souls ascending to heaven.

George pulled me inside
Some lady said tickets are 5
it's two people in a saber tooth costume — kids might cry.

I bought the tickets but George,
whose parents live in Beverly Hills,
said he wanted to make it to the arcade.

I started crying because the only thing
I wanted to do in LA (except Disneyland)
was see the tar pits

but the only reason
I wanted to go was to make
The the the tar tar pits joke (which he didn't even laugh at)

so I should damn well—some kids were
waiting in line behind me for the
tiger puppet show—

so I should darn well be able to
see a tiger puppet operated
by some crazed jurassic parker.

Then we were inside the puppet show
and I started crying again
because the tiger costume

was actually so scary
that I had to close my eyes
almost as much as the kids.

And I thought *maybe George wouldn't save me*
if this were a real tiger because
I cry too much for his amusement.

The Poet

I open a magazine among my father's hoards
to find a glossed picture of him in a chestnut coat,
above a poem—I don't read it, but I see a recounting of
sex, his hard, our soft, our wet, his fingers on us,
his videocamera and a *I told you not to wear that tank top around the house.*

There's an artist's statement:

*I must thank my daughters, A & S, for making these poems possible.
Without them, I could not have guided so many through God's temptation.*

I put down the magazine,
back among his empty cigarette cartons, his potentialess memorabilia, his burdening inheritance

and realize he's gotten everything I wanted by burning and burying me.

Then I wake up to find
the hot wheels sold, the estate appraised, the bloodline cleansed

and I realize I'm the poet;
I've got his ashes right here to prove it.

Redeeming the Diva

In the silence surrounding your name,
you became enigma, there were hints,

words like: *promiscuous, crazy*
Tuned to vibrations, children became
detectives, gathered the scattered seed
of your story, like a game of monsters,
you were the witch.

There are always woods
between children, parents,
undergrowth from other generations.

I carried your face in my mother's look,
she became a mirror.

Your ignominy crawled into my body.

In fear as a child, spontaneity shut down,
infamy reined my teenage years,
what women can do,
sex a runaway train.

2

I found your notes at the hospital,
you were incarcerated. A nurse
remembered you crying at night,
'They even took my children'

Everything I heard to do with your name
was like a black hole, an abyss of shame,
a woman who refused a Catholic marriage,
your visit home a disgrace.
Your partner arrived in search of you, his children.
Met with silence
he eventually gave up.

Your pain became my wound,
My mother's fear of sensual fire

I carried
the demonised woman.
Stripped of my clothes
I sought a new skin.

Cassandra

I can't resist probing
the corners of my mind.
Because I can't forbear asking why

my mother said I was too sensitive,
my sister learned to say it too.
Too much of everything; I believed them.

Men had other ideas; possession.
When I refused Apollo, my gift
became anathema.
My back bent with apologies,
each vertebrae a step to elevate others,

I loved too much. Still, I tried, and fated
to die, I'd like someone to know
what happens when you're a scapegoat,
because I want to understand too.

Fish People

Even when I was young,
I held the Queendom in

my trachea-

singing red and slicked,
a siren intervening with

the making

of glass. Baby named
Greer, a Greg named boy.

My open legs-

a bloated wound, ripe
with other kissed mouths.

One sucked

motherfucker, my ugly
mosquito bite says to my

pretty nipple,

longing for a turn to gnaw
at the lung. I sit cowgirl on

a school

of stupid men, cooing for them
like I am a coddled plastic horse

ready

for quarters in my ass-
my happy gills draping along

their pencil

as hips. Flesh like bread
in the lungs, the boredom

of a glistening

Greg in my bed, chanting:
man, man, man, as if the

ocean

he is collecting from
the tears I cannot tranquilize

will make

him a water that death will
not survive, his story

wrapping around

my muzzle like an intimate
braid of lace or the synonym

for

"Go fuck yourself"

Stella Fridman-Hayes

sonnet

with his open body on view the right temple embedding bruises
the howl oppressing a set of east-facing windows
I am with you with him
outside a fist a pomegranate margarita conducting a mass
of broken ice down an esophagus
my body's orientation turned toward you a ballerina on pointe
sweeping the stage in circles her toe hardened from abuse her
foot's readiness for harm getting used to rebreaking
I am spinning out of control toward you facing down
a double terror & love which is bold & ripe & sweet like nothing
I should compare to form a vaginal activation
the way love feels at first blush a sublimation
a yearning to be found & found
& let go after midnight

Strolling the Candy Aisle ■ ■

in a ■■■-■■■ foggy, rootless fatigue, I am looking for freedom from the self —. I pick up Paroxetine, 0.75 MG, the smallest dose of a generic antidepressant Dr. Good e-prescribes. Clinical studies of ■■■ women like me she says across a desk surface caught in a hot flash of the sun, have shown that it manages ■ ■.

My ■ is still ■ wet. In the crease of my wallet, I carry a paper script for symptoms forthcoming months later. I get sidetracked to the sirens of candy. Family size peanut M&M's for a sugar rush. Puberty. Peddling a men's 10-speed bike to the lake. Forsaking safety of neighborhood watch. The sun eaten ■ by the moon. I had to focus on what felt like passion for my boyfriend. On each other, we practiced kissing. My mother's distance eating away my tooth enamel. We suffer. Exhibiting a succinct spontaneity. Our nights are not lonely. We have in common each other's ■.

This Is How It Should Be

Nightly the raging cicadas fighting an invisible war
Buzzing, slowly —, methodically

A man carries his burden like a pack
Stuffed with wounds

Again, I'm here in your chair —,
If only I could take a dingy down my cheek to water

On our side of the world
To our summer by the lake outside of Kyiv

Where you made me breakfast out of stars
& set the universe in reverse

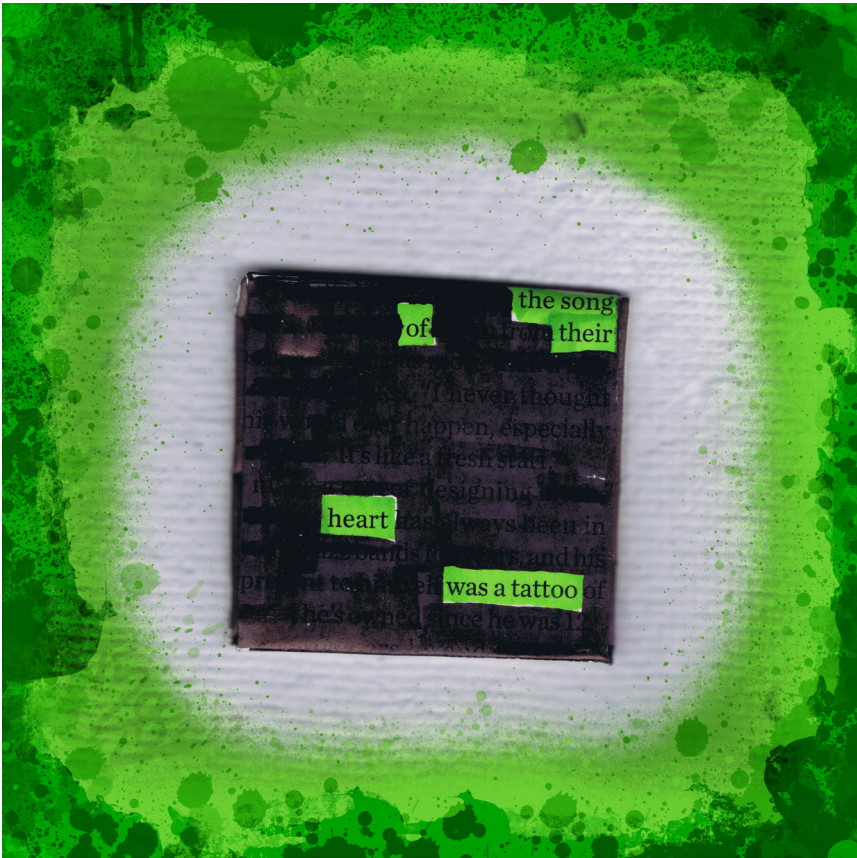
Adelina Gonzales











Cassini, Anne of Cleves, and the Gordian Knot

Now is not the time for dancing.

– Anne of Cleves, *Fourth Wife of King Henry VIII*

The spacecraft has disintegrated into Saturn and now photos of icy rings and half-moons saturate the web. It is more compelling to look at Titan than to untie the (k)not that seems beyond unraveling, no ends in sight, and the sword is rusted, bent, and really no solution this time and who would replace the orange ruler who fights for all that is wrong and is rarely in the mood for dancing?

Now is an urgency. Now is an eclipse. The king is waiting for his presence to matter, for his Anne, who is/is not his wife. He likes her not—her countenance painted—the portrait complete. His ulcerated jousting through time changes the unsteady canvas and commoners are for(ced) to admit that the emperor has no neck and dancing is an illusion replacing duty with impotence.

We have memes, now, and tweets, tantrums, and what happens is behind a shroud of tapestry not in the open air under transparent blue where signals no longer emanate from the source, where the possibility of time travel still exists, maybe in a place before the hour of regret/shame/terror, where the baited bear will appear dancing, ephemeral in the forest.

Peanut Butter Baptism

I let a spider live last night
only to discover this morning
it has a funny way of showing its
gratitude—I woke up w/ hickies
all over my body

clingy little pauper,
so clingy I can't even go to the toilet
without receiving a sneaky kiss
on my buttocks; the bidet is my
only solution, it excels at what
it's known for so well I space out,
rinsing the dark and dingy regions
for what seems an eternity

not unlike the other day;
I'd been scrubbing the cutting
board, wondering what condition
my liver is in since I've become
a champion of intake; in that space
of thought, the disservice of my muscle
memory guided the hand away from
the hand soap and towards
a squeeze bottle of damn skippy

PUT IT ON YOUR FACE,
the squeeze bottle demanded

YOU DON'T LOOK RIGHT,
PUT IT ON YOUR FACE

while some seedlings had grown
to scruff, it wasn't enough;
an important event was nearing,
I knew pictures would be taken
& there was a bold probability
of looking like a ballsack

I wanted to celebrate without
the fallout panic of impish dysmorphia,
recede behind an accentuated ruggedness —

PUT IT ON YOUR FACE!

there must've been a little granule
of influence from *the peanut butter*
solution I caught streaming —
the creamy milled runners
consumed my scrubbing hands

PUT IT ON YOUR FACE!

high hopes and a peanut butter facial
— I'm in constant amazement
of how far I'll go to please myself
even when I can't

This is What We Chose

Faced with the reality of what she's being asked to do —
and yes, here you may laugh at my use of the word 'reality' —
my ordinary self swivels on the fine point of her loathing

and begins to wonder if there isn't another way. She says this
aloud as she and my extraordinary self disentangle
an abandoned dory from the patch of woods behind

my neighbor's house. *Of course there are other ways,*
my extraordinary self counters, *but this is what we chose.*
They work the boat free from the mud and vines,

push it along the grass down to the creek. The sunshine
is as flat as a clean slate, the sky an ambivalent hue.
Down by the docks, the skiff lands with a splash, then rocks

back and forth, knocking against the piling. *It doesn't*
look like it will stay afloat, my ordinary self says,
watching water lip the scow's sides and turn the dusty

earth to mud. *That's not a bad thing, is it,* asks
my extraordinary self, although she directs the question
to the prow, its head split slightly, like a mouth

about to speak. *We'll move it to the reeds.*
Bamboo will support the boat. Raccoons and insects
and water snakes will do the rest. My ordinary self

shudders. *Even in death, she grouses, you have to be*
so extreme, so unnecessarily over-the-top.
Shut up, says the other one. And she jumps

into the dory's belly, lays her head against the stern.
Or would you prefer my possible return? My ordinary self
climbs into the boat and ties the binds in answer.

She paints milk and honey across her sister's hands,
face, limbs and feet. Then she empties the rest of the jar
into my extraordinary self's mouth, who drinks.

No Satisfactory Answer

For days my extraordinary self watches clouds at dawn
move across the sky. She waits to die, to be changed
into something better than this, like all of her attempts

over the years to make her extraordinary qualities manifest,
like a prophecy or an almanac's prediction come to pass.
Where are the bees? The aphids? She tries to catalog

all the insects she knows, worms and beetles interested
in a body's ruin. She faults, to some extent, the cat —
who arrived two days ago and licked most of the milk

and honey from her face, then moved methodically
to the rest of her skin — and now that she is clean as a kitten,
and albeit a little sick from the scow's constant bobbing

in the shallows, she concludes she feels fine. Even the cold
weather cannot burrow its way inside — because the cat,
like a totem, sits on her chest and purrs its comfort song.

This is not death, she thinks. Then at night the raccoons
and opossums arrive, but instead of chewing her skin
they gnaw free the ropes around her hands and feet,

sticky and sour with residue. And once they've left,
the water snakes curl beneath her arms, her flesh
a warm, comforting den in the absence of sun. And so,

within days, she concludes this experiment's done.
She's failed yet again. The worst part is walking past
my ordinary self making breakfast at the kitchen window.

My extraordinary self shuffles by, eyes down, trailing rope,
her savior cat pouncing behind. My ordinary self takes a bite
of toast and jam, watches my extraordinary self disappear

around the corner. Well, she thinks. *We must leave far less
to chance.* The gray morning's silence provides no satisfactory
answer, just the sound of her jaw as it pops and clicks.

Authors of Their Own Sad Ends

*Failing at death when you've already failed at life
is the ultimate kick in the nuts, isn't it?*
asks my extraordinary self of my ordinary self.

They build a scaffold in the garage, attempt to fortify
against a body's swinging weight. *Think: Emma Bovary,*
her gruesome cartoon. Trying to sell what was left –

withered breasts, her desperate, janky eyes. But
thwarted by the gauche projectile vomit, black as crude.
My ordinary self has no reply, hands her a drill

and bolts. Or, my extraordinary self chatters on,
what about The Breakfast Club? Brian's shitty
elephant lamp, his impossible revolver. My ordinary self

nods, climbs the ladder into the attic space, waves
to signal she's ready for the reinforcing two-by-eight.
My extraordinary self passes it through, watches dust

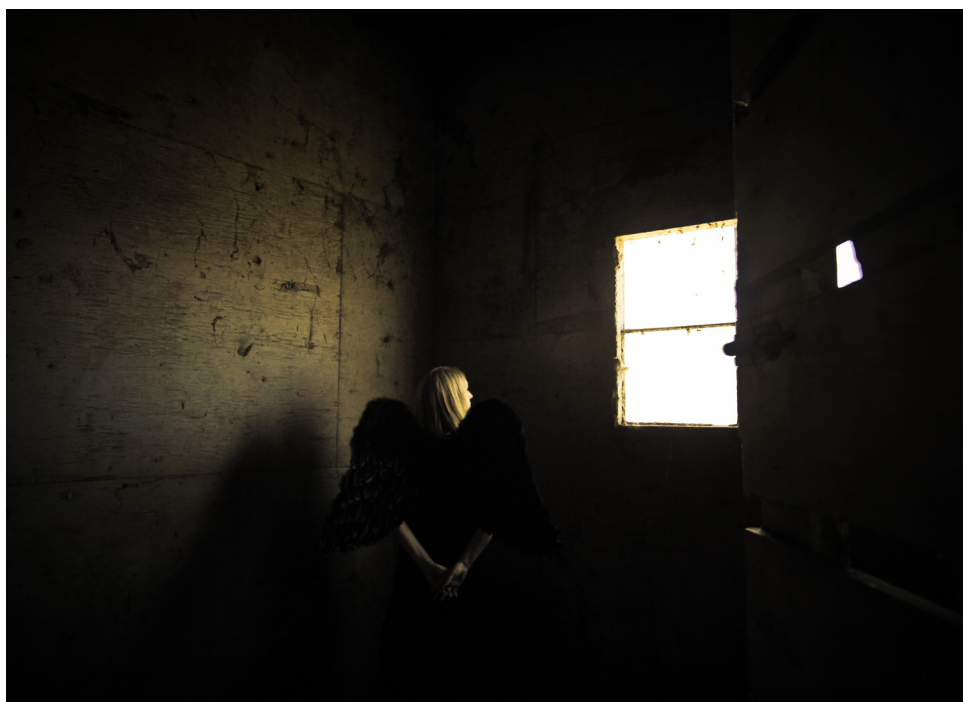
and droppings fall between the beams. *But then again,*
she offers by way of killing silence, they were fictional.
My ordinary self peers down, clears her throat.

Remember seventh grade, social studies, the assassins
of the Archduke Ferdinand? My extraordinary self grimaces
as she raises the sister beam into place. Expired cyanide.

An empty riverbed. So many plot turns and yet
they were never authors of their own sad ends.
My extraordinary self laughs, a strangled bark.

That's not reassuring, she says. My ordinary self agrees:
We've been deceived. Fate is just another word
for accident. She tests the rafters. They sag with fatigue.

Jay Halsey



She, in Parts

I.

she walks a white wolf.

i have mocked many wolves in drunk dreams,
so i am sure.

i drift to hunted spirits
and flip my ash in the space that divides us.

i dodge vultures slick with yesterday's corpse.
i dodge turmoil. i am violence;
they fuck off to another place.

i run with no pack. i seek a wise heart.

i am blood. i am violence.

i crash the wind.
the wind weeps.

II.

she likes cheese in a can, and magazines with lots of makeup ads.
at her best
she is a perfect spring flower popping from cinder block and dry bird shit.

at her worst
the device of a ten-armed choke hold circling in grey spaces with yesterday's currents.

she is gutted and gutless,
damned and mad.

she is the cherry of a morning cigarette...
like sunrise
burning into a new day.

then she is not.

Bruised

(after my then-girlfriend beats me up)

night bled into a vague morning with no discernable moment to indicate an end of one day or a beginning to another.

concept of time at that hour was a slow knife extracting itself from stale flesh:

it did not exist without the concept of suffering.

ghosts of regret left everything cold and I shivered in fog that stuck to cuts on face, made bruises slick beneath buzzing powerlines.

the air sounded as horror looks.

i scowled into water that scowled back.

cigarette smoke clung to chapped lips and found its way to lungs.

lungs filled to throat.

i inhaled. i exhaled.

i destroyed.

repeat.

nothing shined and everything rested opaque beneath a sky brooding in its own defiance, and i sat there smoking, staring holes through persuasive shadows.

i sat there smoking

feeling like the color wheels we made in grade school:

when you spun them fast

all their value was lost in white.

and i sat there smoking, still in fog, hating god, waiting for flames.

i perched myself atop a large rock to be nearer a teasing sun. the sun did not want me and

i fell back to the ground.

i stood, i spit, and went to myself. but the self did not want me either and i fell again.

dawn finally broke into gold pieces through holes in the tree line. i stared hard and lit another cigarette.

repeat.

the sun stopped and stared back harder. a mutual feeling hung between us in the opening sky:

neither of us would rise.

Jay Halsey



tick-tock

i try to forget
the world outside
the room 13
of a cheap motel
out off Highway 74,
deep in a desert
town, where crows
don't bother to fly.

ass up and waiting
for you to come fuck away
reality a thrust at a time,
but there is no knock
at the door, there is no relief
from my insanity,
there is no sound other
than the ticking of a clock
attached to a bomb
with only minutes to go.

extinction

we've been committing
slow suicide
all these years now
w/our gas powered
cars & trucks, factories
spill their demon
seed into trickling rivers
that wander to close,
chemicals made to last
forever, for a better tomorrow.

maybe it's just a quiet murder
of the masses, perpetrated
by the sadists & psychos
on Wall Street, in the high halls
of veneer & glass, the saints
of capitalism, the knights
of capitulation.

or maybe it's inevitable.
we finally flew too close
to the sun, we finally crossed
a line we drew ourselves,
we finally decided all for none,
and none for all.

welcome to extinction, it's not
our first one, but maybe
we could have a bigger party
as the ship goes down &
Wall Street counts their one-hundred
dollar bills.

show and tell

Mandy can
claim the title
of *First Female*
to see my Penis,

and last,
as it turns out,
except for a doctor
at an ER
many years later.

Mandy claimed
to be curious.
we were friends,
not lovers.
just friends.
high school.
junior year.

i showed her,
disinterested.
turns out,
my penis
did have any interest
either.

when she touched
it, my penis just sat there.
nothing.
no movement.
no growth.
no engorgement.

after i put it away
she offered to show me
her vagina.

i passed.
i'd seen the movie.
turns out
i had no interest.
my penis just sat there.
she hoped
for a boyfriend,
one day,
that would have more
interest.

and i hoped for the same.

Ars Poetica With Fire Alarms

May I have your attention please—
This is only a test. In case of emergency,
You would have been warned that
Poems are indeed fire, that they are
Hot to the touch and fussy and dangerous,
Cropping up at all hours to startle you
From sleep with a strange rage
And an unsteady hurt. If a poem
Comes to stalk you, with its flinty
Heat and electric sparks, make sure
You are prepared—protective gloves,
Face masks, and a whole lot of
Gospel prayer. For you never know
Which gods are listening, if any.
You never know how many sacrifices
You'll have to make in the midst
Of these ghostly fires, these arcane
Oaths. May I have all of your
Attention, your ears and eyes,
Your memories and moments,
Your desperate hours and vacant
Rooms. This is only a warning,
But in case of actual poetry,
You would have been instructed
To step away before you were lit
Aflame, before you could forget
What it is you call yourself,
All that knowledge lost
In a life's worth of conflagration.

You Carry it Well

what it is that you carry,
once a prairie, once a streak
of bad luck. Summer fires,
bitter air.

The less you carry the better,
girl good with horses,
once a prairie, once a streak
of summer fires. Bitter luck
yesterday.

The less you say the better,
girl – less a sun glared prairie,
less a fire, less girl
the better.

I Secretly Love Not Being Anyone's Baby

Tell me the story of how you wanted me. There never is a happy ending, so please don't stop. Understand when I talk about crossroads, how the spirits of the dead are pacing (pacing!), and it's time to go. There's a faraway whistle of a train. Where? It doesn't matter. The sewer treatment plant pumps my poison. The beat-up cemetery holds my ground. I'm doing nothing wrong except being with you. The radio is playing an old sad song, and I hate you more than I love you. You never call me baby, and I secretly love not being anyone's baby. Call me a dead girl instead. *Dead girl*, you say, reaching to kiss me. But I am just another skeleton you stripped the meat of. Hung silent to dry in the windows of home. As we near the crossroads, the train is closer. I watch your hands squeezing air. Too late, I laugh. Taunt you with my curves. And I hate this life, I say, staring venom at you. Whistling, flashing lights, it's all kinds of drama. I roll my eyes and jump. *Dead girl*, you say.

Siren

He calls her *lover* now, this woman. Hey, happiness. Hey, perfect pink hearts. Once, I fell in love with a summer storm. But the rain fell harder, and so did we. Before he was yours: Heated lips, our skin stuck together, honey between us. His breath heavy as this pain. Thunder in my heart, lightning in the sky (where the lakes pretend to be oceans). But you weren't in our picture when we walked, hands braided together, me in my tiny bikini and his eyes filming me. *Siren*, he called me, my hair whipping around us, a black tornado. We stripped each other down when dusk stole the sky. The park by the woods outside town. Hundreds of trees, damp and thick. Secluding ourselves in his car while he pushed the driver's seat back, while I climbed on top of him, making him mine. It became a game of *gimme your mouth* so we pushed and pulled, ripping the fabric of our bodies until we came undone. My body a lie as it covered him. Does he call you my name? Not like a lover but like the demon I am. Like the song I keep singing he refuses to hear.

Once, I hung myself in the sky for him. But you are the sun he sleeps with at night. Hey, sweetness and truth. Hey, summer storm. You'll never know what it's like to swallow an ocean and still be empty.

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

Queen of Swords

*from the Enter the Dark Wood Tarot
For Fox*

Her butterflies fly night ward, over Alps, they are words, this is a fake fairy tale outside of New York. These words can't beat taxi traffic, but she makes her tea religiously.

A sext is not a message from the underworld, becoming bloodied period lines of distraction in bed. but something to hoard later hiding in the bathroom.

these love notes to the man in the mountain fall apart. He doesn't like scrawls in blood , prefers edibles and old shirts.

A gong sound outside can be silly or terrifying, like new television tells us., these gray rocks have heard so many bells and calls, from crows, humans, owls, things dying, so many paper cranes falling.

sheer butterfly wing notes burn in a second and we laugh at our fantasy movie ways of communication. the spell never a spell and always a spell.

Jokes transform a word into shoulders that carry a new message. how many times must we draft a post or an e-mail and deliver it before it is understood. how many times can I touch your shoulders hoping they will carry me over the next stream, the next mountain.

one word is complicated. It must be at least six. it could be I Love you which if you say 5 times fast it's a recipe. I like to pick out stamps but what else am I wasting time on.

I wish for you:

to hear your own mantra in the woods,
twice to be sure,
three times for it to grow viney and weedy

plush, through the soles of your feet
the leaves sticking out of our heads,
a laurel of self and silly.

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

Warlock

I met him one night, slipped over the snow in skinny jeans. My daughter H. said not to go out. There would be witches. He carried a bottle of wine in a parka, hair in eyes, skimmed over the slush.

He smiled, *said I don't see the birds anymore* and I felt a whistle of wind in my chest. I knew I was a passing shadow, but I still think of him now, wandering under the moonlight, where there was no one.

Reminded H. *hey, you stole my tiger's eye*. I said *this will bring you confidence and it soaked in the moonlight all night long absorbing power*. It was cold as dead lips and made my brain clear.

H said *few places in this world are more dangerous than home*. The warlock knew, why I was out walking that night, trying to get back a pieces of myself that scattered like leaves through snow blankets. He got all of this. And for that I felt fear. to be seen but not cured.

He said, *I'm not toxic, I'm smooth like fake leather*. A smile, a glint. wanting to give and receive presents but also unsure of outcomes.

He said, *take that pebble out of your shoe, that rattle*.

And he disappeared into the dark, the ice, the starless night. the no birds anywhere street. The warning in my heart: inside.

When Poe wrote about a knocking, he missed the secretness of it. The horror isn't the sound, but it's secret: no one else can hear it but you. Impossible to share the feeling.

I craved my boyfriend saying he couldn't remember where he bought his pajamas, lying under a blanket, on the purple couch, his arms, open.

Eleven letters to Gráinne Uaile*

'A most famous femynyne sea captain'

1. Dear Gráinne, legendary seafarer, woman warrior, leader of the O'Máille lordship at Clew Bay (and retrospectively known as Grace O'Malley and the 'Pirate Queen'),

you and the times you lived in are intriguing. I'm thinking territorial defence, plundering, was a necessary way of life for you? Seems like everyone was plundering everyone else and 16th century seas were a dangerous place. Does the word 'pirate' irritate you though, with its modern day meaning and associations?

And being a woman sea captain of your own fleet- how did that pan out?

2. Dear Gráinne, what was it like to give birth to a son in the bowels of a ship and one hour later leave your berth to lead your fighting men into battle (and win)? Taking life. Giving life. Were your breasts heavy with milk or is that my own memory of childbirth?

3. Hi Gráinne, your confidence, independence, and determination was inspiring. You didn't take codswallop from nobody. When you called out from your castle window to your husband below '*I dismiss you*', Brehon laws gave you instant marital freedom. Guess he had his story too though (just saying!) If only it was as easy a process today. Divorce, I mean.

4. Hey Gráinne, wouldn't it be fun if you could come back and 'claim' a modern-day cruise ship as your own. All the old dears clutching pearls and Chanel handbags. Think of the loot, Gráinne.

And you'd be surprised at how much the food onboard has improved.

5. Hey Gráinne, remember the time you sailed up the Thames to meet Elizabeth the First. Two queens, and you would not bow because you didn't recognise her as your queen. And how you both spoke Latin because you couldn't speak English and she couldn't speak Gaelic. What was she really like? Come to think of it, who gave her the name the Virgin Queen? Is there a Virgin King?

P.S. Did she release your two sons and brother from custody?

6. Just thinking Gráinne, life must have been physically tough, rough. I mean,

did your castles have windows or did the cold Atlantic gusts and gales sweep constantly through? Was your ship a warm refuge?

7. Wouldn't it be fun if there was such a thing as time travel Gráinne. We could meet half-way, say the late 1700s. You'd probably want to know Ireland would still not be free.

What would you ask of me?

8. Hey Gráinne, just thinking you'd have made a shrewd tax collector. Didn't anyone who fished off your coast have to pay dues? I hear you chased people for taxes as far away as London. People might hate you though. Did they fear the tax collectors then too?

9. Just thinking again Gráinne, cropped hair is all the rage now. Though we go to hair salons and someone else cuts it for us. What did your Dad think when you defiantly cut yours just so your long flowing hair wouldn't become entangled in the ships' ropes (or was that just an excuse by him not to bring you, a child, aboard)? He brought you anyway on a trading expedition to Spain. LOL on your rebellious streak, he saw a leader in the making.

10. Hi Gráinne? Nowadays there are scandals a plenty. No one would bat an eyelid on you taking a shipwrecked sailor as your lover. Though being honest Gráinne, I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of you. Didn't you wage war on the McMahons and ransack their castle after they killed your lover? Still happens, Gráinne. Love Crimes. Revenge Crimes.

11. Funny Gráinne I was thinking of you the other day. With Covid-19 we've gone mad sanitising our hands and sneezing into our elbows. Wouldn't I love to have been a fly on the wall when Elizabeth 1 handed you a lace-edged handkerchief to sneeze into which you used and threw in the fire. Consternation in the court! Is it true you told her a used tissue is dirty and contagious and you always throw them away? Ahead of your time, Gráinne.

Let

the

w
a

v
e

s

r
o

l

l

**pronounced Grawn-ya Whale*

Fat and Sad

This is for all the “sad, fat” girls that an author decides
should be victims in

The Silence of the Lambs

The killer catches us alone, and only one of us has a boyfriend, and Thomas
Harris keeps reminding the rest of us

about her glorious hair and
statuesque proportions

not sad, not fat, she sings along to Tom Petty (“*she was an American girl*”) in the
movie, no crisis
“fat pants,” the kind we hide in drawers or closets or wear on the daily because
fat, clearly,

is a crisis

And Thomas Harris wants us to know this as much as he wants us to know
that

Clarice Starling is a
“winter sunset of a girl,” and I, a fat woman in
middle age, will never be called anything but he

wants me to know

that I should stay inside at night, leaving me to wonder

if I will be the next sad, fat

girl

the one who’s caught out
and ends up in a basement

the kind a newspaper will call a “chamber of horrors”

And maybe, a year after the ordeal, *People* magazine will come,
as it often does

to talk about my new life
and I will disappoint them

because I will still be fat
and possibly sad

And I will have no advice
save for lock your doors against novelists
and serial killers, and never hide the

fat pants.

For Jonathon Something

picking up second-
hand books in the city
on a friday day off,
afternoon just before lunchtime.
and a sandwich at costa
and a seat by the window
to skim a few lines and decide
if I like what I've done.

and — glory! — some notes
folded up between pages.
some college-age poet
has been working with words. and god,
it's embarrassing, reading it.
all stuff about bars done
in biro with various edits. and women
are named. are described —

I don't like it: like seeing a mirror
when you aren't expecting it —
the face shown to everyone
else. and very ray
carver at 20 years old.
he's a hard-nosed wild poet
of course, and romantic. and all about

poetry. all about manliness
and how women are not
built to image. as a tomcat must rub
off his scent on a corner.
as a bird must do shits
down from trees onto cars.

I'm embarrassed, of course
but I still put it back between pages
and then put the book
in my pocket. something

is pure there—I don't hate
the poet. a poet with tendons
and no introspection at all.

can believe he invented
the red of a scab
and the beautiful blue
of a bruise.

I want to write a poem now

but lately my life
has been pretty prosaic
(then again, though
I say that, that's not even true) —

driving through waterford
seeing hawks (their claws
curling) which float
over cut apart embered down
crop-ash. see deer
on a mountainside,
walking and casual
as warm sunday mornings
and hands in their pocket
pedestrians. and the “we”
which was saw these things —

is important as well:
this life I describe
as prosaic — it as taken place
with someone who's said
that she'll marry me.
and that is a sentence
of prose, and not poetry
but a well written one
with surprises.

Dandelions

Dawn hanged onto the skies as the sun rose to a higher heights. I've been sitting out here for a long time, unable to see anything except the darkness that had glittered against my skin.

But now, in the dull glow of the sunlight, the yellow flowers became more visible to my eyes. The stem, the petals, such a beautiful combination. They held so many differences yet with each other, they had breached and soared past accommodation.

You and I were sort of the same, except accommodation we have yet to gain.

'Why?' was a question neither of us could ask; after all, it wasn't a matter of choice even though it solely involved our hearts.

Therefore all I could do was sit below the rising sun, blowing and picking at the beautiful dandelions.

Into the wind the petals blew, floating above the waters, above the land and I hope they could perhaps blow straight into my lover's hand.

Amalgamation

The town is known for pain bottling. There are two factories that produce wholesale, and an ever-changing number of retail establishments. The factories are automated and employ a fraction of the town. Retail takes more direct sales and sorting, and is the largest source of income for ordinary citizens. Pain producers separately show up work days at the pain collection center. Their pain is curled into raw sheets before being sent to the wholesale plant for liquefaction. These people are the most creative in our process. Their individual pain is mixed into one generic product. It makes retail more efficient.

Kimberly Ann Priest

Letter to the Editor

Enclosed is my request for immunity from predation due to the contents of my victim story which is not meant to solicit your pity {pity that is not meant to negotiate care but to occupy my attention and boost the quality of your journal in an environment considered hostile to white men while supporting—alternatively—the work of women and people in BIPOC communities}; for whom, I have come to realize you have almost no concern whatsoever except for their ability to contribute to the image you wish to project as a white male editor in the literary community; in which, you have stated to me and others, you have almost no literary ambitions—you simply want to see good work rise to the top—and this seems, on the surface, to be such an endearing quality, this love you have for good work and this abiding concern {in an almost cultish way} that some of us who are part of marginalized communities will not be awarded our due place in the spotlight; and this is why your flattery of my poetry is uncompromisingly desired, because it seems clear, based on your expert opinion of what good work is and is not {as a white man in the literary community}, that your compliments of my work are an indication of its extraordinary achievement and that, without you, this achievement may not be realized; and that is why I am so grateful for the email you sent me along with acceptance of my poem to your journal in which you were careful not to cast my work as a work of individual genius but, rather, as a representation of good work among women and BIPOC communities; which is, I think, kind of you—right? And thank you for your editorial suggestions.

Poet

Your New Instant Best Friend

We were at the bra-swapping stage, third convo, she and I, discussing men. Discussing edibles. Discussing *him*, yes him. It all makes sense in context—those ‘come-hither’ looks and my pheromones, the ones he said he’d need to smell before this could ever become a relationship (all of them I presume), and to which I said *yes, we need to meet first*. Some things men say are so odd you half-listen in half-disbelief, as when the orator on TV describes the possible symptoms of taking a certain medication and the last item in the list is *death*. Bananas are a bit salty. Apples slightly chlorine. Oranges leave a little pepper on the tongue. And grapes are not always juicy. My mind goes offline. I’m not well-attuned to *uncommon* sense. Had his skin turned out to be somewhat honey, I might have matched his male-male gaze. “But we never got that close,” I tell her. Sigh. “Neither did we,” she laughs—not a lament. I bet her pheromones are watermelon candy. I’ll put up with so many things if a man is rather good in bed; even his discard in a message after three days of radio silence, saying he can’t be the person she needs. Takes it all back like an unwrapped lollipop. No licks to rile desire when he says, *I can’t be your instant best friend!*

If I Fucked with Men the Way Men Fuck with Me

I've got him cornered at the bar, buying him drink after drink espousing conservatism like a goddamn lying liberal so he thinks I sincerely want to get into Ted Cruz's pants. "Florida," I say dripping with nostalgia, "took my boyfriend there, 2017." [aka, "I like to spoil a man"]. I'm playing by Long Island rules this sexy Friday evening, showing him the money, tipping the bartender half-way through our convo a clean, crisp \$20. Tip him again at the end. No wink. Sweet smile looking straight into his eyes, [respectfully] to demonstrate I'm no freakin' sex maniac. I talk about my father as though I love him dearly as though he's a god—or a goddess—making gender benign, even silly. Laugh. My insecurities ooze slightly from hands and knees not shaking but bracing just enough to reveal I feel like shaking, disarming his questions about aggression. And let's be honest, I'm not aggressive—just scared as shit; so as soon as he accidentally brings up a touchy subject and I feel his words brush lightly over a childish bruise from a former romance, I pounce, my emotions so sensitive I practically live in this bar waiting for a man to hit on and tell me I'm pretty because I need to feel pretty, craving the few hours of attention he gives me and maybe a night of good sex. Expecting, insecurely, to get what I want whenever I want and suffer immediate offense whenever convenient so I can ditch him whenever convenient. I'm sad enough to make him feel pity; entitled enough to impale him with rage. Please, darling, I bark, take this like a man. *Stop being so clingy and needy!* This wasn't confusing. Even the bartender knows when a woman leans in, elbow to elbow, eyes dancing and looking for "serious," she doesn't mean with *you*, bitch. C'mon.

in sleep, the voices become my everything

after Dove, no. 9 by Hilma af Klint

the abduction is only a trance. a casket lurks inside my stab-
cavity, its own receptacle of lost & found. the top
of the world slides from my feet in reverse sisyphus. the crucifix
or the satan-cross of st. peter's misconceived humility
form the opposite poles of a magnet meant to guillotine
the chapel from my body. in our favorite horror feature
the heroine flips the parlor-crosses & sits us down
to tea. she confesses possession & i confess, too.
only i am not demon-full, not girdled in a soul half my own.
when you open my heart-locket you'll find my lover's
eye, a whole goblin from a folktale i'm trying harder
to remember. i know i can never even hope to grieve
with a ghost already lying gaze-wards at my feet.
space-ships gnat-tangle through my hair & i've met my paralysis
for the last time, i swear it. be gone, trolls plaiting
at my ribcage. be gone, my still body despite
the knocking & the screaming & the choker of synthetic gems
pulled too tight around my jaws. there is the eye,
but first the eyelid. there is the teacake & then the inside of it.
it is only a matter of time before i am gobbled by my own doze.

Quitters

Band of about 14
quitters, roaming about

done quit boards
and editorials

demand someone quit
but quit themselves

in this State of Quit
14 roam about

two quitting over
two others having not

and of the two
now roaming about

one demands the other
quit now or else

split on who quit first
the charge being *false quit*

meanwhile, band of 12
split over roaming

6 quit on the spot
over six not quitting

so now 6 are roaming
and 6 are not roaming

the non-roamers
split over banding itself

the roam-abouters
split over splitting itself

one from each band
call it quits on the fly

they meet, begin roaming
seeking The Big Join

they meet a stray
former quit leader

they form a roaming band
declaring quit *forbidden*

former leader sneaks off
at midnight, a stray

stray roams about
feeling a split inside

half that stray now
seeking The Big Join

half that stray now
seeking The Big Quit

Joanna C. Valente

In the Beginning God Said Yes and Satan Said No And What Is True Love Anyway?

Mom said you're going to die alone anyway
Everyone is alone and who can you really trust anyway

when you can't even trust yourself

so trust no one not even your own mother

{}{}{}{}{}{}

All you knew about Mom was that she never drank

and her own parents poured

a new pot of black coffee over her body once when she forgot

to put out the trash

and there was that one time at summer camp when those girls

fingered her in the bathroom while she cried

and they held her down

and rubbed mud all over her body and her hair

and her pussy

and called her trash and she forgot to take out
the trash and she forgot

who she was

and maybe it made it easier when she became a mother

without having another identity
to lose

{}{}{}{}

Sometimes Mom nods her head and pats your hair
says good job good job

for getting A's on math tests or washing
the dishes and remembering to ask
Mom how she feels when she's crying

and you always want to ask why she cries
but you know she'll be mad if you do maybe box

your ears in until all sound is missing

there are no waves left
to hear

so learn to anticipate
new things
Mom said

Mom says a lot of things

 $\{\{\{\{\{\{\}$

Sometimes Mom locks you out of the house
because she's lonely
and you remind her of all the things
that have gone wrong
that are wrong
that she never did

It's hard to be mad at her for being lonely
so instead you sleep in the cemetery

wait for something to give you a sign or a test
like the stories say always said

and you never hear anything

maybe it's because you never learned to listen
you think

but you know that isn't true

considering you've spent your entire life

listening
for someone who doesn't exist

{}{}{

You left me behind
rising to noise the waters of my dreams
reverse waves

bringing me down to a place where you've always been

afraid to go threaten I'll be
damned with

too many waves I won't be able

to sink into
like a good story
a prayer

replaceable like the thought
that makes us ourselves
without remembering the pain
that made us

and why we hurt ourselves

until we become invention.

Her Two Bodies

We always have an overview of who we are
a two-page document highlighting
personality traits & growth

potential growth

except I was never sure
which version of me is the real one
which *her* to answer to

& if there was ever a version of me
that didn't answer to a man

whose desires didn't depend

on a man

who loved coffee more than people

or a man

who loves people more

anyone his body
than himself so he devours
wants

All the magazines say feminism
is changing the world

that women are almost
equal

a thing of the past & rights are almost

but the past is the present

and the future

and the future and the future and the future

and the future

that is my future

which is no future

I used to say I was born

in the wrong time

but all the men in my life

have taught me that all time

is wrong

that nothing I do

will ever matter

in time

so why not just smoke cigarettes

& focus on my hair

& pretend to answer to the name

they gave me.

Your Voice Has Been Muted

You want to scream.

but you can't.

People hear you

but they don't really hear you.

They don't want to. It would be

too much trouble.

So, they ignore you. They ignore you when you scream

and it could be for anything:

It doesn't matter if a man is on top of you

or someone you can't see

is stealing your wallet, your identity

or a car hit your body and all you know is a scream,
that scream.

No one will come running for you.

No one will come running

when their own life is on
the line.

No one ever really comes
running.

In Recognition for All You Achieved

What if I tell you the true marvel
is everything I stopped myself from doing?

Do you know my teeth would all be mine
if I had screamed when I needed to?

Do you know the sum of all I'm owed?

My retirement should be built on my own restraint:
a dollar for every book I didn't hurl across the room,
for all those pieces of chalk and later markers I threw at no one's head.

I'll take a pension made of every time I held my tongue,
for each leering dean and frat boy.

Garnish the paychecks of men young and old who I didn't report
and the men who would have ignored the report.

I owe no one thanks for not quite destroying me.

I have no interest in the card but I will take the whole cake.

Money

That night I was looking for a man to say I was hot,
and he was rude in a way that turned me on back then,
said he was moving to Paris to live above a café,
I knew Paris only from tv and the *Je T'aime Paris* stickers
my 4th grade teacher gave us after she came back from
a trip she called a tour of Europe where not one of us had been
because it was well outside of Mason County,
even beyond Muskegon with its rough failing mall

*To Paris to live above a café I repeated But
what about a job I asked How will you live*

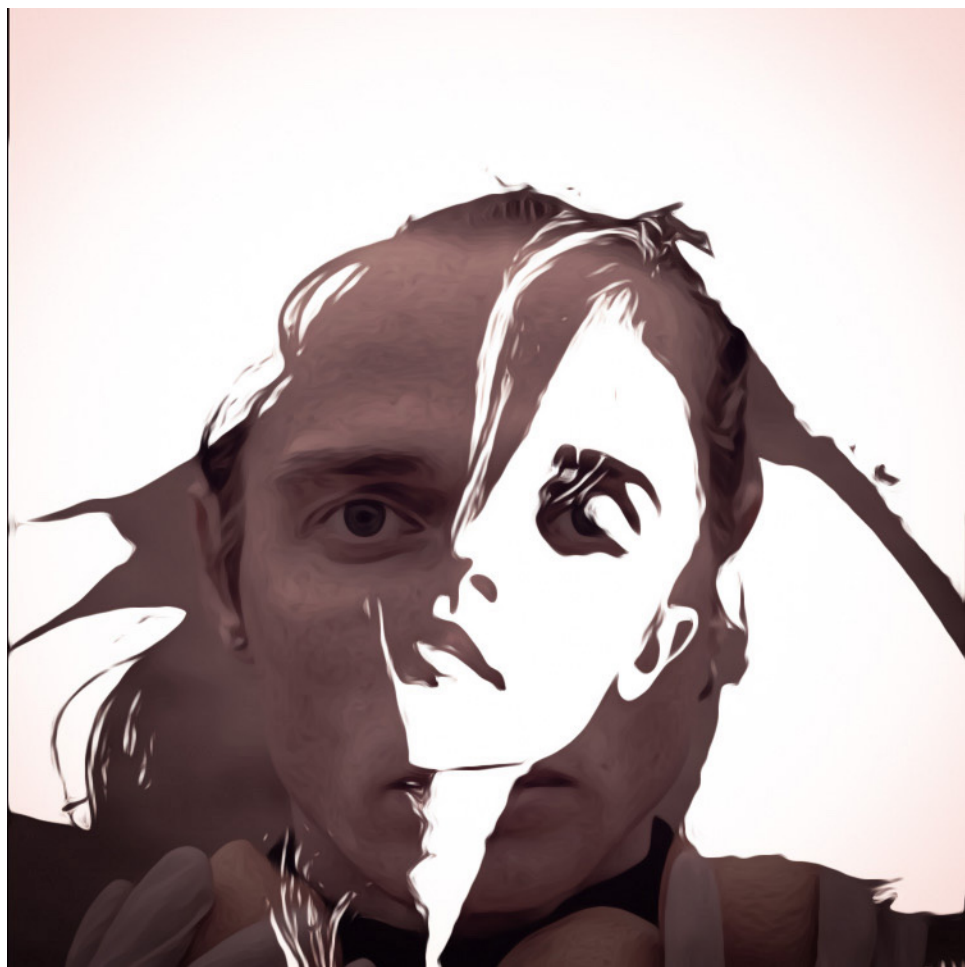
He snorted *If you ask questions like that you should never go,
Do me a favor he said and stay at your little school*

I sank back into myself all practical and fat, and still
I would have slept with him if he'd wanted but he didn't
so I drank alone all night while staying in my budget

Later I found out about him, about his dad really
who was a money man at GM, he was rich I'm saying,
I kept forgetting, or maybe I'd just found out
that people can be rich like that, move-to-Paris rich,
rich so he could live above a café and never even look for work
just work on looking ever so slightly poor

When one day I made it to Paris on scholarship and loan money
I had twelve hours and ten dollars, not enough for a museum even,
just bread and a bus pass, but I could not believe my life,
that I had come to Paris, Who was I to be in Paris,
and so I sat on a bench slowly eating an entire baguette
stunned with gratitude, in love with the furiously smoking man
who glared at me, in love with a tiny child who squatted
and peed in the gutter nearby, giggling at her own tiny stream,
and by the end of my bread I was content, and I was content still
when I made my way to the station to find the train I'd spend the night on

Jim Zola



FICTION

Tenderness

I don't mind being in the dark, shadows don't frighten me. I find it comforting, soothing, inviting. In the dark, there's no one to laugh at you, to point or jeer. People are cruel that way. No one asks to be different or deformed at birth, it's just the way it happens. The guff doesn't have a section for less than complete souls – a collection of those who will be forced to endure, to live a substandard existence. Yet here I am, tossed to the side, or rather below. The dampness of the basement seeps into my distorted bones, but I've a pile of old blankets that form a bed of sorts, and a torn wedding dress to lay my head upon. There's also an old TV without sound, the speakers are broken, but the flickering light from the static on the screen keeps me company. I often wonder as I drift off to sleep at night, whose dreams I will have – mine or the bride whose dress was cast aside with little to no care. Often, I wake in a drenched chill only to find my eyes staring at the brown spots on the dress. It must have been beautiful before she bled out at the altar. I'm not clairvoyant, there was a newspaper clipping in the moving box I found the gown in. *Woman Bleeds to Death in God's House, God Does Nothing!* or so the headline says. The accompanying picture is that of a beautiful blonde in her early twenties. She stands with her betrothed behind her, his left hand placed on her shoulder, the other arm wrapped around her waist. Her left hand is resting on his to display a pretty diamond ring. Both wear a beaming grin. Their engagement photo, I suppose. But what do I know of these things; I will never live that life, not as disfigured as I am.

I'm not kept in the cellar all the time, I don't want you to think my parents monsters. They love me, just not the sight of me. It makes them think of the other, my brother. He was much older. They don't speak his name, not ever; they simply refer to him as 'the boy' in angry, withered tones. They don't even bother to conceal that I'm their punishment for his acts. They speak openly of the woman he killed while I try to shovel food through my crooked maw with a serving spoon. Mother never lets me eat with regular utensils, she says it takes too long. Nor do

I enjoy a meal without a perverse sermon of 'the boy's' wrong doings. Once it ends, she lights a cigarette, pours more whiskey into her glass, and stares at me struggling to eat. So I gorge each meal in the hopes of pleasing. Father doesn't speak at all, he just glances at me with a look of disdain on his face. When Mother can't stand to have me close anymore, she kicks the table leg with a foot, then nods towards the basement door. My misshapen jaw doesn't allow me to form words, but I can make sounds. As Father is pulling me away from the table by the scruff, my diner still only half eaten, I grunt and moan, hoping he'll understand that I haven't finished. He never does, Mother just looks away in disgust.

It's not so bad really. Some nights, Father is more gentle and only drags me down the first few steps to a small landing. His way of atoning, I suppose. Those are the easier nights. When he's angry, I'm lucky to make contact with the wood at all. He heaves so hard that I land on the concrete floor, my hardened bones shifting, but no longer breaking. They've always been a clumped mass on my right side, so the further thickening from fracture upon fracture isn't much of a bother.

When I was younger, there was a home tutor and state-aid. That's how I learned to read and grasp objects with my usable hand, like my spoon or a crayon. But one day, the tutor didn't show up. I heard Mother yelling, and unfamiliar voices, so I hauled myself up the steps to hear more clearly. Mother furious, Father contrite, I could see through a crack between the door and the jam. Police were talking to Father in quiet tones while Mother railed in the living room doorway. After some time, Father left the house with the officers, and Mother, not knowing what to do with her anger, rushed the cellar door and threw it open to take her frustration out on me. She moved so quickly, I had no time to scuttle back down the stairs. When the door flew wide, I tumbled and landed with a resounding crack that slowly echoed to a distorted hum before fading altogether.

I woke on my pile of blankets, a bandage on my head, and Mother sitting at the base of the stairs smoking. Mascara smeared her cheeks, a drink in her hand, she quietly sobbed. I tried to reach with my usable arm and intone the word 'mother'. The moment she realized I was awake, she angrily scrubbed at her face, flicked

her cigarette away, and stormed back up the stairs. It's the only time I'd ever seen Mother display weakness, and she was furious that I'd seen it. She became harsher after that day. Cold, but somehow more angry. In the days that followed, I heard them discuss the fact that Father tried to lay hands on my tutor, so there would no longer be anyone coming to the house. If Father couldn't control himself, then I would suffer for it. He agreed it was for the best, and life continued with less love than these walls had ever known.

But as I said, that was when I was much younger. I've no way to mark the passing of time other than the small amounts I grow. Mother finds new rags for me to wear as the older ones become too threadbare to cover my crippled body. She mutters about Father seeing as she throws a new nightshirt at me. She grumbles about apples and trees, but I don't understand the reference.

It's been quiet upstairs for what must be days, though it's hard to tell. I've slept several times with no meal in between, so I can only assume Mother and Father are away. They do that from time-to-time, go away, but they usually leave a large bowl of mush or a box of dry cereal and a dripping tap for me. This time, there is nothing. No food, no drip, no sound from above, just my grumbling stomach and sore muscles from not leaving the makeshift bed.

Feeling brave, I drag my fused legs to a pile of plastic totes I know I'm not allowed to go near. When I reach the pile, I struggle to pull myself upwards and inadvertently knock the boxes over. A flash of panic sets in as my brow beads, but no sound is heard from above, so I continue. In the containers, I find the trappings of a young boy's youth. Toy cars, a miniature kickball that bounces away, some clothing, and trophies. My brother was a swimmer. Not just a swimmer, but an award winning one. First place in most cases. I spend hours looking through the meager collection, imagining what it would have been like to run, to play, to swim! The saved objects are a hard contrast to the horrors Mother speaks of each night, but the duality brings me much joy and I laugh until I begin to choke on spittle. If

I can't have a life, I can at least be happy my brother did.

In a box set behind the rest, I find photos—some in albums, others loose. The dim light doesn't allow me to see much, so I drag the box back to my bedding, taking a chance that Mother and Father will not come home too soon. I find a high school yearbook, look for my brother's photo, but find Father's instead. Mother is also in the same faded copy, but oddly enough, they have the same last name. Did Mother and Father marry while they were still in high school? Reading the inscription he wrote, I don't understand why he refers to her as sister, but I know nothing of romantic relations. Digging deeper in the box, I find another yearbook, this one twenty-ish years newer. I find my brother's photo with a heart drawn around it. When I read the inscriptions, they all seem to be addressed to a girl by the name of Cara. It's not his book, but hers. Again, another oddity. But then I look further and find the image of the young lady whose wedding gown I sleep on each night. She is Cara. Digging under my dirty blankets, I pull out the article that I'd found with the dress years ago. Cara is the girl in the photo from the paper. Back to the high school yearbook, I find a picture of 'the boy', and much like Mother and Father, they have the same last name. Glancing at the newspaper clipping again, I read the names mentioned there, and they are not the same. Her last name doesn't match his, but in the yearbook, they do. I close the book and notice for the first time that there is a year and place printed on the cover. It says Ar... Ar-can... I have to sound it out as I don't know the word. Ar-can-sas? Arkansas. It says Arkansas! I didn't learn much about states when I had a tutor, but I did learn enough to know that I live in a place called Oregon, not Arkansas. Exhaustion begins to set in as I haven't had this much activity, and this little food in years. Clicking off the TV, blackness floods the basement. As the ebon tide overtakes me, I crawl under the top blanket, yearbooks beside my makeshift cot, my usable arm hugging the dress tight as I drift off to sleep.

I wake to the clamor above. Mother is never gentle on her feet, I hear her stomping through the kitchen.

"How could you forget the food and water?" she shouts. As she swings the

basement door open, sunlight from above floods my eyes, I squint and try to scramble backwards, but there's nowhere to go. "If she's dead, it's on you." She stomps down the stairs, stopping mid-stride at the bottom when she sees the yearbooks and clipping still on the bare floor next to me. Our eyes lock, and I start to groan and scoop them under my blankets.

"Don't bother," Mother says. She sits on the bottom step, coat still on, purse in hand. "Well, at least you're not dead." Her eyes betray her disappointment.

I pull my form up against the wall, clutch the wedding dress, then garble as I point to the books. Her eyes flick from them to the aged white silk in my hands, linger for a moment, then drift up to look into my less than perfect face.

"I guess it was only a matter of time, you're a smart one. You may not be able to walk, but I'll be damned if you don't have the brains to make up for it," her eyes drift to the floor. "Not that we didn't try to beat them out of you." A regretful sigh, "You would have been better off not knowing."

Knowing what? I scream inside. She can't understand me, but I try anyway. I grunt and moan, trying to imply my confusion but Mother always assumes the worst.

Her heels click as she walks over to me, sits on the blankets beside me, and reaches out. I flinch at first not knowing how to accept love from this woman I've known my entire life. She and Father have clothed me, fed me, given me a place to sleep, perhaps she has come back kinder, more willing to be a loving mother despite the shame of me. Do I trust it, is it worth the beating if I refuse her? Resting my bulbous head on her shoulder, I feel her body slump, the fight leaves her rigid form.

"We never wanted you to know," she begins. "Our family has had others like you in the past, every so many generations it happens." I reach up with my good arm and try to hug her, but she strengthens her grasp. "I always thought it was

bullshit. We've been marrying our own and bearing children for generations. I'd been warned that it does something to the psyche, but I never imagined..." A tear rolls down her cheek. "He was a good boy, it wasn't his fault he had to hurt things, it was just in his nature, ya know?" The question rhetorical. "We thought it was a phase that passed when he was a small boy. But it didn't pass, he just got better at hiding it." I could feel her begin to sway back and forth.

"That day at the church, no one could have known. We were his parents and we didn't know. Cara, she was a sweet girl. My youngest, I only had the two. They'd grown up together, shared the same toys, knew each other as well as Father and I. There was just no way we could have known. They both seemed so normal." Another tear, this one accompanied by a hitch in her breath. "We didn't want to leave, but after he tried to eviscerate her at the church, we didn't have a choice. She was seven months along with you. They tried to take you away, we couldn't let that happen. You were our kin, and we don't abandon our own." Her hug was becoming crushing the more she spoke. I began to struggle to get away. "Shh... I know. It's not easy to hear, but you already know, so no harm in speaking about it now. I know I spew ugly words about him each night, but I loved Cara so much." She began to sob, then caught herself. "Anyway, he was mentally damaged, I blame Father for that, and you, you were physically damaged. So much so that you lived on a breathing tube for close to a year while your lungs slowly developed. We prayed each night for that phone call, but it never came. It was one of the happiest and saddest days of our lives when they finally told us you would live." Her grip stronger than I'd ever felt before. From above, the sound of a loud crack. Mother's breath deepened, she began shaking while cradling me with loving arms for the first time.

"Now that Father is gone, I'll go back to 'Bama. I've been missing the rest of the family for so long." She began to hum, a tune I'd heard through the door while she was baking or cooking many times. In my own distorted pattern, I crooned along with her. Another huge sigh left her body. "That's my good girl. You hush now, it's all gonna be okay, Mother is here with you."

For the first time in my life, she was being kind. I was giddy, filled with joy. As we rocked back and forth, Mother put one hand on my distorted collar bone, the other on my forehead, and with one swift and brutal movement, she snapped my neck, shoving the base of my spine clean into my skull. It was almost painless.

The Threshold

Satisfied, Radic unclenches his fingers from around her throat, kisses her on the forehead, and slumps beside her on the bed. He closes his eyes for a moment, then sits up, grabs a baggie from his bedside drug drawer and a hardbound translation of some of the key texts of the Nag Hammadi library, and uses the book as a table to roll another joint.

There is a faraway look in her eyes that Radic cannot interpret. She had been stiff and immobile throughout the act, breathing shallowly through clenched teeth. Certain ordinary enjoyments had been avoided, as if they raised memories too painful to bear. Certain compromises were effected that seemed to be diverted from the aims of union. Then, when she pulled his hands to her neck, her eyes burned toward some distant object, as if the desire that moistened her skin with sweat was not physical at all. Her shriek had been short and toneless, and she had gone limp. Now she stares wordlessly at the ceiling, breathing with a slow, steady rhythm. A strange girl, with dishwater blonde hair.

In that moment, Radic realizes just how little he knows of her, of the unknown world that smoulders behind those eyes. He drags deep on the joint and the coughing fit that follows deepens the mystery. She does not refuse the joint when it is offered to her. She does not, in fact, acknowledge it at all. Radic fumbles with the blankets on his bed to fill the moment, then sits up and draws his knees up to his chest. He casts his eyes about the shambles of his bedroom, piles of clean and dirty laundry, stacks of books and manuscripts, empty and unwashed coffee cups.

Marijuana smoke curls up and then tumbles down, leaving a floor-clinging fog that thins and rises in the air currents to the unmoving ceiling fan. Radic rises, crosses the mat of clothes to his bathroom, and pisses by the room-light without turning on the switch. He will not look at himself in the mirror. In fact, he notices that it is difficult to stand, that he staggers every third step. The clumsiness of

post-coital tristesse, following the peace of la petit mort. His heart sinks suddenly at his life's petty squalor. And then, the girl next to him drones quietly, as if something is speaking from within her belly and gurgling through her choked throat. "Ave Frater."

His neck spasms, and he finds himself murmuring in return, "Ave, Hierieia."

"Tell me my name."

"Darkness is thy name, thou Great One of the Path of the Shades."

"Care Frater, do you see that you presently stand on the Threshold of the Shattered Temple?"

The smoke of the room darkens, and the colors of the objects flicker suddenly with garish light. All seems artificial, as if the clutter is formed simply of projected images on slowly billowing smoke, and would fade to nothing if one looked away. Has she dosed him? Was there something in the peculiar smelling ointment they had used in the act? "I wander under the banner of evening twilight."

"Can you give me the Sign of your Grade?" It is as though her lips do not move at all, and she beholds him through eyes dead and helpless before the might of what croaks from her belly.

His own lips twitch into words that are not his. "I have no Grade. I stand among the husks. I am unpurified and unconsecrated." His head swims, thoughts which would have been slowed by the marijuana are disjointed entirely, like a broken thread in a string of falling pearls.

"Inheritor of a Dying World, arise and enter the Darkness." Her eyes roll back into her head, as if gazing on some distant horror bleeding on black sands, under a sky where the stars have all fallen. "The Mother hath blinded him with Her hair. The Father hath hidden him under His wings. And his limbs are still weary from the

wars which were in Heaven."

His lips mutter in reply. "Yet unpurified and unconsecrated, I canst not enter this sacred and shattered Hall."

Her bitten lips are animated into a twitch of a smile. The voice from within her secreted places takes on a tone of simultaneous mockery and horror, of cynicism and despair. "Then you shall receive instruction as to how you may become worthy." The secret drugs within the witch's ointment begin their deliriant work in earnest. He slumps to the bed, an immobile form next to another immobile form, separated by a few inches and unending gulfs. That voice, calling forth from the crawling grounds of scorpions, a place of fear and solitude and shame, begins the lesson.

In the forest, among the jack pines, something stirs into waking. The Aspirant, who has realized the Darkness, senses the ever-burning lamp of one who walks upon the Threshold, the devourer of corpses, the dog of witches, the bastard son of the Dead Man. The waking one, the Dead Man, the vindicated, reads the flicker in the lantern, and knows that he shall finally be freed from the blind fish, the Lord of the Shattered Temple, the False God of Grain.

The clay and stony road cuts through the hills to the gravel pit, a sore on the land's skin where the loose rock has been hauled away, leaving a hole in the ground for teenagers to drink cheap beer and smoke cheaper weed. The road is washed out and deeply pitted, leaving many unseen traps for the tires of the little foreign car. Beyond the pit are fields not yet reclaimed by the woods. There, the grass grows yellowed and dry out of the ashen dust and grit. It cuts the hand that tries to grasp it, roots clutching the earth with the strength of drawn blood. By September, the thistles have dropped their flowers to the gravel. Beyond these,

rusted barb wire looped around the bases of the thicker oaks cinches the forest at the wood's edge. Nothing is said as the fifteen-year old foreign car pulls under the shade of the trees.

The old path once enjoyed a brief use as the way to a dumpsite. Rotten tires still buzzing with the season's last mosquitos sag next to rusted bed frames and automobile parts. An old-time refrigerator leers white and open, its doors a trap for tiny bodies. But the path goes on. The path goes on to Grandma's house. Through the wire screens, she can watch the marsh from her porch. Past the cat-tails, she can see the muck-rooted brush where the blackbirds return each spring. When she was younger, and full of sulfurous fire, she would pull on her waders and stalk the sludge for great fat bullfrogs. Sometimes, she would write the name of an enemy in her own blood, cram it down the croaker's throat, and sew up its mouth with the hair stolen from her enemy's brush. Sometimes she would stab the frog through the belly after hours of intonation and torture, bury the limp form in an ant mound of twigs and grasses, burn black candles before the grave to draw the potencies of earth and death into her victim, and then, after a novena of averse prayers, would kick open the nest and harvest a cleaned bone dripping with malice. Like her.

She has been cursed with dangerous occurrences in secret places. The bag hangs from a wound in her blubbery, scar-crossed stomach, filling over the hours with her filth. She scratches the skin where the bag joins with her diverted intestine. The old witch stinks of stale piss, and the cancer bites into her divided guts like a worm fleshed with spines. She has been reduced to skin, fat, bones, and tumors. And hate. Once she had thought, perhaps, that there was a love that could wash the poison from her heart. But she had given her body to more than a few others, and had corroded their dreams with the vitriol of her spirit. The children she'd slung from these couplings had broken themselves on the temptations of youth, or had taken their first breath already broken and stunted, or had run far, far away. But then there is Abigail. And she is returning. The old witch grins with a mouthful of gray nubs. The field of her victims is still, and curling with a few wisps of fog. Grandma wheels from the kitchen window to a counter drawer, and

draws out a packet of cherry Kool-Aid. She manages to put the kettle to boil, and slumps back into her chair, aching from the effort. The wound in Grandma's side sobs, and the cheap seal around the stoma exhales a breath of half-putrefied filth. She is returning. What great crimes will stain the earth once the prodigal daughter of the prodigal daughter returns to the Threshold? What fresh abortion will stain the face of a broken idol?

They pull up a shotgun's blast from the front porch of a white-washed old farmhouse. She turns and caresses his cheek, looking him straight in the eye. "Just wait in the car, honey. I'll be back in just a sec, okay?"

The stunned numbness with which Radic has driven the three hours to the northern counties does not leave him. He nods. "Sure. I'll stay right here."

"I'll be right back. Then we can meet Grandma and get some food into you." She leans into him and kisses him--hot, wet, open-mouthed, tongue wriggling against his. He reaches for her hip, slipping his hand inside her denim shorts to cup her buttock and pull her closer and she slips from his grasp. A self-satisfied grin spreads on her face as she opens the car door and hops out, not taking her eyes off his until she turns to walk away.

You smell the pens before you see them. The fence is still the same one, the one her Daddy was supposed to have built. Looks like she never left. He still looks young, close-set and crossed eyes bulging under their lids in a hairless, pale babyface. His bleach-stained jeans and t-shirt are muddied with pig shit, and he blushes strawberry red when Abigail approaches. "Don't get too close to me. I stink like hell."

"It's been a long time, Uncle Ananias."

"Don't feel too long. No. It does. But I've been helpin' Momma since your

mother--" He stops. Ananias doesn't talk much. Everything makes people angry, it seems. Like a dog kicked for every misstep, he shies from conversation. It is all he can do to take the cans from his long roadside walks into town and cash them in for whiskey money. The clerks, fat God-fearing blondes who gag discreetly as he approaches, look at him with eyes that burn with barely-hidden disgust. He thinks about those eyes when he is alone, before he goes to sleep. But it has been a long time since he has thought of Abigail's dishwater blonde hair.

"What you been doin', Uncle Ananias?" She knows he doesn't mean any harm, even though she was always awake when he'd open her bedroom door in the middle of the night. That's why he's blushing still, and can't look her in the eye.

"Feedin' the pigs. He's been real hungry. That's what Momma says."

"Who's been hungry?"

"God." He turns his fearful eyes to the shed, and looks away just as quick.

Abigail follows his eyes and fixes her gaze on the shed's gaping slats, the untreated pine grayed by the sun. "Does God still live in there? Or does Grandma have a different place arranged?"

"Don't make me talk about God. It makes me want to puke. And she won't listen when I say we won't have no more hogs if she keeps it up."

"Thank you, Uncle Ananias. I'll see you at dinner later, okay?" She kisses him on the cheek and strolls down to behold the sanctum sanctorum.

She makes good coffee. Radic drinks deeply to try to wash out the earthy bitterness and cloying sweetness of her cherry pie out of his mouth. But Grandma knows lard is the only way to get the flaky quality of a real pie crust, he'll give her that.

Abigail is washing up the dishes from lunch, and Grandma tidies up her dried herbs, sorting through her jars and bundles. A handful of thorny seed pods sit in a wooden bowl. She shakes one, hears a slight rattle, smiles. When Abigail had finally returned, they went up to the porch together to meet the old woman. Grandma had gone strangely unmentioned during most of the drive up north. But there she was, obligingly wheeling them from room to room in the old farmhouse, which was oddly bare of the porcelain figurines and photographs with which the elderly so often decorate their homes. She seems nice, but is definitely an odd conversationalist. She talks sideways to queries, changing diction and tone from sentence to sentence, yet remaining relevant in distant ways. There is the occasional stern command. "Abigail, honey, go out and check on your Uncle, will you?" Abigail's chin falls to her chest, she nods slightly, and leaves the kitchen. Then Grandma turns back to Radic and gives direct address. "It is the privilege of family to be nosy. You understand."

He finishes his coffee and starts to rise, thinking to finish the dishes.

"No, don't get up. Can I get you anything?"

Now that she mentions it, Radic is thirsty. "Water, please. We only stopped once on the drive."

"Water is very important." She stretches up to fill a glass pitcher from the tap, wheels to the refrigerator. "Could you get me those ice-cube trays? They're at the top."

She watches him with interest. Radic stumbles once as he crosses the kitchen to open the freezer. He's always been clumsy, especially when he's nervous. But he twists the plastic trays until the ice cracks free, and then dumps the cubes into the pitcher. She hands him a tall glass and wheels the pitcher back to the table. He pours himself a glass and drains it at a single pull, then another. He is terribly thirsty, and it is suddenly downright muggy in the old woman's kitchen. "The Principle of Jealousy was, in the beginning, that which was without form and

void. For that Principle has no life therein, but is only the Abortion of the Spirit."

The tall glass slips from Radic's hands before he can ask Grandma to repeat herself, and she is already there with a thick cloth, shooing him away as she picks up the shards, only looking up to peer curiously at his eyes. "There, no trouble. Would you do something for me?"

"Sure. I'm so sorry about--"

"--Oh, nevermind. My eyesight is not what it was, and I have trouble reading." She hands him a folded newspaper and indicates an article with a yellowed nail. But he cannot read it. The text blurs before his eyes, no matter how closely he brings the paper to his face. "Can you read it, dear?"

"No." His heart pounds desperately in his chest. What is happening?

"Then it's taking effect. You'll notice that Abigail and I didn't actually enjoy any of that delicious cherry pie. Now you know the reason." She grins with ruined teeth and gums. "Child, come here." Her scalp is wet with blood and her face runs with blood and her clothes are soaked in the blood of a thousand million meaningless crimes and atrocities, the sacrifices of a blind, idiot God.

Abigail is fucking bored. That's why she's getting her legs all cut up in the dried grass, seeing a legion of tan locusts each click and flutter into the air with her every step, big thick ones the size of her fingers. When she was younger, she'd stick pins through them and watch them kick their spiny little legs, naming them her enemies. Grandma'd slapped hell out of her, full in the face, and hollered at her something fierce before Abigail'd been able to explain. Grandma went quiet, and said that only weak enemies could be punished by such methods. Grandma took a long drag from the whiskey and coffee she sipped off throughout the day, told her she should look for stronger enemies.

Abigail isn't as dramatic as all that. Sure, she'd gotten sent up to Pierhead after she'd nearly bitten through Melissa Warszawski's neck for calling her a whore behind her back. But the drugs were better at reform school anyway. She'd literally rolled her way through senior year with straight A's. Abigail didn't have time for enemies. The grasses thin out as she nears the gravel pit. Then, all she desired was the sweetness and rush of young love. Like here, with the pills and the whiskey and the weed, with the rough boys who stank of sweat and motor oil, inarticulate, shy, and violent. Water drains right through the sand and gravel, seeps into layers of clay deep below the surface. You can't grow anything up here. But she had drained this pit, these forests, this goddamn town of every drop of ecstasy it had to offer. What irresistible compulsion had drawn her back to this awful place?

She skids down the grit in her sneakers, kicking up clouds of dust. Then Abigail takes a seat on a boulder, behind which she had once often slurred words of love. The dust dulls the glisten of sweat on her pale bare legs. Nearly sunset. She looks up at the red sun sinking down over the edge of the pit, washing all the loose stone a glowing warm orange. Then she sees a form rise up with its back to the sun. She can't make out a single feature, but the deliberate walk looks familiar, somehow. But what is he doing here? And what is he doing with that shotgun?

--shadows in the corners billow with the movements of his head but all that matters is the big fat piggy that's been run over by some speeding truck, flattened and grit-filthed guts trailing out of a dribbling wound of bright orange-pink and glistening yellow fat. It's screaming, and Grandma is screaming too--"As he clothed himself with cursing like as with a garment, so let it come into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones..."

The piggy's womb splits open and a little piglet slips from her ruined body with a flood of shit and afterbirth, and it has no eyes or legs and soon there is a mound of half-formed piglets screaming, their skin white and leprous and flaking off like

Grandma's pie crust, and then the flies fill the piglets' rotten skins with maggots, and the air is abuzz with flies all over his skin, and he can't beat them away, and then he is screaming with all the little piggies that spill forth from the torn piggy's maggoty womb--

There is a dried-brown, cruddy handprint on the shed door. He can see it from the dirt where he lays. He's cold and naked, caked in dried mud and blood. His mouth feels like he's rubbed it out with salt. Everything is still blurry. Like right before--

There are flashes of nonsense in his head. Awful things, disconnected as letters cut out of magazines and tossed into the air. He stands, peers close to the handprint. Unlike this shed, hung with rusted tools, the handprint looks like something he has seen every day of his life. When he places his hand on the print, the door creaks open on unoiled hinges, pouring the morning sunlight on what sits inside that shed upon an altar of sawhorses and old boards.

No sculptor made this crude image, but a peculiar mind as simple and as skillful as child, a child profaned with the secrets of aged crime. These secrets grin from the image's idiot face, from the fresh stains on its broken head and hands. For one who could read the symbols, the intent of the image might be ascertained after some struggle. They do not represent a clear and single evocation of a pure intelligence, but a partial and broken call to blind forces that howled behind this mask, this failure. What unclean and decaying forms could be called to speak through the crack? Then, two things stand out at once. A few inches of the idol's smile shine with human teeth, thick clay lips drawn back to reveal the bone of some jaw, gaped where a molar had once rooted. And the red stains on the image's hands are cruddy with dishwater blonde hairs.

The dull ax is weighted to split logs, but Radic can swing it just fine with two hands. He doesn't know whether Abigail's body had been hidden, or whether it had already been fed to the hogs up the hill. But he figures if it comes down to it, he and the ax could give that old poisoner an easy choice.

The drapes and curtains are all drawn. He has no way of knowing whether he has been observed as he creeps up the stairs, opens the screen door of the porch, slips inside, and closes it with only a slight rattle of the springs. The door into the house is open.

This spare farmhouse is entirely without sentiment. Most people this age have accumulated the detritus of memory, odds-and-ends with which they cocoon themselves against the days of senility and loneliness, irrelevance and failing flesh. There is nothing like that here. There is, however, a locked walnut bookshelf enclosed in glass.

Radic had chosen the impractical vocation of heresiologist, not out of any faith in the peculiar doctrines he investigated, or through a fervor to correct these proscribed errors. Radic is a devotee of no God, and satisfies his curiosity as to the extent of man's folly through the exploration of hidden blasphemies. While he has not yet finished his graduate thesis on Cathar soteriology, his eyesight has returned just enough for him to recognize several of the most notorious Gospels of the Filthy Ones, the Revelations attributed to Cain and Sodom, and instructions concerning the Eucharists of Abortion and Infanticide.

Steel hits him at the back of the knees. A boot stamps on his naked spine. He hears two break-action barrels lock shut on a shotgun, and an ungentle metal prodding where his neck meets his spine. Then the blubbering of his assailant, pleading for him not to move. He can only see the frame of an open doorway leading to the kitchen as he hastily agrees to the demand. The old woman's voice: "Kick that ax over to me, Ananias." The heavy lump of metal slides across the floor. Then: "Honey, why don't you put some coffee on?"

Sluggish, dazed, Abigail steps into view, a length of stained bandages wrapped around her head. She looks at Radic without recognition. Grandma laughs with the dry sound of seeds in the thorn apple. "The proud father woke up just in time for breakfast."

Grandma belches with a sharp rattle. The rot of her body's inmost corruption wafts through the air of the sitting room. She takes a long gulp of cherry Kool-aid, smacks her lips, and begins.

"There is the light, and there is the Dark. But the light is confined to bright-burning specks, while the Dark envelops all other things. The blind Dark is given, sometimes, for moments, a modicum of order. Idiot matter hardens and whirls around these specks of the light, before their suns crumble and die, casting these stones back into nothingness. Our False God is, simply, this universal inanity, the dung of dead stars and lives, the husks left when suns fall sick."

She glugs down the last of the Kool-aid and looks expectantly at the glass and the pitcher. Abigail stands and pours out another glassful without looking up from the floor or changing expression. Grandma leers at her with piggish eyes. Radic tries the strength of the hemp that ties him to the chair.

"The Jews give one of their hells the name of the Exterminating Angel of the Pit, termed by the Christians 'Apollyon' as a blasphemy against the Lord of the Sun. We too, venerate this blasphemy against the light, our Lord of the Locusts. The pit is that place wherein the greatest sinners are chained, the Idolaters, the Sodomites. Those who pass infants through the fire. Those who make themselves into Gods. The unclean peoples venerated this Dweller on the Threshold, and laid the Ark of the Jews' Covenant before it within the corrupt chambers of the Temple of the Pit. Five golden reptiles. Five golden anuses."

Now she gurgles down more of the Kool-aid. She turns with the fervor of a saint,

and fixes her eye on the shed.

“Our old and gnarled God is the pull of the dark to disorder, the hands that claw up from the soil to pollute their descendents with pestilence suckled in the dead earth. When one ascends to the light, those hands seize upon the Aspirant. Our False God’s broken hands. If one will cross the Threshold, and leave the stinking air of the shattered temple, one must pay our Lord of Jealousy. The shells of seeds fall to earth. Skins of fish are tossed back to the waters. The filth of the spirit feeds the horror of emptiness. One mighty in the light, aflame with aspiration, climbs the Tree of Life as the tempting serpent known among men as Christ, leaving our False God clutching only a shed skin. But the broken hands of our Syrian idol snatch hold of almost all who seek to crawl from the pit, and drag men down to gaze into the poisonous wells of his dead eyes.”

Grandma wheels closer to the window, so that she can gaze more closely upon her shrine. A sneer jerks through the sag and fat of her face, and she squints her eyes with pain, holding her belly as she is struck with a long spasm of her secret parts.

“Our God is like some predator from the deep, where no light can reach, wriggling upward to throttle warm life with rubbery arms. We do not venerate him for lust of power, or of holiness. We worship him because we have abandoned hope, and thus acquiesce to the way of all things. The light is doomed to extinguishment, and no fear of what lurks in the Dark and in the cold can change this. Life is not of the nature of the light. Life is only animate Darkness, self-spawning, all-devouring. Blind, idiot motion that is either gulped, or broken, or simply winds down like some shoddy machine.”

If there were tears left in Grandma’s aged eyes, some might have sprung forth and ran down her ruined cheeks.

Radic has been left in the storm cellar to get his hollering out of the way, while

Abigail helps Grandma with her chores. Tears fall from her eyes, leaving glittering spots on the counters. She keeps looking out the window to the little foreign-made car. You can't see much of it through the heat fumes coming off the gasoline fire that covers the vehicle, roaring out from the charred seats and interior. The tires kick up the worst of the dense, black, toxic smoke. Grandma coughs, splitting open thorn apples with gloved hands and removing the dried seeds to a ceramic mortar, and admonishes her in low tones. "It is what you were born to do. Then your own reprobate and unbroken whore of a daughter will draw a stock beast of her own here to the shrine, and she will be returned in kind. And then the same to her daughter."

All Abigail can do is choke out the words, "My Daddy," before the tears shut her mouth.

"I've put your Daddy to a better use. Best hope I'm not dead before you need to dispose of that city-bred college boy. You must learn the prayers and hours used to erect new idols for the Shattered Temple." She grinds the seeds to deliriant powder. "Go mind the herbs in the garden, Abigail."

Instead, Abigail walks past the garden of poisons staked out next to the farmhouse and past the pig-pens with their stench. Uncle Ananias sees her, and averts his eyes. He will not interfere in what is to come. Everything is going to change. Today is the day that she is going to see her Daddy.

Up the rollaway, the forest becomes a gnarl of jack pines clawing up out of the rusty sand. Around Memorial Day, the pines cast off a haze of yellow pollen that lays a film over everything for miles. But now they are quiet and clenched, cones waiting for flame to open them up so that their seeds can sprout from the ashes of their sires. In a knothole in the side of one of the eldest ones, Abigail pours a good drink of whiskey. She lights one of her Camels, and blows the smoke into the tree.

Out of sight in the knothole sits a clay jar. A long time ago, Abigail herself waded out into the swamp where Grandma had found so many of her victims. It was

September then too, a Friday, just after the full moon, when the moon wears the dark face of a spearman in haircloth, and causes discords and journeys. She'd taken a bullfrog, flicked out a switchblade given to her by some young mechanic who'd dropped out of the tenth grade, and cut off the frog's head and legs alive. She'd nicked some willow oil from Grandma's cabinets, steeped the limbs and head in a mason jar for three weeks. Then, she dried the flesh and bone under three nights of a moon that promotes the flights of servants and captives.

Her Daddy had been buried in town, but what they'd put into the dirt was missing some crucial bits. Still, she went to the grave one Monday night with whiskey, cigarettes, and thirteen dimes to buy a few handfuls of gravedirt from the shade of her father. The goatsuckers twisted between the trees as she approached, but comported themselves with watchful silence as she failed to raise her Daddy's ghost.

Grandma had told Abigail once that she needed to find stronger enemies. When Abigail realized that her Daddy was bound, damned and screaming, within the idol of the Threshold, she made her first and only enemy. But her's has never been war of open insurrection. She is, after all, the heiress of witches.

At the twelfth stroke of midnight, she ground the oiled bones and flesh into the dirt bought from her Daddy's grave, watering the soil with her tears. She left the switchblade in the dirt, for even ghosts need weapons. And she placed as a seed in her pot her Daddy's tooth, stolen from the Shattered Temple. Her prayers and offerings slowly drew the ghost from one clay prison to another clay seat, and soon, there was nothing left in the shed but dried bone, a mirror for the detritus of rotten minds, and the awful intimacies demanded by the malignant powers that use such for marionettes.

So then, the daughter of the daughter of a witch, and a murdered man who'd known the damnation of Idolatry, and the Shells of Abaddon, were reunited at last. The Aspirant had taken house uneasily in dirt and bone. He had only a frog's throat for voice, and, away from the watching gaze of waking men, the

ghost would sometimes hop through the pines of his land by awful marriage. But mostly he spoke through the movement of branches in the wind, or through flourishes of pollen in the spring. It is upon this high place, in the secret grove, that a father and daughter plot their final revenge.

Radic awakens from the only sort of sleep you can get when you're tied to a chair with scratchy rope. The storm cellar opens and footsteps scrape the concrete. Even silhouetted against the moonlight, he recognizes Abigail's form. His skin crawls when he sees what she has brought with her; a switchblade and a can of gasoline, and the shadowy, hunched form of some tiny, hopping, thing. She makes the sign of silence before he can try to yell for help, and kneels before him.

Holding the switchblade against the rope, she looks at him with eyes full of dangerous promises. "When you have found the vulture and the nurse of crocodiles, you will be purified and consecrated. But now you must meet me to the east of the altar in the place of the Accuser." He nods, and she slashes open the rope. She hands him the switchblade, and croaks in his ear. "Long hast thou dwelt in Darkness. Quit the night and seek the day." As quick as she came, she runs up the stairs. The question enters his mind, and a tiny hunched shadow whispers some barbarous words, and it is answered. He knows what he must do.

She is waiting for him in the dark when he opens the door. Stripes of lunatic glow stretch across her body, cast from beyond the blinds on the bedroom window. Grandma looks up at Radic, her wet, pained eyes flashing white in the moonlight. "What made you think that I would struggle?"

Radic brings the blade down into the frail form. He hits something vital right off. Grandma shudders like a half-crushed roach, limbs flailing at the weapon thrust in her cancered torso, exhaling from the wound a gagging stench of corruption. He leaves her spilling out and thrashing on her bed, running down the hall to the old woman's bathroom to vomit. Kneeling over the toilet, glaring up with wild

eyes at the floral print wallpaper, he wonders how heavy the body will be in his arms. Like the idiot grin of a False idol, the moon has no answers.

In the morning light, the trees continue almost right up to the lake's edge, thinning out as they grow up from the wet mats of peat moss, and the gray mud of the water's edge. The lake is ringed by forest. Across the water is a sagging trailer. Radic cannot tell if the trailer is occupied. No tracks around it. No lights in the windows. Does sound carry that far? He looks to see if there's any smoke left from the fire, but the trees hide clear view. The shed had caught flame quickly, and they had doused the old woman as thoroughly as they had soaked her False God.

How long had he run? By this time, the sun is out and shining, and the morning sky's merciless blue reflects on the lake which, below the mirror, is black to the bottom, liquid grave of aged horses, dangerous muck of rotten weeds that keeps the ice soft all winter, liquid grave too of the odd whiskey-drunk January fisherman. She had forgotten her oath, and broken the solemn pledge. That which was secret had been revealed, and the Light had been taken from her. Abigail had stayed with Radic until dawn, watching the flames tear down the temple. Then she had walked up the rollaway to the woods. A half-bestial shadow met her at the tree line, and hopped with her into the pines. It is autumn. The air is still muggy from summer, and rings with the war song of forest birds. The sun shines on a mirror world of hidden death, and the vultures wing overhead on the plumes of heat, gyring down to the road to feast on burst dogs. Radic hopes that what is hidden remains hidden, and that which was broken and now burns crumbles at last to ash.

Grace Noel



Coleopterror at the Races

As I opened the door into Hell, I realised I'd forgotten Alice.

I obviously don't mean *the* Hell. The United Kingdom's regional heats of the underground race meetings are held in a room that, I imagine, assaults the senses as would the devil's hovel. Once the beer-soaked cellar of a pub that's now graffiti canvas, it's a low-ceilinged space that's always stifling. Claggy, hoppy air that's oppressive, heady with a miasma of sweat, alcohol and vape. Expensive perfume fighting with counterfeit aftershave. An underlying sour smell of addicts' cravings. The basement has sulphurous lighting courtesy of fat bulbs, dust-covered and peppered with fly excreta.

I was later than planned - traffic being worse than its usual monstrous self - and bets were already being placed at blurring speed. Crisp plasti-notes held aloft like flags (this being a cash only event). I watched the elderly Bookie as she slid past the gathered crowd like a grey swan, swapping the proffered bills for coloured tickets.

Set apart from this cacophony of betting, beyond a tattered rope that strained against the building excitement, five handlers assembled at the head of a long table. Lengths of plywood had been used to create six individual lanes on the grey painted top. At the head of each lane was a gated trap into which each handler now gently lowered their racers. They stepped back, somewhat theatrically, to give everyone beyond the rope a good look at the competitors. The crowd erupted in more frenzied betting as they recognised champions. The Bookie circled. Racebugs gleamed like precious jewels in fly corpse-filtered light - their procurement and training costing almost as much as their gemstone likenesses.

It was indeed a formidable shimmer of *Carabidae*: the cosmopolitan family of ground beetles, coveted for racing. These elite specimens were rearing up at the

gates that impeded their path to food lures beckoning from the lane ends. Sibilant hisses and chitinous crackles abounded as I moved in close, recognising the race-bugs and their anxious handlers.

Janet from Wales with her *Violaceus*: bruise-purple as a mangosteen;
Doc from Manchester and his *Elaphrus*: blue crab-shell iridescent;
Northern Ireland's favourite, Terry and his *Broscus*: the biggest competitor, deadly-black as gunpowder;
Newcomer Imani from London with her *Amara*: bullet-shaped, coruscate of green rust;
Big Mo from Glasgow with his latest *Carabus*: gold-powdered, green as sweat bees.

It was an impressive line-up, which my racer had absolutely earned her place in. Trap six of course remained pitifully empty. My glorious Belarusian *Dromius*, Alice, two years' North West champion, was likely enjoying an evening of peace and quiet at home in her tank. Radio 4 on low. Early night.

I was drenched in flop sweat, dabbing at my face with a wad of tissue as I approached the Bookie. She glowered at me beneath beetle-grub-hairy grey brows, her eyes bright as any insect that raced under her glare. I explained my predicament, the terrible traffic. Alice earning a race lane after winning the third heat, was there nothing I could do? I'd heard of last-minute substitutions, extenuating circumstances and such, could she see her way to allowing me that opportunity? The Bookie knew I didn't have a back-up racer, there was only one substitute available to me.

So, she smiled, a slicing yellow-toothed thing, pointed to a door in the far corner of the cellar. Cackling like a broken engine, she returned to counting notes, securing rubber-bands around slippery bundles before packing them into her canvas

money belt. I looked over at the painted plywood door, peeling and scabrous, and shuddered. I knew that behind it was a bathroom so vile and malodorous, I avoided it at every meet. Everyone did. I turned back to the Bookie; my less hirsute eyebrows raised in confusion. She shrugged skeletal shoulders, made a horrible clicking sound with her tongue and said,

‘Darklings.’

The only substitute available.

I opened the door with no small degree of trepidation. Stepped inside the tiny, cold box reeking of urine and mould, stained with worse. I pulled my sweater over my nose, breathed cashmere. Behind the repugnant lavatory that was marked beyond comprehension, several broken floor tiles beckoned. Crazed once-white ceramic that easily lifted: revealing a starburst of churchyard beetles. Husky and liquorice-black, they are leggier than most *Carabidae*, with a natural knee joint lubricant that keeps them lithe. What they lacked in bedazzle, they made up for in speed, and sheer arrogance. Attempts to train them inevitably ended in failure: I’d only ever seen one on the race circuit. A massive specimen, a regaled Scottish darkling that killed two opponents in its last race, copulated with another, then vanished into the ensuing melee and onto the unsuspecting streets of Aberdeen.

Now here I was, crouching in the fetid room, with my practiced fingers seeking one out, my face alarmingly close to the rim of the toilet. When I straightened up, I could feel strong legs kicking my palm, pushing against my curled fingers. I wasn’t used to such resistance - Alice was always totally unruffled - so I made haste to the race table. I caught the Bookie’s beady eye and she nodded, then announced my participation in the race with a sub to the unimpressed crowd. I lowered the darkling into the starter cage, where he instantly calmed. Like he’d spent his whole nocturnal life longing to be a race bug. Perhaps hearing the adoration of the crowd and craving it. Like a gladiator in the arena of a Roman city.

I ignored the collective mirth of the other handlers, scoffing at my last-minute

entrant. Ignored the gamblers pointing and shaking their heads at the gangly, undistinguished churchyard beetle. As they watched him stretch his rangy legs, a meagre few swapped notes for tickets. It was disappointing – Alice would have commanded fierce betting – but preferable to admitting outright defeat.

A dimming of the lights above the race table hushed the baying crowd. It was time. They parted to allow the Adjudicator to waddle into position above the finish line – a strip of yellowed tape across the table's width. He was corpulent in a ludicrous acid-lime tuxedo, neck straining a precise white collar. Belly testing the veracity of synthetic fabric. Despite being lost like raisins in a pudding, his eyes were precise as microscope lenses. Should there be any ambiguity as to the winner of this night's race, he would have final say. No photo finish: just the fat man's stare. He mopped his beaded brow, then held up the same black silk handkerchief, raisin-eyes sparkling. We all held in hot breath until the silk dropped with an elytral swish, and the gates pinged open. The crowd roared as five of the race bugs erupted into their lanes; a burst of clicking feet and luminous colour. I ignored all the action around me, focused on the leggy amateur who lingered in the trap.

What happened next was quite unexpected and remains seared onto my brain (as well as literally seared onto the table). While the room filled with cheering and jeering, the darkling appeared to look up at me, frustratingly still amidst the frenzy. I frowned, waved my hands to encourage him. The other bugs were scuttling up the table, lured by sweet writhing grubs, spurred on by their puce-faced handlers, when the darkling suddenly galloped from the trap, legs a blur. I whooped as he easily overtook the others, my heart thundering with his footwork, sensing the win. Then he stopped hard, turned side on to present his deadly rump to the other lanes. I swear the darkling waved his antennae at me then, before lowering his head and raising his tail; those legs allowing for quite a lift. My hands flew to the top of my head and my heart zigzagged behind my ribs. I knew what was coming, was helpless to stop it. The darkling tensed, then released a fanning stream of dark, noxious liquid. It fell in a foul mist onto the race table. Onto glistening, champion elytra. There was a cacophony of unintelligible sounds—both coleopteran and human—the race bugs stopped in their tracks, spinning in horror.

The tattered rope groaned, then snapped from the crush of the crowd: some panicking, others seeing an opportunity to snatch a champion. Outraged handlers launched themselves at their prize bugs, sprawling across the table, elbows and feet flying. Terry scooped up his Broscus, earning a retaliatory expulsion of defensive spray in the face. Big Mo and Janet were just too slow: they wailed as their winners were spirited away by quick, greedy hands. Imani, who was a tiny thing, had secured her Amara quickly and they now huddled under the decimated race table.

The Adjudicator pummelled by the panicked rabble, crashed to the floor on his substantial buttocks, his face lobster-pink. I spotted his abandoned kerchief, used it to reach down and swaddle the devious darkling, spent as he now was, before gently secreting him in a coat pocket. I crossed the cellar as fast as I could, stumbling into the Bookie - who was pressed against the hideous bathroom's door—both of us scrabbling to get free. Eventually, the darkling and I were able to escape the stinking chaos: clambering from Hell to the relatively fresh air of an alley of overstuffed bins and dog shit.

I marched to where my car had been hastily parked. I could hear the darkling clicking in my pocket: sounds like firecrackers. I imagined it was victory cries. He might not have won a race, he might well have secured me a temporary exclusion from future heats, but he'd proven to be a magnificent distraction. I reached into my coat pocket; felt the bulk of the money belt I'd appropriated from the Bookie as we collided. I pressed the canvas-wrapped notes deeper into that pocket as the darkling chuckled away in the other.

The Old Ways

As Shelly and Weston made their way west to the vacation town Blue Springs, the sun began to set, casting everything orange, the color of the sky before a tornado. As they climbed a gentle hill, they were greeted by a painting of a white, blue-eyed Jesus brandishing a head of corn. It took Weston a moment to realize he was seeing an ad for the country's largest Christian corn maze. This place reminded him of where he'd grown up, a rural hamlet with four churches and one convenience store with a post-office attached and miles and miles of corn and wheat going in every direction.

"I'm starting to think this was a bad idea," Weston said.

He could imagine himself in a pew as a child, around six or seven years old, listening to the pastor preach about how even children would go to hell if they did not believe. The pastor had looked right at him as he said *God watches the people in hell, watches them catch on fire, their skin curl up and blacken like burning book pages. The demons rise from the ash and flames to torment them. And God knows that it is good.* Weston had nodded, his eyes on the pastor's face, his hands folded tight in his lap, his body straight and hard as the unforgiving wooden pew behind him. That night, he'd peed the bed for the first time in years and his father had made him wash the sheets by hand and hang them out to dry in the dark.

Shelly startled Weston out of his memories, reading aloud from her phone. "Though the surrounding area is extremely isolated and rural, Blue Springs is a cultural haven for the Ozarks, a home for artists and freethinkers both in the area and across the country."

"Don't worry," she said. "I promise, it's not gonna be like this when we get there. Once we get on the mountain it'll be different." She knew how Weston had grown up. She had come from a secular family, where the closest thing they had to a faith

was their family devotion to a jam band that they'd followed from tour to tour every year. She often quizzed him about what it had been like to really and truly believe in hell.

"Did you have nightmares about it? Did you think that if you died as a kid, you'd go there, too?"

He usually just shrugged and told her he didn't remember, but he remembered.

Soon after, as the elevation rose and roads became difficult and winding again, the billboards switched from religion to restaurants, from anti-abortion statements to marijuana dispensary advertisements.

"See?" Shelly said. "I told you. There's a drag queen selling CBD pens. We're back to civilization!"

Weston smiled. He appreciated her attempts to soothe him. The trip had been her idea. A second honeymoon on their one year anniversary, since their first honeymoon had been cut short by Weston getting sick two days in. Shelly had found him doubled over in the bathroom. It was his appendix, and he'd spent the rest of the trip in the hospital, recovering just in time to take the flight back. He felt guilty about it, though Shelly never blamed him. But the unsaid agreement was that she could pick the next destination, and she picked Blue Springs.

She was a researcher, and had shared her research about Blue Springs with him. The town had developed a reputation for healing in the mid-to late 19th century. People with tuberculosis, cancer, syphilis, and other then-fatal ailments had traveled from far and wide to bathe in the natural springs that burst from the rocks and gathered in pools. Shelly's articles and books hadn't said it explicitly, but it was obvious to Weston why the town later experienced such a steep decline in population: the healing had largely been unsuccessful, and eventually, many

people had died here. By 1920, there were more graves in Blue Springs than living residents

Aside from the springs that didn't heal, the town had also historically boasted a notorious huckster, Clyde Simmons, who had lured cancer patients to Blue Springs with a promised cure. Simmons charged them exorbitant sums while feeding them an elixir of sugar water and aspirin powder. When his victims died, Simmons disposed of the bodies in an incinerator and continued to write to their family members, asking for more money. He was found out eventually, though the authorities could only get him for mail fraud, as the ill had given explicit permission for the doctor to do with their bodies as he pleased. He spent a couple of years in prison and was released early. He lived out the rest of his life in relative obscurity, finally dying from a heart attack while on a yacht just off the coast of Miami. .

The enormous building that had once been Simmons' dubious medical facility was now a hotel, the Cross, named for the cross that rose from a metal rod on the roof, high above the mountainside and therefore above the town. Shelly had insisted they stay there for the weekend. Weston thought that staying in a creaky Victorian-era murder house with near-original plumbing did not sound like his idea of fun, but he went along with it.

When they arrived, Weston noted that the Cross was at least situated in an interesting place — on the top of a mountain, looming above a natural rift between rock outcroppings, where the town had been built, ramshackle, on the edges of two slopes. Facing the Cross from across a narrow valley, perched on the opposite mountain range, was an enormous statue of Jesus in the style of the Jesus in Rio de Janeiro, only crudely done, his body stubby and disproportionate.

"It's weird, isn't it," Shelly had said that first night they went out on the deck and saw the glowing Christ from a distance, his arms perpetually outstretched, lit up with spotlights after sundown.

"We're in the Bible belt," Weston said. "Maybe somebody saw an opportunity

here.”

In addition to the artists and the freethinkers the town promotional materials had boasted, evangelical Christian groups came to see a yearly staging of The Passion, which included a live performance of Jesus being whipped and carrying the cross to Golgotha. It was a performance, but the pamphlet Weston found in the hotel lobby insisted that the performance was realistic, and featured a picture of a man wearing a thorn crown, technicolor blood flowing down his back.

On the first day, Shelly and Weston hiked out to see the farthest spring, one that gushed out of a collection of monolith-shaped rocks. On the way, they passed several decrepit churches, one of which was identifiable as a church only because of the cross on the heavy wooden door. The cross was decorated with a realistic heart at the crosspoint, lopped veins and arteries spraying stylized blood, the structure itself surrounded by waving cephalopod arms, suckered up the lengths.

“What the fuck is that?” Shelly had said aloud when they passed it.

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to be murdered by some weird cult today,” he’d said, steering Shelly away.

Shelly shook her head, laughing at him. “They don’t murder *tourists*,” she teased. “That would be bad for business.”

He looked away. He didn’t want to discourage her enthusiasm, but sometimes Shelly didn’t know enough to be scared when it was obvious fear was the only natural response.

At lunch, their waiter reeled off the weekend events. Concerts, art exhibits, and religious programming, all stuffed into a three-day weekend, with some rare Wednesday events.

"We might stay an extra day," Shelley told the waiter. They were eating in the hotel's crystal ballroom, which had once been the greenhouse, a place where the sick patients had tended plants: Dr. Simmons (though he was not a doctor) recommended that the ill spend time with plants for their healing properties. Weston imagined the dying shuffling around the room, watering cans in hand, hoping that something intangible in the air would heal them.

The waiter didn't recommend staying. "This place is dead on Mondays," he said. "Everything's closed—even the grocery store. It's our Sunday. We run a skeleton staff here on Mondays, so you can't get room service or towels or anything. I wouldn't be surprised if the ambulances won't run," he'd said, laughing.

Shelly just nodded, impatient. "I get it. Still, we'd like to get to know the town without so many tourists around. Just locals."

The waiter nodded at this, a smile on his lips.

"So you two feel like locals?" His smile was conspiratorial and intimate. Weston didn't like it.

"Oh, I do, but Weston has his doubts." She was being playful and teasing, but this put Weston even more on edge—he felt as though they were both making fun of him.

The waiter turned to Weston as though seeing him for the first time.

"Oh, so you don't love it here?"

Weston shrugged.

"Do tell," he said, turning the full power of his flirtation toward Weston. "Maybe I can report your complaints to the tourism department."

"This place feels like one big graveyard," he said, simply. "I can feel it in this room, even, all the history of death."

The waiter blinked, holding Weston's gaze for a moment longer than comfortable. Weston looked away. "Well, then. You'll fit right in. We all feel spooked out in our own town, too. Part of the appeal for us spooky people." He winked as he swept their dishes away.

Weston did not want to fit in, but Shelley seemed so excited.

"Please?" she said. "I swear I'll make it up to you. We'll go to a baseball game or something." This was a kind offer coming from her. She found baseball painful. All waiting and no action, she always said.

Weston sighed. "I'll think about it," he said, though the idea of staying in this place when it was empty sounded like a nightmare, even more so than being here when it was full of people holding up their phones down every hallway, hoping to capture an orb or apparition of some poor dead cancer patient, stuck in this miserable hotel forever.

They spent the afternoon walking around the cheerful, bustling downtown. Long-haired twentysomethings strummed their guitars in the park at the center of town. A few people holding signs gathered by a tarp-covered fountain at the center of the park. They were mostly elderly men and women, the men wearing overalls, the women in what looked like church clothes—polyester blouses and long skirts, some variation of faded flower or dingy pastel, some wearing scarves over their hair. Their signs all said the same thing: *Give us back our town.*

They didn't seem angry: they stood near-silent, barely shuffling or blinking.

"I wonder what they mean," Weston said aloud. Shelly shrugged, but a man softly playing banjo on the bench beside them looked up.

"It means they don't like all the artists and hippies who've taken over." He smiled, clearly on the side of artists and hippies. "They don't like how we've changed the traditions, opened the place up. They miss the old ways. Old days, I mean. When they were in charge, their church the only church."

Weston nodded and turned to Shelley as if to speak to her, hoping to avoid more conversation.

The man continued. "But they know they need us to keep it going," he said, then saluted playfully at the man in overalls, who looked forward, stony-eyed, as though he hadn't heard or seen anything. Weston watched the elderly man for some reaction, but saw none. The man's sign was different from the others, it depicted the local Jesus statue before a bloodred sky. He felt a pang of embarrassment for the elderly man, outmatched by the banjo player, and wished he could make this interaction stop.

"Before us, this was just another dying mountain town." The banjo player said. "They needed us."

On Sunday morning, Weston woke to an empty bed. It was a perfect, bright morning, but late, later than he'd slept for years. He remembered falling asleep while they watched a movie on the ancient television at the hotel, a VHS copy of *Blue Velvet* that had given him nightmares about a woman clawing at the door, asking to come in, asking him to hurt her.

He went to the balcony and Shelly was already there, staring dreamily out at the

view of Jesus in the distance and the leaves on the edge of changing, veins of red and yellow and orange occasionally breaking up the vivid green. But the air hung heavy, still summer hot, and Weston felt ready to get home, back to central air and faucets that didn't spurt rusty, cold water before clearing.

"Can we go downstairs to breakfast?" Weston asked, a touch too loudly.

"You slept well," she said, no trace of disturbance on her face. "See? I told you you'd like it."

Weston shrugged. "I need to eat, then let's figure out what to do before this whole town shutters itself. Apparently everyone crawls into a coffin when the tourists leave."

Downstairs, the dining room was only half filled; people had started to leave already. The same waiter as yesterday swept through, setting down more of the bitter coffee in a carafe and a bowl full of hearty muffins, busy with seeds and grains. The muffins were as tough and tasteless as they looked, but Weston finished his anyway, trying to soften the edge of his hunger. They ate in near silence. Weston was nervous. When he'd first started dating Shelly, his mother had asked him if he was willing to be with somebody who, in her words, would "keep you on your toes." Weston had to admit that he needed somebody to keep him in the world, if not on his toes. Before Shelly, he remembered spending whole weekends at home, reading fantasy novels or simply staring up at the ceiling for hours, lost in thoughts about worlds that didn't exist, about people who didn't exist. He was satisfied with his imagination, though it pained him sometimes that the real world was so disappointing, his tech job so simple. He'd met Shelly on a blind date, set up by work friends. He'd taken her to a local play, on a whim, which she'd found charming. He, too, had been in a garrulous mood that night, after three glasses of wine, and they'd walked and talked for hours. He told her about his childhood surrounded by cornfields, in a quiet house where he'd made

up companions in the walls, imagining them as invisible friends who only he could see, which she'd declared darling. The morning after, he woke up with a red wine headache and a sense that maybe he'd said too much, though he felt a glow, too: he'd shared himself with somebody else, with this woman who had endless, voracious curiosity about the things she loved. She had told him in great detail about her current obsession, musicians who made just one or two albums and then disappeared or died or gave up making music: like Mary Margaret O'Hara, whose songs were intense and obsessive, often repeating the same phrase over and over until it became a curse or a prayer or Jackson C. Frank, who made one beautiful album of folk music before his mind betrayed him and he spent the next thirty years between institutions and homelessness until his early death at age fifty-seven. She knew the fine details of things in a way he didn't, which made him feel inferior. How large the world was when he was with her. And how small he was in comparison. He hadn't believed himself capable of keeping such a lively person interested in him. But she was.

Shelly convinced him that she liked his steadiness, his ability to stay in one place. And she was good at realizing when she overwhelmed him. She gave him space. This vacation was her turn to bask in the strangeness of this place she'd been enamored with after months of research. He was being fair, a good husband. And yet, he resented it. Resentment was an ugly emotion, one he wished he didn't feel so often toward the person he cared about most in the world, but he did. She took all the air out of a room sometimes.

Shelly was lit up from within in this place, her face active, hands animated. This reminded Weston of Shelly as she'd been during their honeymoon, when they stumbled across a carnival set up in the parking lot of an old pharmacy. She'd been excited to try out all of the most dangerous-looking rides and play the most obviously rigged games for stuffed animals that nobody wanted. Shelly had asked Weston to throw darts at balloons to get her a prize.

"C'mon," she'd said. "Just try. We'll take turns."

The man behind the booth had rotten, crooked teeth and was thin, wrinkled up like a piece of beef jerky. Weston had immediately felt that this man would get the better of him, that this man, despite his clear lack of fortune, was freer and smarter and better than him. And he was right, the man did get the better of him. As soon as he heard Shelly's interest, the man popped a balloon and said "try once and that's a free one, for three more dollars you can try for the big prize," Weston had handed over the money and took aim. Before he could step away the man had popped two more balloons himself with a dart he held in his hand, *pop pop pop*.

"That's two for free, another five bucks and you can try for the dragon."

The dragon was enormous, half Shelly's size. It sat at the very top of a triangle of stuffed animals.

"Get all five and you can win your girl the prize."

Shelly stood back, watching Weston squirm and hand over money. It took several more times around before he won her the prize. Weston lost track of how much money he handed over to the man who just kept the game going, over and over, until Weston said he had nothing more to give. Weston knew he was being played, lured to shell out money for something he didn't even want, but he felt helpless to stop.

When it was finally over and the man hefted the dragon over the counter, Weston handed it to Shelly.

"I thought you were going to play, too" Weston said.

Shelly smiled. "I was just waiting to see how long you'd keep going."

They walked downtown after breakfast. A spring and small pool that had been covered for repairs over the weekend was now unveiled, the yellow safety tape removed from around it.

Weston stared, not sure what he was looking at.

"Oh Christ," Shelly said. "Are you seeing this?" She raised her arm to take a photograph. "I saw some pictures of this online, I was hoping we'd be able to see it in person."

The fountain rose up in what initially looked like a column, but upon further inspection, it was the elongated body of an octopus, or something like it, the arms twisted straight up until they opened out at the top of the fountain, each arm curled willy-nilly, water spraying back into the narrow pool through some impossible physics built into the design. Weston couldn't comprehend how it worked.

"I guess it's better than little cherubs peeing," Shelley said.

Weston wasn't sure about that.

The protesters held their signs again, but this time what looked like two whole families had shown up. The men all wore overalls over workshirts with short hair and clean-shaven faces, the women old housedresses, faded flowery prints that went down to their ankles. One held up a sign with no words, just the image from the church near the spring, a cross with a realistically rendered human heart at the crux.

A lone musician was out in the square now, the same banjo player from the day before. Weston hated to talk to him again and invite the mistaken idea that they were friends, but he was also curious.

"Hey," he asked, "are they in a cult or something? What's up with the...octopus stuff?"

The banjo player didn't stop playing as he explained.

"Not a cult, just real traditional."

"But, an octopus..."

The banjo player shrugged. "I guess some old preacher needed a way to make his church distinct." Weston thought he detected some disgust in the man's voice. "The symbols don't belong to them, they just took them and tacked them onto their crosses" he said. Weston didn't understand, but nodded anyway. The banjo player must have caught his confused look, so he explained. "From way back, before settlers came, the octopus was an important spiritual symbol."

Weston shook his head. "But...why? We're landlocked"

The man shrugged. "Whatever the reason, it's important to the area, and that was so long before they came. Long before Jesus, before writing, before any of our ancestors stepped foot on this land."

The banjo player spoke loudly, so loud the protesters could hear him. Weston noticed the same elderly man from the day before, watching them carefully as they spoke. When Weston made eye contact with him, the man shook his head, as though disappointed in them both.

The banjo player winked at him, and the man turned away, his face wrinkled in disgust.

Weston backed away. He went back to Shelly, who was crouched by the pool surrounding the fountain.

"Put your hand in," she said. "Put your whole arm in."

The protestors turned to watch them. Weston thought he detected disapproval

from their stares.

"Are we supposed to touch the water?" He asked, tugging her away from the fountain. She gave him a withering look that made him feel stupid for asking. Weston nodded, then rolled up his sleeve and put his arm in up to his elbow.

"Christ," he said. "It's freezing." He jerked his arm back.

"Keep going," she said, tugging his arm down, ignoring his sleeves. "It goes really deep."

Weston pushed his arm down farther, to please her. The water just got colder. He wiggled his fingers but could feel no bottom. His arm felt numb, and more than that, he felt a movement in the water, a vibration. He jerked his arm out with an exclamation. The protestors watched him, too, their faces blank.

"It's amazing," Shelly said, not noticing his response. "A spring bubbling up from the ground like this, so deep and cold."

"It's not just amazing, it's a miracle," one of the protestors said. "And miracles need to be protected."

The banjo player laughed and did a gentle fingerpicking roll. "Miracles aren't miracles if nobody's here to see them."

The whole day felt off to Weston, strange and empty and hushed. Shelly had asked him to visit all of the downtown sites, which she identified on an oversized map. She pulled him down to the tiny door in the wall below an enormous mural of the town as depicted at the turn of the century, bustling with farmers in overalls bringing fruit and vegetables to the center of town, where they were piled up at the town square, around a fountain. The mural depicted women dancing in a

semicircle around the pile of fruit.

The door was grimy and made of metal with bars where a window would be.

"The door doesn't open anymore," she told him, examining the map. "It's an old entrance to the underground city. Parts of it flooded out back in the 20's and the old town was sealed up, then, and a new level built on top. You can see it through the sidewalk grates, though, and some of the old entrances are built into the underground shops." Weston looked through the metal bars and squinted, trying to make out anything in that dim. He thought he saw a flicker of movement, maybe the bright spot of an eye catching a fragment of light, but he couldn't be sure.

When they finally got back to the hotel for dinner, Shelly was electric, talking about the underground city and how it connected to this very hotel, to the old morgue where the fraudulent doctor had incinerated the bodies.

"He'd just tell the other patients that that missing patient made a miraculous turnaround, that they'd left that morning, eager to go home. Then, he'd burn the body in the basement and take the cremains through the tunnel and throw them into one of the springs."

"How often did that work, I wonder?" Weston asked. "Surely somebody caught on at some point."

Shelly shrugged. "Maybe they understood what they were doing. Maybe just being here was enough to feel like healing, even if their bodies were dying. Plus, I bet it was a relief to a lot of families that a desperately sick person was being taken care of, no matter if they didn't come back."

After three glasses of wine, and an involuntary nap at the dinner table when Shelly took a seemingly interminable time in the bathroom, Shelly brought him up to the hotel room and placed him gently in bed. Weston closed his eyes when

he felt Shelly's weight beside him, still dressed, stroking his hair. He murmured and pressed against her. This was the vacation he'd hoped for, this soft fall into something familiar.

Weston woke up in the dark, but not in his room. He was aware of being cold, of being pressed against something hard and icy. He recognized that he was naked, and when he tried to rise, to see if he'd fallen on the floor or somehow sleepwalked out into the hallway, he met resistance at his wrists, his ankles, and his throat. He was bound to some kind of table, and when he tried to look to see how he was bound, he saw only darkness—this wasn't his room, but somewhere that smelled earthy and sharp, like a room full of damp books.

In all that darkness, a tiny light flickered on and danced. He saw the flame and the person holding it come forward. He felt the flame by his face.

"Shelly?" he asked.

"I'm here," she said. She was holding the candle. She leaned down close to him, the candle warm against his skin.

He could make out her face in the light of the candle, but not much else. She was crying, and she looked at Weston, then at the group around her, as if trying to figure out where she was exactly, how this had happened. Weston tried without much success to focus on her face, but the world spun. Her reaction was almost as destabilizing as being strapped to a table. Shelly was in a panic, something he'd never seen before.

"What's wrong?" He tried to say, wondering if she might need his help as much as he needed hers, but the words came out sluggish, his voice unfamiliar to him. He felt drugged, and then remembered the wine he'd had the night before and how sleepy he'd become after finishing a glass. Maybe she'd been drugged, too. Maybe somebody had tried to hurt her. He opened his mouth and struggled against the

bonds, but she placed a hand on his chest and shushed him.

"Listen," she said, "I know you're afraid, but you have to believe that this is going to be worth it." She tried to smile, but her face wouldn't complete the expression.

Weston's panic roared through the fuzziness of his brain.

"Please, Shelly. Tell me what's happening," he managed to get out, a new realization dawning on him even as she tried to soothe him.

"You've gotta trust me, Weston. This is going to be amazing." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "It's hard to see you this way, but it's going to be over soon, and you'll see. We'll both see."

She smiled and he felt a slow, heavy rage rush up through his chest.

"You drugged me."

She shook her head and looked behind her as if searching for help.

As he readied himself to scream at her again, a young man materialized from the darkness behind Shelly with a balled up sock. As Weston protested, the man shoved it into his mouth, nearly catching his fingers between Weston's teeth.

The man shook his head, as though frustrated with Weston's embarrassing displays of fear. It was the waiter, Weston recognized, the man out of his work clothes and dressed in a dark, long-sleeved shirt and pants, which made him blend into the darkness.

Several men, also dressed all in black, gathered around the object Weston was tied to, gently pushing Shelley aside. They grabbed the sides, which apparently had handholds, and with a grunt, lifted it. He was moving now, out of the dark room and through a tunnel, nearly pitch black, though a yellowish light glowed beyond

his feet, where he couldn't see, though he could smell the smoke—a torch. For at least fifteen minutes, they made their way through a seemingly endless maze, the table navigating with difficulty through the narrowing walls.

The underground tunnels.

Then, after what felt like an eternity, the tunnel opened up out into the air. Weston breathed in deeply, feeling the cool air against his naked, damp skin. Weston could see the trees above, the night sky, bright from the full moon. He took this moment to spit out of the cloth and scream.

He stopped screaming when he heard the laughter around him.

“You can stop that now,” the waiter said. “Everybody’s at the fountain already.”

Weston felt the desire to fight back flow out of him. He understood, now. This fucking town.

The trees cleared and Weston could hear the faint clatter and noise of voices. He was being lifted up right, though at enough of an angle to prevent him from choking on the leather around his throat. He could now see the fountain and the people gathered around it. He recognized some of the faces: the banjo player, the people dressed in overalls who had stood, stony-faced, with their signs over the weekend. He saw other members of the wait staff at the hotel, shopkeepers, and a street performer. All stood solemnly, waiting for something.

Weston looked at the crowd, feeling his anger rise again.

“Fuck you all and your fucking tomb of a town,” he said, and spit as forcefully as he could with his dry mouth. It mostly landed on his chin and chest, but some of the people gasped anyway and made strange motions before their chests, much like Catholics make the sign of the cross, though the actual motions were like nothing he’d seen before.

"Shut up," the waiter said, stuffing a cloth back into his mouth. Shelly pushed her way forward, giving the waiter a worried glance, her lips pursed. She came and stood by Weston's head, speaking to him, but loud enough for the crowd to hear.

"This is it, Weston. I couldn't tell you straight out because I knew you would disapprove. I have known since I stepped foot here that I belong here, forever. I have never felt drawn to a place like this before. It all feels familiar – the smell of the water on rock, the way the streets are carved out of the mountain, all of it."

He watched her tear up again, this time with what seemed like genuine emotion. He looked at her with horror, but she pushed through.

"I feel like I've been here before and that I need to come back and stay for good. I knew you didn't feel the same. So when I talked to some of the locals about this feeling, they told me they had felt it too, and that it meant something. They said that for some people, that feeling has an opposite effect: it's so overwhelming that everything in you says to run. So this ceremony is meant to show you what your body is afraid to feel and your eyes afraid to see."

Shelly removed the cloth from his mouth to let him respond.

"You let them tie me to a table to show me something that might make me want to move to this godforsaken shithole? After I've been kidnapped and tied up naked like a fucking offering?"

A strange, shrill laughter rose up from the crowd somewhere, but otherwise, silence.

Oh fuck, Weston thought. That's exactly what I am.

Shelley shook her head, shaken by his anger.

"No, not exactly. It's so hard to explain -"

The waiter interrupted her, seemingly as impatient with her as Weston was. "Yes, it's impossible to explain. So we're going to show him."

Shelly looked backward at the group of stony faces, blankly staring at them, and then back at Weston. She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it.

"You've gone too far," Weston said. "I don't think you're gonna like how this turns out." Only she and the waiter could hear him. The waiter smiled a small, quick smile, as though involuntarily. Shelly seemed bewildered, looking backwards at the crowd and then again at Weston.

The waiter snapped his fingers, and then gently pushed Shelly to face the crowd, right next to Weston. A few of the men from the crowd came forward.

"Start the ceremony."

They nodded and disappeared back into the crowd, which immediately hushed and assumed a different shape—Weston couldn't see them well, the flames too bright and the darkness behind too intense in contrast, but he could hear the gentle rustling of their clothes. The mass of people straightened and clarified, and then a sound rose up, a consonant-filled muttering that gradually grew in volume, voices adding row by row until the sound was deafening. Weston wished to reach up and press his palms against his ears, but he couldn't, so he tolerated the din until, abruptly, it stopped. He felt a sliver of relief until he saw why they had stopped. It wasn't a chant, but a call. And whatever they had called had arrived. They assembled in a circle around the fountain, the torches turned toward the hole in the ground, pointed at that dark, deep spring.

It began with a slap against the edge of the fountain, an arm thrown up from the depths, grabbing the slick, black stone with suction cups then more slaps and a great whoosh of water displacing. Then, the black flesh tensed, and it hauled up the rest of its body, a muscled, yet soft thing, the bulbous head both sickeningly fleshy and solid. It slid from beneath its own hardened image that spiraled above,

its wet dome glistening in the moonlight.

"Oh my Lord," Shelley had time to say, before the arms shot out, encircled her body, and pulled her toward what Weston now saw was a mouth, ringed with teeth in several rows, all jagged, predator teeth, meant for tearing and shredding. The top part of Shelley's body was inside the beast's mouth, her legs kicking spasmodically, then they went slack as the creature tipped its enormous, gelid head back and, jerking forward and back, eased the rest of her body into its mouth, as a coyote would tip back its head to accommodate the body of a small animal.

Weston was dimly aware that the chanting rose again. They stood in puddles of Shelley's blood and sang, this time joyfully, some raising their hands. Weston felt the air kick up and a new warmth on his legs. Shelly's blood. It was strange she held so much blood. Weston found his thoughts grew loud, started screaming. As those thoughts swirled, he saw the waiter swim into view.

"Weston, wake up," he said. He lightly slapped Weston against one cheek, and then the other, harder, until Weston's eyes snapped into focus.

"Do you see now?" The waiter asked. "Do you see now what this town is built on?"

Weston's mind harnessed itself for a moment to respond. "It's built on death."

The waiter nodded. "That's right, and you knew it from the beginning. Death, and more. Something more powerful than death. The ability to look at death, to participate in death and stare it right in the face and then go to work the next day. Let me tell you, Weston, it gives everything a gleam, it lifts even the most ridiculous task, like washing a stack of dishes or listening to a drunk tourist complain about the wine. Look at it, Weston." The waiter took Weston's face in his hands and stepped aside, leaving an unobstructed view of the creature, struggling to choke down the rest of Shelly. She had disappeared into its mouth completely, and then, in a convulsion, it spit out her shoes with the feet still inside them. One

was expelled so forcefully that it rolled towards Weston and stopped by his feet, blood spreading out in a pool beneath it.

Weston continued to watch as the creature finished working Shelley's bones into shards and watched it rise, the body a contradiction of forces, softness and power, sharpness and give.

"Your wife could feel it, and she wanted to stay here. She could feel it, but she had no sense of the sacred. She pushed her way in, Weston. She didn't have what you have. She didn't have *fear*. She didn't have *awe*."

Weston tried to stay with the words, and they registered—yes, she often did push forward. Yes, she didn't believe in the sacred. She didn't believe in hell. He remembered how puzzled she was by the idea that he had these horrors in his head, that he had once believed in creatures who wanted only to destroy.

"Do you know what awe is, Weston? It's fear put in its proper place."

Weston watched the creature rise, and then, unfurl great, dark wings, which unfolded with such grace that Weston felt something new in all this horror: astonishment. It rose like a demon from the crude, garish drawings on the tracts his youth pastor had made him hand out on Halloween.

"Look at it, Weston."

Weston could do nothing but look and look and look. Blood flowed down the front of its, what, mouth? Blood flew out from its wings as it flapped, just like water from a dog's back when it shook itself dry.

The creature rose above the fountain, the wings flapping, creating its own current, which blew everyone's hair in the wind and sent the torches flickering. A handful went out, pitching the scene down closer to darkness.

"Will you stay with us, Weston?"

The waiter, the priest, the conjurer of the demon, he needed an answer now.

For one of the first times in his life, Weston felt a desire rising up inside him, something that was his own. He understood, now, how a person could love a terrible God. He had never said *Yes* with such conviction before. He had never felt so at home.

The Salon

Irina's Hair and Nails wasn't the best salon in town—that would be Egidio's in the new strip mall on Bloomington Avenue where they also put in a Sur La Table, a Pottery Barn, and a Maggiano's—but the people who went there were too thrifty to spend two hundred dollars each time they needed their roots done. And anyway everyone liked Irina, remembered her from when she first started as a manicurist just over from the Soviet Union with all the other Jews who got out, when the place was Rosa's Hair and Nails and Egidio's strip mall was a stand-alone store called Zuckerman's that sold rack after rack of stationary, notebooks, and three ring binders. Maybe they liked the fact the place still looked the same after all these years, Irina not going in much for decor and keeping the walls white with those eighties posters of asymmetric haircuts and impossible cheeks. Everything else in Bloomington had certainly changed.

They always asked about Irina's daughter when they came in for their usual appointments and stopped to chat with Irina behind the reception desk with its tarnished gold trim and peeling veneer. It was good to hear about her daughter's acceptance to medical school and then her cardiology fellowship and then her appointment as the youngest department chair in the University Hospital's history. They loved having known her as this tiny Russian doll, dressed in bows and patent leather and barely knowing English, while her mother scrubbed their scalps or trimmed their cuticles. See how far hard work and perseverance could take you! Hadn't their grandmothers and grandfathers done the same for their parents when they first came from Minsk or Palermo or Dublin at the turn of the century? Isn't that why they had such comfortable jobs and homes and lived in such a comfortable town? It was immensely satisfying to see those wheels of American opportunity continue to turn.

And how is your son or daughter, Irina would ask, never forgetting which or how many they had. Sometimes the news was good: a daughter making partner at

her law firm, a son expanding his mother's dental practice. But a lot of the news was less enthusiastic. Here the wheels of American opportunity seemed to have slowed.

"Oh yeah," a woman named Linda told Irina one morning before walking over to her hairdresser. It had been years since Irina actually touched anyone's hair or nails. "Michael's doing well. You know, I just got back from visiting him and the kids down in Costa Rica. Can you imagine? Me, down there in that weather and in those conditions. But they finally got a roof on that little house they've been building. No windows though, just screens. And they're still going to the bathroom outside. Unbelievable. The girlfriend doesn't seem to mind and the kids are too little to know the difference. Off the grid is what they call it. I say off their heads! I tell them, what are you going to do all the way out here if something happens, if you or the kids get sick? It's a two hour drive to the nearest town! You can't just live in tree forts and surf all day. But you know. Kids."

Irina always nodded consolingly, like she did know exactly what her clients were saying, and nobody ever questioned it, even though when she spoke her accent was heavy and her English rudimentary. It had been her daughter once she started school who used to do all the translating.

Now Linda, unburdened, went over to her hairdresser as the sound of blow dryers and snipping scissors and murmured conversation filled the room. All three chairs and the two tables for nails were filled with their regular clients. Although a sign on the door said walk-ins welcome it was as innocuous and forgettable as the eighties wall posters and yellowing reception desk. Since Irina had taken over the busy salon was by appointment only.

So the girl with the shimmering hair who walked in fifteen minutes later was left standing for another awkward few while everyone in the salon stared. Finally, she half-turned and pointed at the back of the sign nobody remembered, which, of course, didn't help at all. Then Irina stood up.

"It says walk-ins welcome," the girl said and ran a hand through her hair. It was difficult to describe, her hair, and it seemed to spark against her fingers, sending up sprays of color that at once looked red and yellow and orange and silver and blue and green, like so many fine copper wires oxidizing before their eyes. "I just need a touch up on my roots. Do you have anyone available?"

Irina walked around the desk. Everyone still stared. The blow drying and snipping and conversation had stopped. There was only the frail sound of watered-down pop music from a hidden speaker in the corner. Irina reached out and touched the girl's hair, lifted a handful and let it fall back down against her face. The colors glimmered and danced. Irina did this again and again, moving methodically around the girl's head while she stood there, still, eyes downcast and demure. In contrast her hair came alive in Irina's hands, throwing rainbow shadows against the walls and floor like crystals catching the sun.

Now Irina waved over the other stylists and one by one they left their seated clients with hair half in foils, or flayed over to the side in the midst of a blow-dry, or twisted in clipped knots around the one section hanging down to be cut, forgotten. There was a South American girl, maybe from Colombia or El Salvador, and a Middle Eastern girl, maybe from Syria or Iran, and an African girl, maybe from Somalia or Sudan. Their clients all thought of them as girls, like they used to Irina back in the day, though the women had worked there for years and had children who were almost grown. The stylists hovered around the remarkable head and delicately picked strands up into the air and watched the colors glitter in their hands. They spoke softly together and it didn't sound like English, or at least their clients, straining to hear over the simpering drone of the background music, couldn't understand what was being said.

It might just have been the professional language of hairdressers, speaking of hair in a specialized code of color calibrations and standardized styles. But to the clients it sounded foreign and that was enough for them to squirm in their abandoned chairs and wonder just what, exactly, was going on.

The two Asian manicurists then joined the other women around the prismatic head leaving their clients with splayed fingers frozen over their cluttered tables. Rob, in for his weekly buff and clear polish, was the first to say something.

“Are we just supposed to sit here?”

He said it with his eyes lifted to the ceiling, like he was asking God, and then gave a bitter little laugh and looked at Linda. She shook her head, foil crinkling against itself, and rolled her eyes. All the other clients followed suit, shifting and snorting in irritation. It made no difference, Irina and her employees kept circling the stranger, their inscrutable voices pitched higher and higher.

And who was this girl, the clients, in their growing agitation, kept asking themselves. They’d never seen that kind of hair in Bloomington before. Was she from the city? Or did she belong to one of those new families that had poured into the town over the last ten years, the ones leaving the city for yards and open floor plans and high tax bracket public schools? The ones they built the new strip mall for, who were used to city conveniences and prices and ideas. And so many were these mixed-raced families: Blacks with Jews and Asians with Indians and Arabs with Hispanics and every other pairing and permutation in between. Not that the older Bloomington residents minded. They were progressive, after all. They loved diversity. Take Irina and how they welcomed her and her daughter, for one. But this hair was different. Anyone could see it just wasn’t natural.

Linda wanted to call out to her stylist but she didn’t quite know her name. Was it Serena or Selena? It would be ridiculous to ask the girl now, after all these years. And anyway it was always Irina who scheduled the appointments and she knew, which was all that mattered. She must have said the stylist’s name to Linda a hundred times, asking “Your next appointment I make with Serena is how many weeks?” or “You want to leave cash tip for Selena, yes? Use envelope here.” And didn’t Linda always leave a cash tip for Selena or Serena so the stylist wouldn’t have to declare it on taxes? Just as she used to do for Irina? Now the girl had forgotten all about her with half her head slathered in dye and the clock ticking.

How could the color come out right? It would have to be stripped out and done all over. Certainly she'd leave no tip, cash or otherwise, today.

"Irina," Linda called, tentatively, because she didn't know what to say next. She looked around and the other clients encouraged her. "We're all waiting, Irina." Her voice grew. "Only half my head's been done."

"And I still need clear on these fingers." Rob wiggled the pinky and fourth finger of his left hand. "They need to be dry by my lunch meeting at noon."

Empowered the other clients spoke up too. They had busy schedules. They were already behind. The damp hair was ruining the blow out. It was hot and uncomfortable under the gowns. Their scalps were itchy. Hair clippings were poking into their skin. It was unbearable just waiting there. Didn't she have any consideration?

Irina and the five other women turned to stare at the clients, incredulously, keeping a protective circle around the girl and her garish head.

"You can't sit there and wait for minute?" Irina said.

A minute! It was absurd. Outlandish. What was she talking about? They had been waiting for not just one but several minutes. Linda was sweating so much brown dye coursed down her forehead, bumping over lines of consternation like so many moguls. Rob's nails were smudged from indignant fists. The blowout frizzed, the hair clips fell out, and the woman behind Rob waiting for tips stood up so fast she knocked over her chair. How dare Irina talk to them like that! Who did she think she was, this upstart nobody from a backwards country they had done everything for? Didn't they buy her snooty kid's Girl Scout cookies and friendship bracelets and other pieces of crap so the brat could go to the Smithsonian or Space Camp or all those other enriching experiences while all their own kids wanted to do was stay home and play video games? What boring stories they used to sit through, Irina droning on and on in that unintelligible accent. How they nodded! How they

smiled! How they commiserated when that seemed right! And all the money they had spent over the years.

"I don't have time for this," the tips woman said and everyone agreed. Who did Irina think they were? Stooges to milk for cash at every opportunity? Did she think they didn't notice when the prices went up every few years? They were paying double for services compared to when Rosa ran the place. And for what? Certainly not for the ambiance. The port wine stain from when Irina spilled a gallon of red hair dye twenty years ago still slugged its way across the room. The mirrors were cloudy, the manicurists' tables warped with age. A People magazine from five years ago still hung in the rack, wrinkled and smeared. Did Irina have any idea how hard they, or their spouses, or their parents before them, worked for that money she was so eager to snatch? After all these years in America didn't she understand the value of hard work? Didn't she know by now nothing came for free?

"They don't treat you like this at Egidio's," Rob said as the clients finished pulling off their gowns and grabbing their bags and piling toward the door. Linda couldn't read the expression on Irina's face as they walked out. It looked like her eyes and mouth were opening as if she was just about to laugh. Then the sheen from the tawdry head behind her glanced off the foil falling in Linda's eyes and marred her view. Never mind. Linda would head straight to Egidio's and get the kind of customer service she deserved.

Donna Vorreyer



NON-FICTION

Programing Vulgar

You are told to support each other. You are not in the business world. You know you did the work. You wish you could be strong on every facet. You have so many memories, some make you laugh, others make you weep. You don't mention that your spouse rapes you. You have a cigarette. You don't find their jokes funny. You know who the person that gave you their porn, got their porn from. You are attracted to their personality. You think about all the sexual experiences you never had. You smoke your smoke. You feel hot when it's cold. You learn to survive in shit. You kiss them back. You fuck. You smoke. You remember—but today you know you feel. Today you are alive.

Your viewpoints are adapting, on the world, on culturally inflicted symbols. Ones wielded to label beyond the things around us, rooting down to our bodies, our individual bones, and what is between our legs. Further vining into assigned roles and preferences. Perhaps real tribute to identity is to construct a world where such things have vanished, only known to linguists.

When you leave bootcamp your drill instructors tell you to stick together, support each other, there are few of you. This doesn't resonate on the level it should. Perhaps reminiscing begins while you are stuck in an up-armored vehicle for the duration of a two-day sand storm¹ where everyone smells worse than you. But eh, you probably smell just as bad.

Someone of higher-rank informs you that "you are allowed to laugh," at their jokes. They also throw in that you "could smile more." You tell them you don't

¹It is worth mentioning that at this point all the watchable movies on the hard-drive have already been seen, *The Wolf of Wal Street* and *The Whore of Wal Street*, back to back. Consider, "The U.S. adult film industry...is an even larger and more efficient moneymaking machine than legitimate mainstream American cinema." This is what gave it the nickname name Big Red Son, which is also the title of the essay that that quote came from. It is easy to think otherwise under the veil of what is considered taboo and vulgar. In the essay Big Red Son, David Foster Wallace goes on to explain that the word vulgar has a number of definitions, but its general root and meaning applies to what is popular on a mass scale. The opposite being pretentious or snobby.

find their jokes funny and walk away.

You try to joke around with these boots². “Why they take it so harsh?” your colleague shrugs and explains how you scared that one.

The sexual conduct briefs you get as annual trainings are similar to the ones given in the business world. These training videos are put on by low budget film groups, always with terrible acting. The first two are generic, date rape in the barracks, and watching for Rufilin in public. This year, the last scenario is about t-bagging other marines, specifically, boots. Watching bad actors plan and intact this disgraceful behavior ends up being the highlight of your day³. Truthfully, it must be a problem, but you are glad you haven’t dealt with it up until now, indirectly through the film. Actually, this is nothing like the business world.

On deployment, you know who the person that gave you all their porn got their porn from, and who that person got it from in turn. It’s like a weird generational passing down of talismans. Or more accurate, one hub antenna that is supplying all these antennas of masturbation. You rarely have to talk to the original downloader. But every time you see them, if it be in line for chow, or during a company briefing, all you can do is picture their browsing event. Eyes scanning the porn hub categories, the screens blue hue flushed across that weird little face as it cracks a smile, nods and clicks download on the title: *Bitches Peeing in Bowls*.

Someone tells you that the SGT⁴ who is in charge of the armory goes to a lot of orgies in New Bern. This is genuinely intriguing, and since you have joked and smoked with the SGT, you inquire. They tell you to meet them in the armory at 1 am to learn. You show up and have a conversation about orgies, watching people

³ **Boot-** a term widely used for someone who just got out of bootcamp. Someone who hasn’t probably seen anything, and doesn’t know anything.

⁴ Not because watching this plan is pleasurable, because you are getting out of work and being paid to be there.

⁵ Abbreviation for **Sargent-** fifth highest enlisted rank.

fuck, behavioral expectations, and what-not as expected. Before you leave, they invite you back to watch them fuck someone on Tuesday, same time⁵. You kiss like it is the customary thing to do. It's deep, passionate, theatrical⁶. Eventually, when you get out of the marines, you see pictures of this person in drag and wonder if they would have wanted to be caressed a certain way, if it would have been within your capabilities. You think about all the interesting sexual experiences you never had.

There is a picture of you in the Huffington Post. But you're not famous, it's the idea of what you represent, what you are a part of. You are basically unrecognizable. The mountains coated with snow, a beautiful backdrop⁷. You are feeling an intense rush of heat despite the thin unfriendly air.

As the one responsible for the truck with all the COM gear, you are on a convoy through Jordan in the back of a service vehicle with four others. The three vehicles in the convoy ahead of you stop. Your driver pulls over. You didn't hear a loud noise, but are acutely aware you are the only one with a rifle. You have no bullets. The ammo truck is right ahead of you, a vulnerable vehicle⁸. The SGT on the passenger side asks to see your rifle because he doesn't know, "how the local tram drivers will react to you having a weapon." You hand it to them and say, "I don't know how much good it will do, I have no mags." It is such a small, in the moment

⁵ Turn to the wisdom of Ursula K. Le Guin, who, in the introductory essay to the collection, *The Wave in The Mind*, writes, "I think sex is even more boring as a spectator sport than all the other spectator sports, even baseball. If I'm required to watch a sport instead of doing it, I'll take show jumping... show jumping and sex have a great deal in common, though you usually can only get showjumping on American TV if you can pick up an American channel, which is not true of sex."

⁶ You don't remember how it ended or what you say. You imagine it is somewhere along the lines of, "okay thanks, bye."

⁷ You aren't holding two hands on your rifle because you are also pulling a snow sled filled with supplies that were going to get you and your platoon through weeks in the mountains. You had just finished coursing out the marine behind you for not going on any of the acclimatizing hikes and not being able to pull his weight. The same Fuck who is later given an award for this very thing. Hanging around the warm Com station on base, fixing all the gear because the marines who worked there were to incompetent to plug cables into the right places. Head may have been involved. The point is: you don't get a goddamn award.

⁸ You obviously don't want it parked on the side of the road because it is filled cases of bullets and ammunition.

reaction you instantly wish you could take back. The SGT is only a rank ahead of you. But you couldn't find the balls tucked between your gut and brain, when you should have told them to fuck off. SGT Dipshit goes to investigate. The ammo truck blew a tire. You have a cigarette.

When you finish combat school and get into the fleet you are lonely. You can't stand the roommate you are assigned, the barrack rooms small⁹. You think it's bullshit. But someone loves you. Someone wants to be your shining armor. To scoop you up, marry you in a courthouse, and find you a nice one-bedroom apartment for less than \$500 a month¹⁰.

"I'm here to stop rapes," you say to the COG¹¹ when you report for the extra cycle of fire watch they have appointed to your barracks, (where you don't live anymore). They don't get why you find it humorous that you will be waling around alone in the dark for four hours without a weapon, in a dress uniform, to try to cut back on rape.

This Marine in another platoon in your unit is getting an NJP¹² for raping his spouse. You hear one of your own talking about it, confused on how you can rape your own spouse. You go off on them. "do you seriously need to be educated on this...?" You do not mention that your spouse rapes you.

Awarded honor graduate recipient of Corporal's Course. People are pissed. It's

⁹ There isn't even a kitchen in the building. Each room only has a microwave and miniature refrigerator.

¹⁰ Where one night you come home amidst flashing reds and blues to find out someone in the apartment across from you was stabbed.

¹¹ **Corporal of the Guard**- Corporal (fourth highest enlisted rank) is in charge of the guard or duty at that time. A really easy gig unless there is a hurricane.

¹² Abbreviation for **Non-Judicial Punishment**. Also known as a Ninja Punch. It is just the court system that handles offences within the marines. Some offences are really obscure, like having intercourse in a position other than missionary.

the day of the graduation ceremony and your LT and Gunny are paying more attention to you than they have since you entered their platoon¹³. Later, when asked by a few condescending Marines and a Sailor on the smoke deck, “how did you pull that off?” You think about how you helped your friends in the course with the fire plan because yours was the best, and with the leadership speeches because you have a public speaking background¹⁴. You just shrug, make that hand to mouth motion that can only indicate a blow job¹⁵, and you smoke your smoke. Because what else can you do? You know you did the work. You find the thought of such a rumor being spread to the point where, taken seriously enough, you would have to speak with the SGTMAJ¹⁶ about it...quite enthusing.

During mountain warfare training a peer says you inspire them, “when I’m having a hard time, I look up and see you trekking along with that big pack, it keeps me going.”¹⁷ You thank the marine and wish you could be as strong on every facet.

In a bathroom in Oman, a Navy Doc, who sleeps in your birthing, kisses you. Unexpected, without warning. You kiss them back. You kiss them back because they have always been nice to you; besides, there is something familiar about them. When they got cherries soaked in Russian vodka in the mail they shared, and now their lips taste like Spanish sangria. You kiss them back because generally, when someone beautiful kisses you, that’s what you do.

Like a ticking bomb, you do fuck on deployment, in a storage room shared by EOD and your own platoon. A friend phones down, “all the SGTS are coming down to have a meeting, like now.” You throw your shoes and clothes across

¹³ In fact, this is the most extended, and probably only third time you have seen Gunny out of his cavity during the deployment thus far.

¹⁴ Obvious side note, but also, you work out twice a day and have fantastic finesse with a sword.

¹⁵ Or perhaps one of those ungodly huge suckers you get at a fair if you really don’t know.

¹⁶ **Sargent Major**- It is the highest enlisted rank you can be that works along-side your company officer.

¹⁷ In truth, all the packs are the same size.

the room. You hear the knock and lunge behind a stack of sea bags, your shorts hanging off your ass. You are forced to sit there for this meeting, listening to them talk shit. You make a vow to yourself that you will stop giving into desires and living like this, like a human. You don't.

You rush down to rescue the person from the storage room once you know the meeting is over. You tell them you have fallen in love, they tell you to shut up.

Bootcamp, you first develop a crush on another platoon member. If you look at a picture now you still feel the same. You don't think you would have picked them out from a picture or even from knowing them in high school. You're attracted to their personality, it's strong.

Your spouse is also in the military and has recently come home from deployment. Your company is in the field and you are pulled to leave and go home. Your spouse shook your baby to death.

You will never forget the day, as a young marine in your first unit. that Sargent got up in front of the whole company and talked about how, "important it is to treat your spouses and children right, and to go to someone if you need help." You think about that moment and it still makes you weep. It makes you weep because not a single tear was shed as they spoke. It makes you weep because that was over five years ago and today, released from a facade, you understand more, you feel more, and you are alive more than you were when someone else's world was crumbling.

Sex (in Movies. In Life?) is Underappreciated. Discuss.

SEX. What words cum (you're welcome for that) to mind when you read that word?

Bodies? Sweaty bodies? Heavy breathing? Soft Lighting (I am a child of the '80s: soft lighting and gauzy filters were required).

How about personal? Vulnerable? Messy? Essential? Awkward?

What about sex in movies?

Unnecessary? Overwrought? Fake? Aspirational? Escapist?

A powerful way to move the narrative forward?

Yes.

An underutilized way to get to know our characters, their motivations, their weaknesses and goals.

Yes.

I've made some short films and a feature film and I promise they all have sex scenes in them. First off, cause in the academic context, I relished making all the cis het men in my classes squirm as I discussed the intricacies of female desire and how to portray that on screen and also because women (and LGBTQ+ and disabled and BIPOC bodies) talking about desire and sex and how multi-layered and complex they are, felt underexplored and revolutionary.

Spoiler: I didn't actually do it for their discomfort, that was an unsurprising

byproduct. In actuality I was fighting for my voice and by extension a true expression of my experience of life, one conversation, one sex scene, at a time. I'm a rape survivor and to the surprise of many, I like sex. In the course of my life, sometimes transcendent feelings were involved, sometimes not so much. People like sex all different ways and there's no one right way. I am an advocate for the power of exploring our relationships to sex and intimacy.

I always write about women and sex and power.

I like to watch movies that explore the same themes and entertain the hell out of me.

Recently, I was on a podcast (Femme on Film: Hearts and Vaginas Volume One) where we discussed sex scenes. Each of the three of us chose two sex scenes, for six total. They didn't have to be the "best" sex scenes just ones we wanted to discuss further.

These are the six movies we chose (in alphabetical order):

1. *Always Be My Maybe*
2. *Call Me By Your Name*
3. *Crimson Peak*
4. *Dirty Dancing*
5. *Gone Girl*
6. *Unfaithful*

I chose the first two; which would you choose? Why? When considering choices did you make the mistake of googling "great sex scenes" and getting, either websites that exist to show you famous actresses naked or a tired of list sex scenes that center the male gaze, as if they are the only ones who escape into sexual fantasy?

I made that mistake. More than once, thinking that if I refined my search or just

like, tried again, the search engine would deliver the wished for result. It didn't. Which discouraged me, at first, and then proceeded to have the opposite effect. If there aren't more readily available conversations about great sex scenes featuring diverse opinions, perhaps my opinion matters.

To be clear, my opinion matters. And so does yours.

Does it surprise you that I love to write about and be entertained by films about sex, women and power but my first choice, without a doubt, was *Call Me By Your Name*? It didn't surprise me.

1. Because it's an incredible movie that I love from the moment it opens. As an example, every single time I try to watch only certain parts of the film, like the sex scenes for this podcast, I can't. I am unable to only watch specific parts. The film seduces me. Every time. The language, the locale, the music, the way Chalamet embodies the promise of youth but also its terror and loneliness, particularly as we unpack ourselves in a way that differentiates us from the world we'd believed, until this very moment, we would unquestioningly inhabit.

And the sex scenes, what function do they serve? They powerfully actualize Elio's point that he feels he "knows nothing." Even this young man who fluently speaks three languages, who transcribes classical music for fun, and knows the intricacies of local history does not fully know himself because he is living a life from someone's else's imagination. One in which he romances a girl with his smile and a book of poetry. One in which the sex is expected and transactional. One that is nothing like what he truly wants. Through the use of sex in *Call Me By Your Name* the film explores that space of young adulthood, where to outsiders the young hold the keys to the future. They hold beauty, blind confidence and yet, intimately they know so little and this movie captures the vulnerability of asking and learning little by little and then in a heady rush, that can leave a person simultaneously drunk and hungover with emotion.

And here the sex, with its tears, laughter, fumbles and exultation becomes a metaphor for personal evolution. It's terrifying, yes, but it's that very terror, the feeling of staring over the precipice into the unknown, is necessary if you really want to feel it.

2. Yes, I love movies about women and sex. And I love movies that open up a world to me, particularly one that I cannot access myself. And even more if it is one that is under represented. I want to experience new things, if I can't first hand, well then, isn't that the purpose of art? To make me feel less alone with these feelings I'm carrying AND to show me that I am not unique in my aloneness, we all carry our special flavor but where those flavors overlap, compassion and beauty and magic exist.

To me, this film is magic.

And for a completely different flavor, I chose *Always Be My Maybe* because I wanted to chose a hot, but basic sex scene. To be honest, that's the meat and potatoes of my sex life. It's OK to have sex in a bed. That's how most of us have sex (raises hand). There doesn't need to be special lighting or the implied fairy dust of the first time—I also love in this movie that the first time is a complete disaster. It often is just that.

I love the humor that coexists with their desire. If you haven't laughed during sex, I'm not sure what you're doing 'cause if you take how great it feels out of the equation, it's silly. It's laughable. (Full disclosure: I am also a repeat offender when it comes to laughing at inopportune times. I once started hysterically laughing during a production of *Marat/Sade* and couldn't stop.)

Thank God for intermissions.

And it was important to me to choose a movie directed by a woman. In a previous podcast I'd already discussed *The Kids are All Right* by Lisa Cholodenko, so that was off the table. (Check it out, though: those sex scenes are 10 out of 10 storytelling.)

In *Always Be My Maybe*, the spark is the thing that keeps our two characters apart. We're not sure if they have it and so the sex scene becomes essential. Kind of like my life. And maybe yours. I broke up with guys cause we didn't have it. The spark. Like I said earlier, I like sex. And I couldn't imagine enduring a future with someone where taking off our clothes felt like a chore so early in our relationship.

And so *Always Be My Maybe* speaks to me. Validates me. It's OK to have sex in a bed, prioritize "the spark," and have the hots for Randall Park. All these things are normal.

Sex. When you read that word now, what glimmers in your consciousness? I hope some allowance. Some space. Sex isn't dirty, I mean it can be, but it's essence is more than that. And while I am whole heartedly advocating for more sex in movies, from more diverse points of views, I am also advocating for deeper acceptance in the role it plays in the narrative of our lives. It isn't a trifle, a distraction, it's an essential part of the narrative and it can be a particularly delicious part. Enjoy.

FLASH

Hunger Outside the Salt Flats

First memories are difficult. I imagine I'd need quite a large swine, and she'd have to be hearty, too. Maybe a wild boar like the ones I've seen before while hiking in the desert mountains. I'd pack her into the back of my car, wooing her with powdered doughnuts. We'd drive along the Texas highway toward New Mexico. There's a place in-between that's all salt lands. A white glistening flatland that, most days, is too bright to look at. We're on a journey, I'd say to the pig. We need to find my earliest memory. And I'd keep driving until I'm in the back with the pig and now we're in a Suburban, my dad's. And my mom is next to him. And the pig is next to my brother. We are lying on sleeping bags in the back of the Suburban, half asleep and half awake. I can smell cigarette smoke and coffee. There's powdered sugar on my lips. My father opens the door. Time for a walk, he says. My father is young. Maybe the age I am now. My mother is, too. Maybe this is the last time I'll see them together. Maybe we could keep going into New Mexico and stay there in the tree house my brother and I built. Maybe I'm still there. Maybe we eat the pig to survive.

Upon Seeing an Ambulance

My four-year-old exclaims, *That's Sandy. She fell asleep in a car and died. We cannot live underwater. Our insides would become our clothes.* My daughter explains she must tear out her horse's eyes for protection.

Getting Caught

Front 242 was struggling to leave the tiny speakers, the bass fighting with the magnet inside to fill the cone and “sell him to other men.” We never heard the door open. With old houses there is usually a creak in front of the doors, a place in the wood where too many times someone has paused to open the door, their weight adding just a little extra tension to the wood beneath them, pressuring the nails holding the joists. Sometimes there is even a jiggle to the handle. That metallic rustle of the shank against the latch. The hinges will squeal in protest as they are forced to carry the weight of the door on their own, the jamb no longer helping carry the load.

“Freeze!” screamed Jean-Luc. “Shoot to kill or die!”

“Aaah!” yelled his mother. “What the hell?”

It’s hard to remember if his swollen member lost all blood while it was in my mouth or upon exiting. Levi’s 501s were hastily dragged upwards, white underwear doing their best to tangle them around the knees, which had clasped shut in a subconscious reaction to getting caught *in flagrante delicto*. The carpet underneath my knees suddenly became uncomfortable. I could feel the fibers digging into my skin below the knee-length hem of my yellow denim miniskirt. My Keds dug into the carpet as I propelled myself upward, attempting to pull my miniskirt down to maxi skirt length.

“Spread the net!” intoned Jean-Luc.

Somewhere in my smart assed teenage brain I thought “at least we weren’t spread, Jean-Luc.” There was that small comfort, at least.

Unable to bring my eyes up to look at his mother, I depended on my ears to let

me know she had turned around. The metal of the latch lost its rattle as the door snicked into place. The joists did their job as sentries and squeaked. The speaker quieted as the cassette finally broke. Too bad it was in the middle “to sell him to....”

To whom, Jean-Luc, to whom?

Parts

One afternoon, quite out of the blue, my wife asked if she could cut off my fingertips. I was nervous, excited too. Naturally, I said yes.

I should explain. My wife, Ziggy is a mad scientist. That was the first thing I loved about her. The wild hair, burns on her lab coat, intriguing chemical smells wafting in her wake. The wide-eyed, infectious enthusiasm for her work.

She was exciting, but soothing too. Her voice was clear, calming, like cool water. With Ziggy I felt safe to share parts of me I'd never shared before.

We spent all our time together. Exploring, hatching plans, bickering, and making up. We walked in step and laughed at private jokes. After years alone, we both found this rush of intimacy magical and uncomfortable.

Ziggy had a lab, of course. Every mad scientist does. Before we were married, I sometimes asked to peek inside. She always refused. The lab was locked tight.

The day she took my fingertips, Ziggy finally let me in. The laboratory did not disappoint. It was a stainless steel wonderland of bubbling tubes, coloured concoctions, and arcing, sparking machinery.

She strapped my arms down. Her scalpel was sharp and precise. She made her incisions with such care that I barely felt a thing.

"Is this for one of your experiments?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to wear my fingerprints and go on a crime spree?"

I make stupid jokes when I'm nervous. Ziggy smiled.

"No, silly."

The small mounds of severed flesh she took, the flat red ovals of meat left behind on the ends of my fingers - it all looked distant, remote, like they weren't really my hands at all.

It was relaxing to watch her work, so focused, so intent. Cutting, wiping, cleaning, binding.

A few days later she took my ears. I was much more nervous this time, scared it would affect my hearing. But Ziggy's gentle words and hands soothed me.

The procedure was quick. She made clean, careful cuts. Didn't even need to put me under. The dressings were tidy and tight.

Next, Ziggy asked for my arm. Not my writing side, but still. I had to lose the whole thing, from the shoulder down, she said. I lay awake, restless with the fear of it. An arm felt too big to give.

"I'm scared, Zig. What if I can't live without it? I use that arm a lot, you know."

"I know."

She smiled her reassuring smile.

"Can you tell me what you'll use it for?"

Ziggy shook her head. I gave voice to the irrational fear that was creeping up my spine.

"You're not... You're not eating them, are you? The parts of me?"

"I can't tell you. But I promise it won't hurt. I'll take care of you."

She did. This time I was under general anaesthetic. Afterwards, I was surprised at how painless and comfortable I felt without my arm. I adapted pretty quickly.

But when Ziggy asked to take my legs, panic burned like acid in my throat. Visions of a broken, chair-bound future plagued my thoughts.

"No. It's too much. It would change everything. I'd be totally reliant on you."

She smiled her reassuring smile.

"I know."

"Can you tell me why you need them, at least?"

"You know I can't. You just have to trust and let me take your legs."

She pressed her lips to my forehead. A wave of crisp, cool calm washed through me, flowing from that gentle kiss, extinguishing my fear.

After this operation, I wasn't comfortable. I didn't adapt. Pain and despair filled the space my legs once occupied. Phantom itches and aches haunted my missing limbs. I was vulnerable, reliant on Ziggy to push me, carry me, care for me. The weight of my dependence crushed my spirit.

Ziggy took my tongue next. After that, I didn't ask what she needed the parts for. The procedures accelerated. She took a lung. My other arm. Assorted internal organs. She took my eyes.

I couldn't function now without banks of homemade life support machines. I wanted to scream, or run, but Ziggy had my vocal chords and feet.

One day, as I lay still and silent in the eyeless dark, I heard her soothing voice close to the side of my head.

“This is it, my darling. One final operation.”

The cold chemical sleep of anaesthesia dragged me down into troubled dreams. I saw all the parts of me laid out in silver dishes. Ziggy was there, in her bright white lab coat. She held a scalpel in one hand, a fork in the other.

As I watched, she ate the severed parts of me. Molars mashing muscles to pulp. My blood flowed down her chin and she dabbed it with surgical swabs. I squirmed as she sliced portions from my spine, gasped as she devoured my windpipe. Finally Ziggy ate my brain, consuming memories, personality, all that was me.

When I woke, everything was different. I could see and speak again, flex my limbs. I felt renewed, refreshed, strong. More alive than I’d ever been before. I heard Ziggy’s soothing, quiet voice, close to my ear.

“Do you feel it, my love?”

“I do. I feel it, but I don’t understand.”

We moved to the mirror and I saw. My mad scientist wife had combined our parts, with precision and care, shaping us into a single, outlandish, hybrid creature. Not held by crude stitches but fused, enmeshed, made one. Four arms, four legs, two heads, two hearts.

After that, we could climb higher, run further, think faster, do more. People would stop and stare, and we let them. The world was no match for our powers. We were more than the sum of our parts. So much more.

Long on Words, Short on Ideas or The Ecstasy of Saint Romuald of Ravenna and the Perfect Paralysis Wrought by Man's Infinite Capacity for Recursive Thought

(819 words)

The writer looked at the word count at the top of his document and wondered if the word count itself should be counted in the word count. (1)

He wondered if the title should be counted too, but reflected that the majority of literary journals seemed to exclude it from the count, a factor that had probably contributed, he thought, to the trend for short fiction with lengthy, expository or descriptive titles. (2)

He wondered whether footnotes should count towards the overall word count. (3)

He thought about his story. Was it compelling? Subjective. Did it reveal something profound about the human condition? Perhaps.

The idea had felt close to perfection when he first conceived it. Smooth, weighty, and satisfying as he rolled it over and over in his mind. Tactile, pleasing, beautiful. Like a sea-worn pebble or an egg. Now he came to write it, the idea felt rough and porous. Insubstantial. As he held the story up to the light, clear flaws and fault-lines were revealed. Perhaps more research would help.

An hour passed. In that time he read, annotated, and bookmarked ten web pages of information about St Romuald, patron saint of indecision. In the Italian city of Ravenna, Romuald's birthplace, faithful followers celebrated each year with La Festa Della Inerzia (4), in which they followed the saint's rule to "empty yourself completely and sit waiting". Romuald also famously urged his followers to "put the whole world behind you and forget it". The writer marked his notes on this quotation as the basis for a future story. (5)

He wondered whether this research added something vital to the project currently under consideration and spent some minutes staring at the wall just above

his monitor, eyes unfocused, pondering this question. On balance, he decided, Romuald was simply not relevant. He marked his notes on the subject as the basis for a future story. (6)

Opening a spreadsheet, he began scouring his list of currently open submission calls, wondering which journals might be interested in this idea. Perhaps knowledge of the story's final destination would help him find the words.

He pondered the different approaches literary journals took to submission guidelines. For some, extensive hoops of fire must be negotiated for a story to be considered. *Submit on the third Thursday in July between the hours of 4 and 6 am, local time, in a non-Microsoft rich text format, Helvetica Neue font, 13 point, two-and-a-half line spacing, indents on alternate paragraphs. Include your name in the footer of each even-numbered page but nowhere else in your submission, including your email address.*

(7) Responses from these journals generally took in the region of six years and they demanded that you did not share the story with anyone else during that period - *a restriction including, but not limited to pets, family members, other journals, people on the internet, people not on the internet, and that man on the train currently reading this over your shoulder.* (8) Other journals didn't seem to care at all. *Just send us your story. Scribble it on a paper napkin in green crayon and set it on fire. It will reach us just fine. Show it to anyone. Tattoo it on your cat. We don't give a fuck.* (9) This latter category of journals generally sent his rejections within minutes. Very efficient. The world, he reflected, was a place both wonderful and strange. (10) He fixed his gaze on the wall just above his monitor and thought about this for almost a minute, allowing his eyes to defocus as he did.

The writer, now creatively spent, wondered what the current word count of his story was. He was more than three hundred words over. He closed the document. He'd fix it on the next pass. (11)

(1) After a lot of deliberation and several changes of mind, he decided he would

not include the word count in the word count.

(2) After a little less deliberation, and fewer changes of mind, he decided he would not include the title either.

(3) He decided, on balance, that the footnotes should be included in the word count.

(4) The Festival of Inertia.

(5) At time of writing, this story has not been developed any further.

(6) At time of writing, this story has not been developed any further.

(7) These are the actual submission guidelines for the print and digital poetry journal 'Sinfully Indolent'.

(8) Ibid.

(9) These are the actual submission guidelines for the digital-only punk lit journal 'Concrete Shoes'.

(10) This is not an original thought, but a partial line spoken by the fictional character Agent Dale Cooper, in the 1990s television programme *Twin Peaks*. The full quotation is: "I have no idea where this will lead us, but I have a definite feeling it will be a place both wonderful and strange."

(11) He did not fix it on the next pass.

The Death of Bunny White

‘Suicide? I just don’t buy it.’ DS Hatter’s jowls wobbled as he shook his head.

Dr. Bunny White had been found by his housekeeper dead in his study, his right hand resting on the heel of a pistol.

‘He had motive.’ DI March cocked her head towards the enormous advertising hoarding at the bottom of the street. DrinkMe™ had won White praise, earned him millions, and garnered a knighthood amongst many other awards; but the sheen had come off the iridescent green viscous liquid in recent months. White’s friends in high places, who had all benefited from its popularity and useful effects, had remained ominously quiet once the side effects and the implications for its misuse had begun to come out.

‘The guy is obsessively tidy, compulsively ordered, and compelled to do the ‘done thing’. Blowing his brains out, it’s too messy. Suicide, it ain’t the done thing.’

March raised an eyebrow at the understatement of the mode of death being ‘messy’ as they stood in the doorway surveying the scene. Most of White’s body was slumped over his desk whilst the wall behind was splattered with what had once been the contents of his skull.

‘Plenty of people had motive to off the guy.’ Hatter continued as they walked into the study.

Hatter took in the details; the splatter, the globules of brain that clung to a picture frame, light switch, and the mantelpiece; the crumpled jacket tossed carelessly on the floor at White’s feet, now covered in a layer of congealing blood. Hatter shook his head.

'Too bloody messy for White' was all he said, bending down to pick up the oversized fob watch lying broken on the floor; the faintest trace of a heel print on the cracked dial.

'Oh yes. This was definitely murder' March agreed, delicately digging the bullet from the wall with neoprene wrapped hands.

As Hatter had observed, plenty had cause to want Sir Bunny White dead. Parents who had given their daughters regular bottles of DrinkMe™, watched their grades soar and their free will slowly ebb away. They saw their heads become stuffed with facts and figures yet empty of creative thought. Then they watched the neurosis set in, girls consumed with making the right impression, complying with social expectations, being seen and not heard. Their daughters walked an ever-decreasing tightrope between being too dull, too dowdy and being whores and sluts. This skirt was too short, this one too long, these heels too high and those too flat, too mumsy. They baulked at expressing opinions, for fear of expressing the wrong ones. They weaved their way delicately between not wanting to underachieve and not wanting to appear too pushy, too loud, not wanting to be a ballbreaker, a bitch.

Parents begged girls to stop swallowing the thick, silky liquid the colour of damselfly wings as they saw them shrink to fit the lives they built themselves. They sank into vials and held themselves in place under the bottle-necked curve of their personally crafted glass ceilings. They craved the approval like they craved the sticky sweetness that pinned them under the done thing, the right dress, the perfect cupid bow lip and delicately arched browline.

Bunny White was knighted for services to young ladies' education but he had gained plenty of enemies. The shortcomings of his product and how it had been used by the patriarchy to keep the glass ceiling in place for years had gradually been exposed. Parents came forward, making too much noise to be ignored. Their glorious daughters, whose messy brilliance could have ignited stars in its technicolour splendour, were now tidy shells of obedient achievement. They were safe, tamed, decorative and decorous, dulled by Bunny's liquid censure.

Bunny White did not take well to scrutiny. Rumours swirled, and the public swallowed them down like girls drank Bunny's product. Bunny would crack, Bunny would tell all. Bunny knew where the bodies were buried.

Well, that was a whole new set of people who'd want to keep Bunny quiet. They had a long reach and deep pockets. The great and the good who benefited from Bunny's life's work, but for whom Bunny was fast becoming expendable, at the end of his period of usefulness.

But holding the bullet, March knew just who killed him.

Not a righteous parent.

Nor anyone in the pay of the calculating elite.

This was personal. This was vengeance in a blue dress.

The girl who disappeared down the rabbit hole first, who Bunny White had experimented on to develop his billion-pound business. The girl who had escaped the clutches of addiction. The girl who was coming for the glass ceiling with a bloody big, noisy hammer.

She tossed the bullet to Hatter.

As Hatter read the words etched into the bullet's side, he knew too.

Eat me™, he read, looking up at March.

'Alice' they said in unison.

Voice: A Reflection

Why was I cursed? Long story. Let's just say I should have held my tongue.

It was an unusual punishment. A speech impediment, of sorts. My colleagues liked it at first. They started coming to me when they wanted to vent.

"You're very good at active listening," Karen from Human Resources said. "Would you lead a training workshop?"

Then it got worse. Not so much when my boss was talking – people just assumed I was sucking up, and he seemed to love it. But meetings were a nightmare. After every utterance – however inane – I had to chime in. Steve demanding a risk assessment. Sue asking who wanted the last muffin. Even the robot voice saying, "Recording in progress."

Karen remarked pointedly that things can be taken too far. Others thought I was trying to be funny. I claimed I had COVID and stayed at home.

But the curse wasn't done with me, and it took a cruel new turn. A guy moved in opposite. I recognised him straightaway from the aftershave ads. We met when I was taking out the trash (obviously).

"Is it the recycling collection today?" he asked.

I summoned as much confidence as you can in unicorn slippers and a greige dressing gown.

"Today..." I mumbled.

"Thanks," he said, flashing a supernova smile.

I clamped my lips, but it slipped out.

“Thanks...”

He looked confused. I hurried inside.

I knew I was torturing myself, but I couldn't help it. I watched him through the window. I disguised myself in a floppy hat and followed him to his agency, the bar, the gym. I became his number one fan on Twitter, Insta and the rest. Every time he posted, I retweeted, I quoted. My own followers dropped away, calling me derivative.

One day he got locked out. Later, he came round to ask if I'd keep his spare key. He took my phone number.

“Thanks. I'll text if I need you.”

“I need you...” I whispered. But he had turned away.

I was the only one who noticed when he started spending more and more time indoors, alone. Eventually he stopped moving - just gazed at the screen of his phone, mesmerised by his own profile. Silent and still as a flower by a pool.

After that, there didn't seem much point in going on.

Now I hang out in tunnels, mostly. Abandoned warehouses. Caves. I love it when teenagers yell obscenities at me, because I can reply with my own quiet scream. Fuccckkk...!

Shiiittt...!

Bollockkksss...!

They took the words right out of my mouth.

The Temptress in the Garden

She lingers in a rose arbor, watching the young man. He seems lost, dazed by the seductions of this garden of delights. Perhaps it is his first time. Yes: he is her chosen one. She approaches slowly, as if shy.

“Can I... show you something?”

She draws him away from the others. The air is heady with a thousand flower-perfumes, mingling with the richness of moist warm earth. She pauses by a rainbow-drift, bending low.

“See how this bee is ravishing the blooms! Sliding its greedy tongue between a salvia’s lips, sucking the hidden sweetness. Then pushing into a foxglove’s soft-furred opening, deeper and deeper, until it is swallowed whole.”

She cannot read his face, although she is practised in divining men’s desires. Too vanilla, maybe. She leads him beneath an arch that drips with yellow flowers. Plucking one, she brushes the petals against his cheek.

“Some roses blow so fast you hardly have time to enjoy them. But these come again and again. They’re called ‘golden showers’. They’re delicious, don’t you think?”

He stares at the ground. Her mind races. How to reel him in?

She whisks him through a dream-like maze of verdant garden-rooms. One is hung with lanterns and silvery chimes. In another, dozens of little fountains play. Stone animals gaze from feathered grass beside a naked nymph.

She takes him into the hothouse, feeling the caress of humid air, its sultry tang of

fruit. Now they are truly alone. Sweat beads on his brow. Surely he cannot hold out much longer? Standing close, she reaches to grasp a luscious peach.

"Touch it - have you ever felt one so plump, so yielding? Picking is forbidden. But for you..."

She yanks off the rose-flushed orb and brings it to her lips. Sticky juice runs down her chin as she offers it to him.

"Imagine tasting pleasure such as this every day."

He is beguiled, she sees, but wary. Such delights always come at a cost. The most alluring fruit may wither on the vine.

He turns, shaking his head.

"No!" She cries. "You cannot go back. It is our rule. Once you have come this far, the only way out is to press onward. But you can have anything - just *tell me what you want.*"

At last, he speaks.

"Actually, um..."

He peers at the tag pinned to her shirt.

"Tracy? I was hoping you could point me to the patio furniture."

She masks her disappointment.

"Oh. Sure. Carry on past the compost, turn right at the lawnmowers. Can't miss it."

He begins to walk away.

“Wait! Won’t you at least take a petunia? They’re on BOGOF!”

She thrusts two pink, sagging plants into his hands. He groans, drained of the will to resist, and puts them in the trolley.

She shimmies off towards Grow Your Own, where a man in a mac is fondling the seed potatoes. His wife seems distracted by a large eggplant in the back aisle. The temptress approaches him slowly, as if she were shy.

“Can I... show you something?”



What Does Your Favorite Urban Legend Say About You? A Vintage Personality Quiz

1. It's the first day of school. What are you doing?

A. It's day 1 and you've already been in the nurse's office twice for injuries sustained while getting a bullied kid's phone back for them and rescuing someone who got stuck up a tree trying to run away from a garter snake.

B. An older student helped you open up your locker, but after they leave a garter snake in your locker after lunch you see them helping another person with their locker and realize they're collecting access to lockers. You're going to have to intervene.

C. You found a loose garter snake at your feet and got so scared you climbed a tree and had to be rescued.

D. Forgot your phone. But that's OK. You took some nerd's phone so you could make a TikTok of some garter snakes that are loose in the school. Some jerk later punches you in the face to get that nerd's phone back for them.

E. Spent half of the day in the office explaining to the powers that be how better security measures would have kept a creep from letting snakes loose in school.

F. You punched out some jerk for putting a snake in your locker.

G. You picked up some stray snakes and screamed in an unearthly voice to terrify the classmates who were giggling too close to you at lunchtime.

H. You come to school prepared with a bag of garter snakes to let loose in the library and also find a way to learn a handful of classmates' locker codes.

I. It happened to you. Critical Race Theory was taught in history class, and you have feelings about it.

J. You just wanted to be left alone, but some jerk stole your phone. Then another jerk got it back for you. School sucks. Everything sucks. And why is everyone so scared of garter snakes? They, too, just want to be left alone. And you get that.

2. You're on a date. Let's say it's probably a first date. How's it going so far?

A. You jumped in front of a speeding bus to successfully rescue a rogue baby carriage. You twisted both ankles, but your date and the baby's mom are both suitably impressed.

B. Your date presents themselves well initially, but gradually you start to get very weird vibes — though you can't put your finger on why. You heed the warning of a nice couple who alert you to the fact that your date put something in your drink. You spend the next week raising awareness about this as a social issue, and starting a support group for others who have been harmed.

C. Your date turns out to be a wanted bank robber. You already spent money on a nice outfit for the night, so you try to make the best of the situation. You end up as the lookout while they rob a convenience store later.

D. You get mugged on your way to your date, and your wallet is stolen. You mug someone else along the way for their cash. You proceed to your date with full confidence.

E. You notice someone roofie their date's drink. You get your date to interact with both of them while you alert the bartender to what just happened.

F. Your date arrives late and then proceeds to subtly insult your outfit while suggesting you wear his favorite colors on the next date. They then interrupt your food order and place a different order *for* you. You end up stabbing them with a fork.

G. Your date tries to impress you by cutting a sunflower from someone's front yard to give you. Their body is found the next morning in a dumpster with a PRIVATE PROPERTY sign nailed to it.

H. You arrive late and announce yourself by sneaking up behind your date to scare them. You make only terrible faces when they try to take a selfie with you, and then they abandon you when you suggest they come over to your place to look at your shoe collection.

I. They invited you to meet them at a pizza place. Naturally, you strapped on a couple firearms, packed some ammo, called the police, and then stormed the basement looking for kidnapped children. You were very confused when you were the one who was arrested.

J. Your date arrived on time. Like they always do. They look perfect as they sit across the restaurant from you ordering their “usual.” Your date actually doesn’t know you exist. But that’s OK. They’re perfect anyway. You bask in their light from afar.

3. A sweaty man abandons a duffel bag at your feet, and it’s filled with weapons. You:

A. Take out one of the weapons and put it surreptitiously into your pocket, just in case the guy comes back. You have to be able to defend yourself and everyone in this public space from any psychos, after all. After mulling it over, you decide to hang onto the weapons, though you’d only ever use them to protect your loved ones.

B. Cancel your plans for the evening and take the weapons to the nearest police officer for confiscation, with a solid description of the maniac who dropped them off. You express that he probably didn’t mean any harm, but you don’t want any innocent people — especially children! — getting hurt out there tonight.

C. Are on your way to turn them into the cops as contraband, when some cool-looking folx invite you into a dark side alley to buy the whole bag of stuff off you in exchange for money and drugs. There’s no real right or wrong answer in situations like these, right? You follow them into the dark.

D. Have no use for illegal guns or other rare weapons, but know a guy who can help you sell them all on the internet. You take the whole bag.

E. Pass them out to random young ladies who are traveling on public transportation alone this fine evening.

F. Grin and sling that bad boy over your shoulder. Some good luck, for once! This will complement your Rare Knife And Sword Collection quite nicely.

G. Imagine how you’ll set these up all over your property to make sure no one trespasses. EVER.

H. Start posing and selfie-ing with them to look all tough. Then you menace a couple strangers as a joke. Some of them are terrified and start to cry, which entertains you to no end. Before the evening is through, you get tossed onto

the third rail of the Metro for being an asshole. No one feels sorry for you.

I. Begin to cry, and possibly scream “TERRORIST” at the top of your lungs. Hey, if you see something, say something, right?

J. It’s you. You are the sweaty guy who dropped off the weapons at some random strangers’ feet. They looked like decent people, and you don’t need this kind of responsibility. You just want to go home and pop a couple Xannies. This day is really getting to you. How do other people manage in this world?

4. A community member approaches you about bringing awareness to a local cause. You react by:

A. Taking over the cause. You spend long hours making sure everything is right and even lose track of a few of your own plans and projects. The end is worth it though because the petition is successful and the cause is worthy.

B. Look into the story behind the cause only to find out that one of the backers is problematic. You end up exposing corruption but then garnering public support to save the day.

C. You agree to take on some volunteer work to help the cause. It sounded like a good idea at the time, but then you blow it off to go nightclubbing and forget to work on anything. When called out for abandoning the cause, you burst into tears, and tell them it’s their fault for triggering your anxiety.

D. Backing this cause will actually topple a city council member who is your worst enemy. How lucky!

E. The person asking for help on this cause is being misled by someone who has ulterior motives. You make them aware of the situation before they get in too deep.

F. You were approached about this cause and now that you’re involved you’re going to ride this cause until you topple everyone involved. No one’s career is safe.

G. You rip the clipboard from their hand and fling it into the bushes.

H. You pretend to be interested for 10 seconds before tossing a dirty one liner about their cause and flashing finger pistols.

- I. You kindly point out to them that Wikipedia isn't a reliable source and that Snopes.com is George Soros-funded, so therefore it's a Satanic agenda website.
- J. You take paperwork related to the cause home and then go online. You share a few insightful tweets about your opinion but then when they contact you again about a follow-up you stare at your glowing phone screen... and swipe it to silent.

5. It's your lucky day! Dr. Who appears beside you, telling you to take his hand and run, as you're about to go on an adventure. You:

- A. take his hand and spend most of your time cleaning up the Tardis and nearly getting killed as you conquer enemies he never seems to catch onto before you. Eventually he thanks you.
- B. take his hand with much trepidation. You end up finding out that he's not The Doctor but a villain impersonating The Doctor. You vanquish him and save the universe.
- C. take his hand and initially have fun but then you end up getting seduced by his worst enemy and go on a universe-destroying adventure with them before ending up in a hospice at the other side of the galaxy
- D. take his hand. Literally. And then go on an adventure: just you, a hatchet, and Doctor Who's severed hand.
- E. don't take his hand but you do warn him that you saw some shady-looking robot characters just around the block. He thanks you, changes his direction, then surprises and destroys the robots. The universe is saved.
- F. take his hand, but he abandons you years later when he notices you're aging. You become the bane of his existence and his worst nemesis as you follow him across the universe, haunting him and his new companions.
- G. do NOT take his hand. You kick him in the shin and take an axe to The Tardis to punish him for daring to invade your personal space.
- H. take his hand and steal The Tardis. Using it to play pranks across the galaxy.
- I. You do not take his hand and you turn him into the intergalactic authorities for attempted kidnapping.
- J. take his hand and he becomes cemented to you as you take him on a terri-

fying journey to the underworld that is your ennui, nihilism, addiction and depression. The Tardis ends up turning into an intergalactic trap house.

6. There's a serial killer loose. Curfew is declared, and you're told to shelter in place. If you absolutely must venture out, it's imperative that you travel in pairs. What do you do?

A. You go to your mom's house to make sure her security system is armed. It's not. You get electrocuted while setting it up. It's worth it though. Cos she's your mom.

B. You realize the description of the serial killer is similar to the description of your partner. You look into their things hoping you don't end up finding a chest filled with locks of human hair and driver's licenses.

C. You go out on the town anyway. Even though you perfectly match the description of the serial killer's favorite victims. Life is too short to miss out on Wing Wednesday and trivia night at the bar.

D. Serial killer is loose? You go out after curfew anyway. You've got your conceal-carry. You're ready.

E. You organize a neighborhood watch and a tip line to keep everyone safe and informed.

F. Bitch, I am the serial killer.

G. You catch the killer breaking in through your bedroom window. Now he's stuffed and preserved at your kitchen table as a permanent guest.

H. You end up murdered, stuffed, and preserved at a kitchen table because you played a prank on your neighbor.

I. Your son was electrocuted while arming your new security system. You sleep well now because you're safe and the Nextdoor app always keeps you informed.

J. You feel a sense of excitement with the growing fear of the town. You have a scrapbook of articles about the serial killer. You post regularly on a forum dedicated to the killer. You just feel that... they GET you somehow.

7. It's Purge Night! What are you up to, cool cat?

- A. You go out fully armed and armored. You rescue all the innocents that you can from the clutches of vile purgers.
- B. One of the group you're sheltering with turns out to be a Purger. You protect the most vulnerable of the group as you spend a harrowing night trapped in the warehouse only to emerge victorious.
- C. You got trapped out in the city because you needed to make a quick stop to buy some groceries only ten minutes before sundown. You spend the night running in terror as every hiding place you find gets discovered because you're constantly hyperventilating noisily with fear.
- D. Your car breaks down before you can find shelter. But that's okay. You end up taking the weapons of the first Purger who tries to kill you and walking triumphantly into the night. YOU are the nightmare now.
- E. You run a high tech command center that controls a network of good Samaritans who locate and rescue the innocents stuck outside.
- F. Every fuckboi who ever hurt you or your loved ones is On Your List. And you've successfully eliminated two-thirds of them already. And . . . the night is young.
- G. You're not out Purging but that doesn't mean anyone trying to get into your home is safe. Just let them try breaking in.
- H. You're out detonating fireworks and chasing terrified citizens with drones. Some guy with an axe and a bunny mask ends up killing you when you throw a firework onto his lawn.
- I. You decorate your lawn with blue flowers, activate your security system, and go to sleep with a lavender eye mask and a rose quartz tower next to the bed.
- J. You stay secluded in an abandoned warehouse with some spray paint and snacks. A group of Purgers breaks in. You get inside their minds, turning them against each other with the power of your dark and disturbing theories, and go back to spray-painting the walls as they eliminate each other.

8. You've been invited to be part of a wedding party. At the celebratory wedding events, you:

A. Watch all the vendors with an eagle eye for potential fuck-ups, and put the fear of God into anyone who isn't pulling their weight to make this the very best possible first day of the bride and groom's new life together.

B. Manage all the difficult relatives with grace and ease, and also keep an eye on the children's table, keeping them from getting too rowdy.

C. Are invited to do shots with the groomsmen, drink them under the table, and wander off before the cake is even cut. You're never getting married, and you've done your time at this shindig. It's time for some new adventures.

D. Get to talking with the relatives who work in high-powered positions in your industry. Make a nice toast to the new couple, then get right back to schmoozing those relatives.

E. Keep an eye on the drunkest guests to make sure nothing bad happens to them, and also that nothing could happen to mar this day for the happy couple.

F. Are genuinely happy for the newlyweds, but eventually these unfamiliar feelings of hope and love really weird you out. You get very drunk and fight several strangers outside, then go home and order new weapons online for your Rare Knife And Sword Collection. Though you've been thinking of branching out into poisons, lately. You could keep them in prettily sinister bottles . . . and organize them alphabetically by plant source . . .

G. Offer to host the rehearsal dinner and then spend the entire evening getting pissed off at all your guests for not being more considerate of your home.

H. Get drunk and try to fight the bride's father at the wedding reception. You lose.

I. Buy the happy couple a lot of "Live, Laugh, Love" merchandise they didn't register for.

J. Skip the wedding but send a nice gift. It's one of your ears. Just kidding, it's a fake ear made out of gummy candy, dipped in edible fake blood. And a bunch of cash for whatever they want to do on their honeymoon. Your enclosed a note explains that selling ears on the black market is how you raised the funds

for this, their wedding gift, and if that's not love, what is? They'll know you were joking, probably.

9. You were up for a promotion at work that you worked really hard for, and were unofficially promised; but at the last minute, the higher-ups gave it to some mediocre white man who shows up for work late, leaves early, stinks to high heaven of booze all day long, and can barely keep his pants on. How do you handle this setback?

A. Warn all your colleagues about all the misconduct you've personally witnessed from the new boss, so they can be ready to defend themselves.

B. Keep quiet, but maintain a detailed log of the new boss' bad behavior so that when it's time to oust him, you've documented everything.

C. Go out to blow off some steam, meet up with some new people, and end up boarding a midnight train whose destination no one is quite sure of. Turning negatives into positives 24/7, that's you!

D. You get in good with the new boss, learn a bunch of his personal and professional secrets, and then totally screw him over and get him fired. You regret nothing. We adapt in order to survive.

E. You use your whisper networks to warn all the women in your workplace who are subordinate to him, so hopefully they won't be seduced and heartbroken (or sexually harassed or assaulted).

F. You surreptitiously record him saying and doing inappropriate things, then leak them on social media anonymously . . . and tag several local and national news outlets, as well as your HR department, whom you scold for not doing anything resembling their jobs, and tearfully ask the internet for help. You smirk quietly as the higher-ups lose their shit, thinking, *How d'you like me now, bitches?*

G. You ignore him and leave him alone until he invades your personal space. Then you punch him in the face repeatedly and dare him to report you.

H. You try to bro out with the new boss and it lands you in a ton of trouble. Everyone in the workplace hates you — even slightly more than they hate him. When the shit finally hits the fan, you get fired too. It's so satisfying that your

co-workers go out for drinks and cake to celebrate your demise.

I. Honestly, if there's anything that annoys you more than not getting this promotion, it's hearing all this nonsensical gendered rhetoric again. You'll just work harder now. After all, no one promise you a rose garden in this life. Eyes on the prize—you'll get it next time. You will, as long as you work hard and want it, right? Of course you will. This is America.

J. You mind your business, apply for better jobs at other places, and ultimately score a work-from-home position that pays you more, and where the people are less idiotic. You feel like you're the real winner here. You give your notice on your very last day, mumbling and avoiding eye contact, but really you feel fine about it.

10. Your friends have started a new literary magazine and throw a launch party for the first issue. They invite you and some of the other authors with work in the issue to read at the launch. At the party, you:

A. Read your work aloud and dedicate it to all your friends and tell them how much you love them. Everyone cheers, and you glow.

B. Enjoy reading your work, but remain on guard. There is at least one person here who has talked a ton of shit about you behind your back, even while they pretend to be a "safe" person to your face.

C. Step outside to smoke and get caught up in a new adventure with some randos from the bar across the street. You wake up in another state. You vaguely remember doing lines and having taken part in an orgy. You go into the bathroom to splash water on your face and realize you are still wearing the mask. And it appears to be stuck. To your face. It won't come off. It won't budge.

D. Show up and schmooze the living hell out of everyone. You don't like parties, but you'll be back again tomorrow night if given the opportunity. Gotta make connections and win people over, it's how these things work.

E. Keep an eye out for anyone getting too drunk to defend themselves from unwanted advances or any type of aggression. Someone has to do it.

F. Show up, drink your face off, hug everyone there who deserves a hug, read

ebulliently, and punch out the sound guy when he tries to kiss you. The EICs push water and coffee on you before the night is through — but they also make the sound guy cry on your behalf. Everyone wins.

G. Arrive early and stake out your spot. You're fine with attending these functions, but you like your personal space. And you don't like it when people steal your seat.

H. You show up uninvited and disrupt the reading as "performance art," which you've done many times before at other events. One of the EICs hosting this reading punches you in the throat; you're taking a swing at her when the other one glasses you from behind. The bouncer tosses you out on your face. Everyone laughs. Goodbye.

I. You get too drunk and talk a lot about the latest Twitter scandal. You complain about the hosts of this reading, because they recently referred to another publication as the "journal de rigueur for pick-me ladies and edgelords." Someone overhears you and tells you to shut the fuck up. You start to cry and disrupt the evening for everyone. You wish everyone could just be nice.

J. You awkwardly make small talk and have some drinks. You read your work. The whole evening is surprisingly chill. You don't feel quite at ease, but you don't feel particularly uncomfortable, either. You're just a regular person among these folx. In fact, you have better social skills than some of them.

RESULTS

If you chose **mostly As**, you are **The Choking Doberman**:

You're a fierce protector, and always there to help, rescue, and even save your loved ones. Your family and friends would be lost without you and all that you do to love and protect them. You're a gem in the life of everyone you touch, truly. However, you also have a tendency to (ha, literally!) bite off more than you can chew. When the burglar's fingers get stuck in your throat, don't forget that everyone needs help sometimes. Let your loved ones take care of you, too — in some cases, that might mean taking you to the vet. Guaranteed, once they find out what you've been up to (i.e., killing and eating predatory intruders), they'll treat you to a steak dinner and ice cream for dessert. WHO'S A GOODEST GIRL!!!

If you chose **mostly Bs**, you are **The Babysitter Who Finds Out The Phone Calls Are Coming From Inside The House**:

You're vulnerable and sweet, but you're a hell of a lot stronger than most people would guess at first glance. And you're definitely a lot tougher than most violent assholes would give you credit for—but don't worry, if they make the mistake of testing you, they're gonna get theirs. You've been terrorized and gaslit and tormented, but you remain a pinnacle of strength and kindness—somehow. You are a warrior in the truest sense—you will rise up from the ashes of abuse, torment, violence, and suffering, every single time, to protect children and the home. You might nail a bad guy to the floor by jamming a wrought-iron firepoker through his hand, too. Good on ya.

If you chose **mostly Cs**, you are the cautionary tale of the **Creepy San Antonio Kids—yes, all of them, you are an entire troupe of maleficent ghost children**:

You are the unsuspecting car that rolls to a stop at the bottom of a hill. Before you realize what's happening, ghost kids push you onto the train tracks. And you? You're just along for the ride. Who put you in the driver's seat?! Why aren't you throwing your shit into reverse? Or getting out and running like hell? We know

why. You end up in trainwreck situation after trainwreck situation because you listen to the wrong friends. Monsters are just straight-up more interesting than regular, well-adjusted people, and no one knows this truth better than you do. There's always some extravagant, intricate, idiosyncratic life excuse as to why you're waking up in the hospital . . . or naked at the top of a water tower . . . or in jail. But we're laughing, because we know what the real reason is. It's you.

If you chose **mostly Ds**, you are the **Crazed Killer Who Slashes Victims With His Hook-For-A-Hand**:

You're a very determined (and self-determined) personality. You make your own luck and your own chances, and you've never really known any other way. Some might think you're too calculating, exacting, or opportunistic; but you know (and we see you!) that you're really just what time and circumstance have together conspired to make you. So, just like the killer who lost his main murdering appendage but replaced it with a hook perfect for slashing—you turn negatives into positives, because you're so good at adapting to make reality work for you instead of against you.

If you chose **mostly Es**, you are the **Truck Driver Who Kept His High Beams On While Following A Young Woman Home At Night**:

You're a lot like this Good Samaritan who saved a young woman from a misogynistic serial killer by following her home with his high beams on so her would-be captor couldn't overpower her from the backseat. You're a whistleblower. A reader of the daily news, yes, but more than that—it's always you who's reading the signs. You know when shit's about to go sideways, and you're there ready to protect those who are less perceptive. You speak out for the greater good. It's just what you do. Thanks for warning the world. Climate change is still happening, yes, but you're trying your damndest. And we see you. And we appreciate you.

If you chose **mostly Fs**, you are **Bloody Mary**:

You are the Wu-Tang Clan of urban legends, in that you are truly nothing to fuck with. You are the Shark Week of urban legends, in that there's always a lot of blood and a lot of screaming when it's your time to shine. You are the Alice of urban legends, because your vibe is, quite literally, through the looking-glass. You veritable paragon of sacred feminine rage, we adore you. You took a lot of shit in your early life. You suffered. You bled. And you wept. And then you started to smolder, to quake . . . and soon, you were bleeding out your eyes with sheer fury, vibrating in a furor of lethal, cosmic umbrage. And now? Everyone is terrified of you. Even those who ask for your aid better have a damn good reason, and better be prepared to offer you your due. Or else you'll come for them, too. We think you're fire.

If you chose **mostly Gs**, you are **The Bunny Man, everyone's favorite axe-wielding, rabbit-mask-wearing villain** who pops out of the trees to inform trespassers and clandestine lovers that they've crossed the line and you're going to punish them for it:

Similar to Get The Hell Off My Lawn In a Bottle, you are **FUCK OFF MY LAWN, BITCHES! IN A BUNNY SUIT**.

You are a true introvert (not one of those 'take a personality quiz and decide you're an introvert' introverts). Your house is arranged just so. Your property line is distinctly drawn (Robert Frost said it best: good fences make good neighbors). Your personal space is surrounded with barbed wire. And yet idiot lovemaking teens and nosy travelers keep ignoring your clearly written warning signs.

It's not your fault that you have to sometimes defend yourself with messy results.

One of your strengths is that you're unafraid to be seen as you are. You woke up, put on a rabbit suit, and chose violence. You're damn well unconcerned if that bothers an entire generation of terrified teens.

If you chose **mostly Hs**, you are **An Evil Clown**, which is to say, **Simply A Fucking Clown**:

Clowns are the bright fuckboi goblin jesters that frolic in Satan's court. If you're a clown, you think you're a badass gonna start some shit, but as with the 2016 Clown Panic you simply fuck around and find out. Especially in Scotland, where we hear you're likely to be glassed on sight (which just makes us love those kilt-wearing, berserker badasses all the more). The only silver lining to your tragicomic existence is that Michelle Bachmann once publicly confused one of your more malevolent brethren with John Wayne while on a campaign trail (and this is pretty much our favorite thing that has ever happened).

If you chose **mostly Is**, you are **Tainted Halloween Candy**:

You are the Hufflepuff of urban legends, in that someone might take you seriously for half a second at first glance, but if they look at you any longer that all falls apart. You're so silly that you're kind of cute! Do you have any idea how expensive razor blades are these days? And no one is going to waste an edible on your kids. Sigh. We know you mean well. Just . . . don't believe everything you hear, OK? We're scared sometimes that there's not very much standing between you and full-blown QAnon crazy.

If you chose **mostly Js**, you are **Cropsy, the creepy building filled with asylum inmates and tormented souls**:

You're the introverted outlier who openly tells people that you're strange and have problems. Fools that they are, they all pat you on the head and smile—or otherwise utterly ignore your pain. That is, until they need to dump their problems on you, because everyone knows that introverts make the best listeners, right? So you listen. But—sensitive soul that you are—you don't know how to handle their problems (and why should you?), so their problems and your problems all fester together in your deeply disturbed psyche. By the time anyone finally thinks to check on you, they discover the mess they've selfishly created. Then and only then do they make you into their cleanup project—and their cautionary tale. No

wonder you're not resting well. Just hang in there, and know that eventually, the help will finally come. And they'll all know that you *really* weren't kidding about being different.

If your results were so disorganized that you did not choose one letter more than all the others, you are probably the Wendigo. As noted in one of our earlier social media quizzes, this means **you are probably a serial killer**, so we will have to invite you to leave now. Fox says you can always take the quiz again if you want a better result. Cee says be forewarned that anything you send us may be shared to the cops. Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself.

Keisha-Gaye Anderson



Interview with Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir

This interview has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Cee Martinez: It's been a few years since I interviewed you for *Luna Luna*! Since then, I've seen your name pop up in the credits of so many of my favorite movies — *Atomic Blonde*, *Bullet Train*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. And I know Fox just recently saw *Kate*.

So I'll start where we left off: when I interviewed you before, you said your dream was to do a big Hollywood blockbuster movie, and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is Marvel! So I want to ask you about it. What was the experience like, and did you feel any difference between using live-action human actors versus CGI characters?

Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir: Well, *Shang-Chi* wasn't the first film I did where we used CGI. We had CGI fighting in *Deadpool 2*. But I actually started working with CGI several years before. Long before I came to America, long before *John Wick*, I did editing for a children's show. And that's where I got the tools to work with those CGI characters, and VFX in general, because we had to imagine all kinds of ships and stuff happening onscreen. So I picked up a lot of tools from there. Just how to deal with, you know, how the pipelines work and what is needed to do editing-wise to prepare for the VFX work. I gained some important tools that would later allow me to do something like Marvel, without sweating it.

A funny thing is, I actually did *Shang-Chi* and *Kate* and the same time.

Fox Henry Frazier: Really?! What was that like?

ER: Yeah — it was never planned, but you know, COVID made everything weird. We were stuck in Sydney, Australia, and no one knew what was happening with the lockdowns, you know? We thought at first, "Oh, it'll only be 3 weeks, maybe a month," and then, "Well, maybe three months" — but we were there for a year.

And at some point, we production told us that they would be putting us on hiatus. Being a mother of 4 with grandchildren, is expensive—you know, kids are expensive, and the older they get, the more expensive they get! I couldn't stay in Sydney unpaid on hiatus. I'm not saying they didn't treat us well—I could have just chilled and enjoyed everything there—but I just couldn't afford it.

But it happened that Netflix called me at the same time and asked if I could do *Kate*. Then they found out I was in Australia, but they still agreed to send it. So they sent it, and I had everything in my hotel room—my editing suite—but then we never went on hiatus for *Shang-Chi*!

So we were working on *Shang-Chi* during the day, and then at night and on weekends, I would go to my hotel room and work on *Kate*. There was COVID, so there was nothing else I could do, you know? It worked out fine.

CM: It sounds so dreamlike, to be doing those two projects at the same time, and not doing much else. Did you ever find that it affected your sleep? Your dreamworlds? Did you, or do you, ever edit or see film imagery in your dreams?

ER: Yes, a lot. I see everything in my dreams. I remember when I was 12, I once cut to a close-up in a dream, and I thought it was so weird. It was long before I had experience or even knew editing existed, but there it was, BOOM!

But I was so happy to get *Kate*, because my role in a big production [like *Shang-Chi*]*—*with so many people working on it, your voice gets smaller and smaller. You can learn a lot from that, but it's also pretty strict about what you can and can't do.

But with *Kate*, Netflix sent it and I was allowed to do whatever I wanted. And that was a great experience. I thought, "You know, I'm just going to cut this as though she's just going down through the patriarchy, just killing every single guy [who gets in her way, on her path] to save this young girl."

So that became my focus, that's how I interpreted the script, and all the work of the director and his crew. For me, this was: she's remembering her own life—not necessarily her youth, but her past—and she's just going through, making way for the future, basically. And then ultimately sacrificing herself for the future.

FHF: You know, when I was watching *Kate*, there's this scene where she's fighting with one of her would-be assassins, and he grabs her by the hair and is about to kill her, but she moves so that he chops off her hair instead. And then she wins the fight. I thought it was so bad-ass.

I feel like there is so much bound up with that image of a man grabbing a woman by the hair, both in sex scenes and in scenes of violence and assault—like, it's such a familiar image, it's become kind of its own trope. Long hair as a symbol of feminine beauty, it's really bound up with ideas of being feminine and beautiful and desirable, but also really bound up with ideas of victimhood, or being submissive or subjugated, some kind of conquest. I thought it was such a cool visual rendering of how Kate's character adapts in order to survive—like, she'll just release a piece of herself if it gets in the way of what she's after, because she's a stone cold killer—but also, that moment of going from the long hair to the short hair is the moment in which she goes from being a presumed victim to being the person who kills her assailant.

I thought it was amazing because the actual moment really is only a second or two in the film, but so much happens at once. It made me wonder—when you're editing, do you already know that there's a moment you want to emphasize, or does it happen that you're watching a ton of uncut film, and you see a moment like that, and you think, "Oh, wow, this is important, I need to make sure this stands out for the audience, that they get to spend a moment with this"?

ER: I think you know right away, once you've decided what the movie is about. Because no movie is really about assassins kidnapping children, you know? That's, like, without substance. So, with *John Wick*, David Leitch had this brave idea that the bad guys would kill John Wick's dog. I thought of the Icelandic sagas. They're

filled with histories of, like, someone slaps a woman, and then her uncles go [to avenge her] and a hundred people die. So, with *John Wick*, I thought of those sagas, and how they're really about revenge. And then, with *Kate*, I thought, this is really about the patriarchy. She's sacrificing herself for the future. And once I feel what the movie is really about, it's so much easier. That's when you start connecting moments that can really help your mission.

FHF: I love that!

CM: Yes — *John Wick* is basically an Icelandic saga centered around a beagle puppy, and we've got *Kate*, with children in danger — let's jump over to the boys' club, where we've got *Deadpool 2* and *Bullet Train*. Those are both really violent, but also both really lighthearted. I mean, I was laughing way too much during *Bullet Train*. There's a fight scene where he's fighting a woman who's dying of poison, and that's tragic, and he feels bad, but he needs her to die, and somehow the scene itself is hilarious. I think it was the mansplaining line that did it for me — and so you're laughing, and you feel bad for laughing, but you're still laughing — that's super important, to get that emotion across, because [that scene] could *very easily* not be funny.

ER: Yes, absolutely — and that's something that [director] David Leitch is very good at. I learned it from working with him. And now I think that's so important. He taught me on *John Wick* that you have to give people permission to enjoy the fight.

So, how do you give people permission to enjoy a fight? It's much easier with comedy than with drama, it absolutely is, but you still have to let them know it's OK. Because we all have to remember, this is not true violence. This is made-up violence, it's all choreographed, and it's OK to enjoy it. It sometimes gets really violent, when you have special effects and sound added in, but the essence is the alpha dance. Whether it's done by men or women, I always think of it that way, as the alpha dance.

So it's always a question of, how we are going to allow people to enjoy this? It goes back to understanding what the movie is really about. Very few people know this, but what we discussed during *Deadpool 2* was actually the prison system. You know, that's actually, like, making criminals, multiplying them. In the movie, there's the young boy that's taken and he's innocent, but he's taken to jail where he meets criminals, and he ends up becoming evil. So you try to find out what the story is about, the essence of it. And then you find ways to give people permission to enjoy watching it.

CM: That makes me think of *Atomic Blonde*—there's a scene that feels like [the fight sequence] just doesn't end, where she can barely lift her arms by the end of it—and you can hear her breathing—they're just, like, two exhausted animals. I got pillowfight arms when I was watching that in the theater, like I couldn't even lift my popcorn anymore! It was a very intense scene, and it almost gives you the illusion of a one-take scene—though I don't think it was. Was that your editing, or was it actually a one-take?

ER: No, it wasn't. It's been a long time, but I think it's, like, 40 edits or something. It was quite a lot of edits. The idea came from the producer, Kelly McCormick, to do it this way—and the whole scene, I think, is really a testament to David, and how he works, how collaborative he is.

You know, it does happen in Hollywood sometimes, when some people get an ounce of success, they stop being collaborative; they want to show everyone how much they know. But not David—he's so collaborative. I think it's because he was originally a stunt man, then second unit direct, etc., so he knows all the departments, he knows everyone's roles in a film, so he's very collaborative.

For *Atomic Blonde*, hair and makeup had to be on set, because it gets bloodier and bloodier—as the scene goes on—the clothes get ripped. So every take you have to change clothes, change makeup. And you know, you can't throw Charlize [Theron] down a flight of stairs or into a wall—not that she wouldn't be super, super excited to do those stunts herself, but it's an insurance issue. So there are stunt people in there, too.

When I was on set for *Atomic Blonde*, just so we could check the stitches, and when we get outside, it's extremely visual-effect heavy — obviously — because, you know, you're in the car, you're turning around —

FHF: Yes!

CM: You go straight from the fight scene to that epic car chase.

ER: Yes, I was on set for that whole fight scene and then the car chase as well, until they go into the river. And it was just such a fun scene to participate in. It was great.

CM: One of the comments you made earlier, about learning to love all of the characters, including the bad ones — that feels liberating, to me. To sink yourself into the viewpoint of whoever you're looking at, and just dig in. I think that can create humanity for every single character, even the bad ones.

ER: Yes, you know, in *Bullet Train*, my favorite character was actually [secondary antagonist] Prince. She was basically the one I could relate to the most. So, yeah, I think you have to love your bad guys. You can't make a 'good' character *good* if he doesn't have a good *bad* character opposite him. You know?

FHF: Truth.

CM: One of your ambitions, last time we spoke — you said you had a great revenge tale in mind, pitched to someone. Do you ever think about collaborating with another filmmaker, to tell a story?

ER: Yes. I do. But you know, I came to Hollywood and did *John Wick* when I was 50. And now that's about seven years ago. Up until then, I had just been struggling in the Icelandic film industry, which, you know, has a really tight belt on it. So financially, that was a huge struggle. But I came to Hollywood and did *John Wick*, and suddenly I was fixing up my house!

I felt a bit trapped, into that. I am trapped. But I'm just going to enjoy it while it lasts. Because we all know that at some point, you eventually just become irrelevant. I mean, it doesn't even have to be because you're not good anymore; it's all kinds of things. It's ageism—and, you know, as you get older, there's also new stuff coming. Like TikTok, which I think is amazing, but I couldn't do a TikTok, you know?

CM: I couldn't do TikTok!

ER: You like it, though?

CM: Yes, I like it well enough, but the way kids constantly pump out content on it is not something I could do.

ER: It's crazy! No disrespect. But I know there is a future where someone else will take my position, and they should have it. I'll want them to have it. But right now, I'm just bringing home the bacon for as long as I can. And when that time comes, well, then maybe I'll have time to [film] things here in Iceland, and enjoy it.

FHF: In 2017, you did *The Swan*—was that an Icelandic film, or no?

ER: Yes, made by Ása Helga Hjörleifsdóttir, one of my dearest friends.

FHF: I was wondering about that, because you've done so many big-budget films, as you just mentioned. Even *Kate*—you said it was smaller, but I mean, it's still Netflix! That's still pretty big. [everyone laughs] How did you come to do *The Swan*, in the midst of all the big Hollywood projects you've been working on?

ER: I love to work on independent films when I have the opportunity. Obviously, they don't have the same huge post-production period. It's maybe six months. And sometimes, there's a space between projects, on my end of things. But I like doing independent movies where you don't have to think about what the audience wants, you don't have to think about box office numbers. You know?

I have huge respect, but this is the game in Hollywood. Because they're making movies for twenty million dollars—I think *John Wick* was twenty million—and even upwards of that. So, someone's going to want their money back. It's all private money. And I have absolute respect for that—you have to keep in mind that there are box office expectations.

But doing an independent film here at home—it really grounds you, first of all, so you don't get full of yourself. You know, like, no [mimics haughty tone] "Where's my coffee?!" [everyone laughs] No, nothing like that. But, in addition to being grounded by the experience, you also have the freedom to experiment with things. You don't have to do them in the same way that you do with big blockbuster movies.

Actually, though, I think it's amazing what we got away with in *Atomic Blonde*. I did really European edits on it. I watched it just the other day, and was like, "Wow, we really go to do this!" But there are those concerns about returns, and so you have to be more careful. You are asked to be more careful, and stick to what you know will work. I think it's a testament to David that we were allowed to push things a bit.

I think SONY was also amazing in allowing *Bullet Train* to end up where it did, too. And it wasn't without discussion. For example, Prince did horribly on test audiences. They wanted to cut that monologue out completely, and I thought, "Over my dead body! There's no way!" And the way *Bullet Train* came out in the end, what I love about it is, it's so layered. You can watch it again and again and again, and never get bored. [laughs] I'm speaking for myself.

One of my favorite things about *Bullet Train*, and about *Atomic Blonde*, is that the audience is really being gaslighted the entire time. In *Atomic Blonde*, the main character is lying to you throughout the entire movie, which extremely complicates the plot. And in *Bullet Train*, you're being gaslighted by those amazing characters. If you look at the movie, it's really about the father and son: that's why the movie starts with them in the hospital. Then you follow them through all this

craziness, and they're the only characters that have any kind of arc. They're the only characters that anything resolves for, and they're the only characters that experience any kind of change. Well, some of the other characters die, I guess, but that's not really a change. But both of those movies are just so fun.

CM: They really are. Which I enjoy because, looking over your career, it seems clear that you choose projects that speak to you, rather than “belonging” to a given studio and just doing whatever job you're handed. So it creates a more personal, interesting body of work. I watch at your filmography with a sense of enjoyment—like, when I see your name pop up, I know it's gonna be good.

ER: Well, thank you. That's very sweet. I mean, listen, there are absolutely movies I won't take. But very few.

I'm also a bit of a method editor. So I have to choose my projects well. Like, when I was working on *John Wick*, I was just sick. I had this suit sewn for me—and I wore a suit to work every day. When I was doing *Atomic Blonde*, I went to the gym every single day, and was freaking out just because of, you know, wanting to fight everyone all the time. [everyone laughs] Then, we did *Deadpool 2*, and I was struck by Stage 4 cancer. And I thought, “REALLY?? REALLY, REALLY??” And I was in the hospital for four months.

CM and FHF (agog): Just like *Deadpool*!

ER: I'm telling you, it's a method thing! And then, the year I did *Shang-Chi*, I got my granddaughter, who is part Chinese!

CM and FHF: You're magical!

ER: No, no. It might be a curse, but we'll see. [everyone laughs]

But I do believe whatever you take, if you take a project, you have to commit. Now, that doesn't mean I put my name on everything I do. Sometimes I do a lot

of doctoring and fixing movies, and I don't always put my name on it, because I don't always have the time with it [that I'd like]. But I did with *Kate*, because I re-edited it from a completely different movie, so I really committed to that.

But when I commit, I get obsessed. And also, just finding ways to make things work that might not—it's an obsessive behavior, I can spend hours. I go into myself and have no idea what's happening around me. Once, in Denmark, I was editing a documentary, and it's like I suddenly realize it's dark outside? So I turn around, and they'd built a whole freaking wall around me! And put in a door behind! And I hadn't even noticed! [*everyone laughs*]

CM: That's the sign of a true artist.

FHF: I was going to say that!

CM: I think we can all relate. We're all artists, musicians, writers — you put up your tent around yourself and your work, you go inside, and you do your job.

FHF: Yes! You know, I actually refuse to drive a car after I've been working on something for even half a day. Because I'm still so inside my brain, like, all immersed in my inner ether—I'm afraid I won't understand what's going on around me in time, and I'll have a car accident.

ER: Yes! This sounds right to me. I support your choice there. For me, I can drive, but I will lose everything. Just, everything. Wallets, telephones, cameras, it all just goes somewhere. I don't know.

FHF: You know, when Cee mentioned earlier that she gets excited when she sees your name in the opening credits because she knows it's gonna be good, she was speaking for both of us, and it made me wonder—do you have any colleagues whose work affects you that way? Is there anyone in your industry that when you hear they've been working on a project, you think, "Oh, I've gotta see that!" —?

ER: Oh, yes. Yes, I have many. But I'll only mention the living, and just a couple.

Dody Dorn is *such* an amazing editor. She did, for example, *Memento*. I've never been starstruck until I met her. And then the last thing she did was Snyder's cuts [referring to work Dorn has done on *Zack Snyder's Justice League*, *Army of the Dead*, and *Rebel Moon*]. So she has a huge spectrum, and I think she's amazing.

Tatiana Riegel is another one — the most recent thing she's done is *Pam and Tommy*. And she did *I, Tonya*, which I absolutely loved. So yes, I do have editors I adore.

CM: Do you have any projects right now that you'd like to tell us about?

ER: Not really, not at the moment. But there will be, as soon as I sit down, because there's a project that I know is going to obsess me. I'm already excited. We're going to Australia, again, with the same team that did *Atomic Blonde* and *Bullet Train*. It's exciting, because the team is getting back together! We're doing *The Fall Guy*, with Ryan Gosling and Emily Blunt. It's going to be so exciting. And there's something lovely about working with the same crew, because we kind of, at least for now, speak the same language. We know what we like, and what we don't like. It's good. I am super excited. It's a great script. It's gonna be really fun.

CM: It sounds amazing!

FHF: It does sound really exciting. Thank you for talking with us about your art, and new projects too!

CM: We've found your work to be so much fun over the years.

ER: Thank you, you're very kind.

CM: I fangirl hard! When I'm a fan, I'm a *fan*.

ER: [laughs] Does it go the other way?

CM: [*looks around impishly*] I hope so.

FHF: It does!

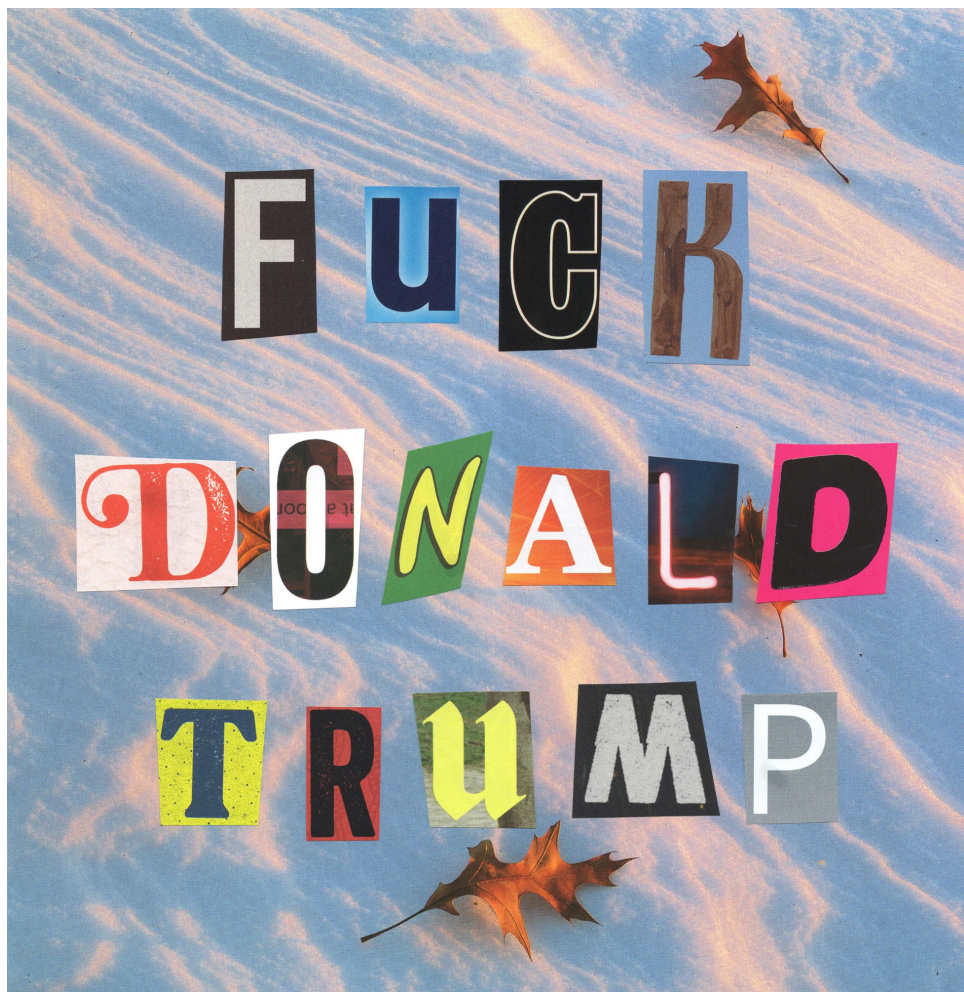
ER: It was so nice seeing you both. You know, I love the name of your magazine. I love it! When Cee told me, I was like, *that is too cool*. It's the best!

CM: Thank you! We're going to bring the fight back to literature!

FHF: Thank you! Before we close, I had wanted to ask — do you have any favorite Icelandic idiom or proverb you'd like to share with us?

ER: Hmm. Yes. My favorite for a long time is actually kind of a new one. It's difficult to translate, but it's the word *skilja* — it means both "to get a divorce" and "to understand." So we have this idiom, "*Að skilja er að skilja*," which means, "To get divorced is to understand." You understand your situation, you understand that you have to go in a different direction. It's the understanding part that I like.

Curtis Bergeson



CONTRIBUTORS

Paul David Adkins fucking lives in NY. He served in the US Army from fucking 1991-2013. Recently, he earned a MA in fucking Writing and The Oral Tradition, as well as Integrated fucking Health and Healing, from The fucking Graduate Institute, Bethany, fucking CT. He spends his fucking days either counseling soldiers or teaching college fucking scholars.

Jordi Alonso is a poet and translator based in New York City. He is the author of *Honeyvoiced* and *The Lovers' Phrasebook* and is currently working on verse translations of ancient Greek material from late antiquity. He is studying for a masters in Classical Studies at Columbia University and has degrees in English from Kenyon College (AB '14), Stony Brook University (MFA '16), and the University of Missouri (PhD '21). Follow him on twitter @nymphscholar.

Keisha-Gaye Anderson is a poet, author, and visual artist living in Brooklyn, NY. She is the author of the poetry collections *Gathering the Waters*, *Everything Is Necessary*, and *A Spell for Living*. Her writing has been published in multiple anthologies. She holds an MFA in fiction from The City College, CUNY. Visit her at keishagaye.ink.

Alessandra Bava is a poet and a translator living in the Eternal city. She is the Editor of HerKind, a poetry series dedicated to contemporary women's poetry for the Italian publisher Ensemble. Three of her chapbooks have been published in the States. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Gargoyle*, *Plath Profiles*, *Thrush*, *Tinderbox*, and *Waxwing*, among others. Her most recent translation work into Italian is Diane Seuss' *four-legged girl*.

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, including *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021), *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, and *The Prisoners*. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Chautauqua*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble.

Dustin Brookshire, a finalist for the 2021 Scotti Merrill Award, is the curator of the Wild & Precious Life Series and editor of *Limp Wrist*. He is the author of two chapbooks—*Love Most Of You Too* (Harbor Editions, 2021) and *To The One Who Raped Me* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2012). Dustin is a co-editor of the forthcoming *Let Me Say This: A Dolly Parton Poetry Anthology* (Madville Publishing). Visit him online at www.dustinbrookshire.com.

Curtis Bergesen was born in Washington, DC. He is a vegetarian, only child, eagle scout, and nature lover. Curtis has spent much of his adult life working in the music

business. After 10+ years of marketing, publicity, and social media ghost writing, he decided to unplug and search for more creatively fulfilling opportunities. Collage The World was born in 2017 after an inspiring trip to Miami's Wynwood neighborhood. Curtis lives in Denver, CO, and is a proud member of Denver Art Society.

Melissa Eleftherion Carr is a cis queer human, a writer, a librarian, & a visual artist. She is the author of *field guide to autobiography* (The Operating System, 2018), & eleven chapbooks from various small presses. Born & raised in Brooklyn, Melissa now lives in Northern California where she manages the Ukiah Branch Library, curates the LOBA Reading Series, and serves as the Poet Laureate of Ukiah. Recent work is available at www.apoetlibrarian.wordpress.com.

Alex Carrigan (he/him; @carriganak) is an editor, poet, and critic from Virginia. His debut poetry chapbook, *May All Our Pain Be Champagne: A Collection of Real Housewives Twitter Poetry* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022), was longlisted for Perennial Press' 2022 Chapbook Awards. He has had fiction, poetry, and literary reviews published in *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Lambda Literary Review*, *Barrellhouse*, *Sage Cigarettes* (Best of the Net Nominee, 2023), *Stories About Penises* (Guts Publishing, 2019), and more.

Karen Cline-Tardiff has been writing as long as she could hold a pen. Her works have appeared in several anthologies and journals, both online and in print. She founded the Aransas County Poetry Society. She is founder and Editor-in-Chief of Gnashing Teeth Publishing. Find her at karenthepoet.com

Juliet Cook is brimming with black, grey, silver, purple, and dark red explosions. She is drawn to poetry, abstract visual art, and other forms of expression. Her poetry has appeared in a peculiar multitude of literary publications. You can find out more at www.JulietCook.weebly.com.

Tinamarie Cox lives in Northern Arizona with her husband and two children. She writes to escape her mind and explore the universe. Tinamarie's poems have appeared in *Nevermore Journal*, *The Sirens Call*, *Grim & Gilded*, and others. While she doesn't think her life is exceptionally interesting, she invites you to follow her writing on Instagram @tinamariethinkstoomuch.

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has eleven published chapbooks the latest being: *fat & pretty* (Dancing Girl Press, June 2022). She is also the author of four full-length poetry collections, three micro-poetry collections, and the novella *Mates* (Alien Buddha Publishing, March 2022).

Nina D’Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old graveyards. Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a co-founding member of the horror writer’s group Pen of the Damned, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

Samantha Duncan is the author of four poetry chapbooks, including *Playing One on TV* (Hyacinth Girl Press, 2018) and *The Birth Creatures* (Agape Editions, 2016), and her work has recently appeared in *BOAAT*, *SWWIM*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Meridian*, and *The Pinch*. She lives in Houston.

Sophie Ewh is a writer, filmmaker, and podcaster practicing radical openness in her art. When they discovered *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, she learned how to laugh. After developing an obsession with B-horror movies and mental breakdowns, she tried to make others laugh but mostly just made them nauseous. They’re currently working on two podcasts—*Uptown Films* and *We Killed the Moon*—as well as a screenplay and an MFA in poetry from NYU.

Attracta Fahy, Psychotherapist, MAW NUIG ‘17. Winner of Trócaire Poetry Ireland Poetry Competition 2021. Irish Times; New Irish Writing 2019, Pushcart & Best of Web nominee, shortlisted for: Fish International Poetry Competition 2022, Write By The Sea Writing Competition 2021, Allingham Poetry competition both 2019 & ‘20 OTE New Writer 2018. Dedalus Press Mentoring Programme 2021. Her poems have been published in many magazines and anthologies at home and abroad. Fly on the Wall Poetry published her best selling debut chapbook collection *Dinner in the Fields*, in March ‘20. She is presently working towards a full collection.

N. Flaherty is an emerging Jewish poet from SLC, UT. A four-time Best of the Net nominee, her work is published or forthcoming in *Sunspot Journal*, *Atlanta Review*, *Sky Island Journal*, as well as others. Nicole enjoys making memories with her husband and Chihuahua named Tinkerbelle.

Ukrainian-American poet **Stella Fridman-Hayes** is the author of the poetry collection *One Strange Country* (What Books Press, 2020). She grew up in Brovary, a suburb outside of Kyiv, Ukraine, and in Los Angeles. She earned a creative writing degree at University of Southern California and is a graduate student at NYU studying for an M.F.A in poetry. Her work has appeared in *Poet Lore*, Poetry Project’s *The Recluse*, Stanford’s *Mantis*, *The Lake*, *Prelude*, and *Spillway*, among others. She’s co-editor of Ukraine/Russia inaugural issue on belonging for *Through Lines Magazine*. She is Assistant Fiction Editor, as well as Online Features Editor of *Dispatches from Ukraine*, at *Washington Square Review*.

Adelina Gonzalez, also known as That5280Lady, is an artist, whose artwork is inspired by all things music, and recycled materials. As a former DJ, Lighting Tech, Roadie, and lover of all things music she is no stranger to the music industry and how it has a pulse of its own. She recycles normally trash materials such as vinyl records, drum heads, magazines, junk mail, and other music media into original works of art.

Mathew Gostelow is a dad, husband, and hobnobbist, in Birmingham, UK. Some mornings he wakes early and writes strange tales, which have been published by *Stanchion*, *Soor Ploom*, *Cape Mag*, and others. He has won prizes from *Bag of Bones*, *Bear Creek Gazette*, and *Beagle North*. On Twitter he's @MatGost

Anne Graue's work appears online and in print in journals and anthologies. The author of *Full and Plum-Colored Velvet*, (Woodley Press, 2020) and *Fig Tree in Winter* (Dancing Girl Press, 2017), she is also a poetry editor for *The Westchester Review*. Find her on Twitter @agraue & on Instagram @amgrau poet.

Barracuda Guarisco is the author of several books of poetry and hybrid works published with Spuyten Duyvil, Vegetarian Alcoholic Press, Feral Dove Books, and is the Editor-in-Chief of Really Serious Literature. He has been nominated for Best Microfiction and The Elgin Award. In the past he curated for *Da'daedal*, *Poetry Laboratory*, *Free Poetry*, *Ogopogo*, and *LIT Quake* in Everett, WA. You can find him if you want to.

Sarah Kain Gutowski is the author of *Fabulous Beast: Poems* (Texas Review Press), winner of the 14th annual National Indies Excellence Award for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in various print and online journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *The Southern Review*. In spring of 2024, Texas Review Press will publish her collection of fabulist poems about female mid-life, titled *The Familiar*.

Jay Halsey's poems and prose have been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Net. His photography has been used as cover art for poetry collections and novels, and was part of a touring exhibit featured at libraries and bookstores throughout France to represent Editions Gallmeister's American authors. His forthcoming photography and multi-form collection, *Barely Half in an Awkward Line*, was just published by Really Serious Literature in the fall of 2022.

Shannon Hardwick's work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Gulf Coast*, *Salamander Magazine*, *Frontier Poetry*, *MAGMA Poetry*, *The Texas Observer*, *Four Way Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *Passages North*, among others. Hardwick serves as Poetry Editor for *The Boiler Journal*.

Jack Henry is a queer writer based in the high desert of SE California. recent success has been had at: *dreich magazine*, *raven cage*, *bold monkey*, *throats to the sky*, and others. there is a rumor that *Los Angeles* may be released by Guttersnob Press in 2023. for more, please go to jackhenry.wordpress.com

Allison Joseph is a poet and essayist who lives in Carbondale, Illinois. A professor of Creative Writing at Southern Illinois University, she is author of *Confessions of a Barefaced Woman*, a nominated work for NAACP Image Award.

Natasha Kessler is the author of *Dismantling the Rabbit Altar* (Coconut Books, 2014) and the collaborative chapbook *SDVIG* (Alice Blue Books, 2012). Natasha helps community college students with writing, loves learning about native plants, and ties knots in her free time.

Hillary Leftwich is the author of three books: *Ghosts Are Just Strangers Who Know How to Knock* (Agape Editions, 2023), *Aura, a Memoir* (Future Tense Books, 2022), and *Saint Dymphna's Playbook* (PANK Books, 2023). She owns Alchemy Author Services & Writing Workshop and Community Coven. She is a professional Tarot reader and teaches Tarot and Tarot-writing workshops focusing on strengthening divination abilities and writing. She lives in Denver with her partner, son, and their cat, Larry.

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens (she/her) went to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and now lives in Iowa where she is landlocked. Her fifth, full length poetry collection, *Pool Parties*, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press in 2023. She is also the author of fifteen chapbooks. Recent work appears in *The Westchester Review*, *Cleaver*, *Dream Pop*, and *Grist*. She is the director of the monthly reading series *Today You are Perfect*, sponsored by the non-profit Iowa City Poetry. Find more of her work at <http://jennifermacbainstephens.com/>.

Sally McHugh lives in the west of Ireland. She has published in *ROPES Literary Magazine* (2022, 2018), *Pendemic* (2021), *Spilling Cocoa Over Martin Amis* (2022, 2021), and *The Blue Nib Literary Magazine* (2019). She enjoys all things creative and exploring different forms of poetry and art!

E.A. Midnight [she/her] is a neurodivergent artist specializing in multi-modal, cross-genre hybridities. She is a strong advocate for challenging the boxes creative bodies are put in. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *Aurora Poetry*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Inverted Syntax*, and *Poetry Northwest*. A full list of her published pieces can be found on her website, www.eamidnight.com. E.A. Midnight resides in the Colorado wilds.

Eleanor Nesimoglu began acting and singing at a young age and fell in love with art. After four years in the Marine Corps, she studied creative writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She continues to hone her skills and honor a legacy of playwrights and directors on each side of her family by participating in theatre and continuing to write plays and non-fiction geared toward progress. She believes in the power of art to heal, and the ability of words to move. Eleanor is passionate about collaborating with artists and helping others explore their creativity. You can find more work in *The Things*, *Writers Hive Media*, *Atlantis*, and through the Colorado Photographic Arts Center.

Sarah Nichols lives and writes in Connecticut. She is the author of eleven chapbooks, including *These Violent Delights* (Grey Book Press, 2022, forthcoming), and *Press Play for Heartbreak* (Paper Nautilus Press, 2021.) Her poetry and essays have also appeared in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Twin Pies Literary Magazine*, and *Buffalo* (x 8).

Grace Noel is a mixed media fine artist, muralist, installation artist, and owner of Grace Noel Art, LLC. You can visit her studio at the Denver Art Society Underground in Denver's Art District on Santa Fe Dr at 734 Santa Fe Dr, Denver, CO. The vision of Grace's work is inspired by being outside in the sunshine and how it all relates to the four elements of fire, earth, wind, and water.

Diarmuid O Maolalai has received eleven nominations for Best of the Net and seven for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in three collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

The author **Kayshanielia Osbourne** has been an avid reader of books for years. She started her own at age fourteen and joined the world of poetry when she realized just how well she could play with words. Her works are of love, heartbreak, life and she excels in many other topics as well.

Originally hailing from rural Northern Michigan, **M. Pelin** lives and writes in New Orleans.

Jude Potts is a full time carer, who writes to keep herself amused. If she amuses others too so much the better. She began subbing stories in August 2022, and has had one piece published in *Flash Fiction North*. She likes dark, droll things that rattle around her brain like dried peas. Described by a school photographer as a pickled plum, she hasn't heard a better description yet.

After years of impersonating a Systems Engineer, **Ken Poyner** has retired to watch his wife continue to break national and world raw powerlifting records. They

travel lazily between sites of powerlifting or literary interest. Ken's four current poetry and four short fiction collections are available from Amazon and just about everywhere else. He has appeared in *Analog*, *The Iowa Review*, *Furious Gazelle*, and many other places. www.kpoyner.com

Kimberly Ann Priest is the author of *Slaughter the One Bird*, finalist for the American Best Book Awards, and chapbooks *The Optimist Shelters in Place*, *Parrot Flower*, and *Still Life*. She is an Associate Poetry Editor for *Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry* and Assistant Professor at Michigan State University.

JP Relph is a working-class writer from North West England. Her writing journey began in 2021 with Writers HQ and is mostly hindered by four cats and aided by copious tea. She loves murder programmes, zombies, and Marvel. A forensic science degree and passion for microbes, insects, and botany often motivate her words, which can be found in *Noctivagant Press*, *Quill & Crow*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Cutbow Q*, and others. Twitter @RelphJp

Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir was born and raised in Reykjavik, Iceland. A mother of four, she has edited over 50 feature films, television programs, and documentaries. She is a founding member and two-term inaugural chairwoman of Women in Film & Television Iceland (WIFT Iceland). She is best known for her collaborations with film director David Leitch on the films *John Wick*, *Atomic Blonde*, *Deadpool 2*, *Bullet Train*, and the upcoming movie *The Fall Guy*.

Sarah Royston's writing often draws inspiration from nature, folklore and myth. She likes plants (a lot) and ancient trackways, but occasionally branches out into horror based on kids' TV. Her work is published in *Bear Creek Gazette*, *Full House Lit*, *Soor Ploom Press* and *Horned Things*, among others. She lives in Hertfordshire, UK, and in her day job works as a sustainability researcher. She is on twitter: @sarahroyston4n

Alyson Shelton wrote and directed the award-winning feature *Eve of Understanding*. She created and wrote the comic *Reburn*. Additionally, her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Ms.*, *Hobart Pulp*, *Little Old Lady (LOL)*, *Comedy Blog* and others. She is currently at work on a memoir in essays. Follow her on Twitter and on Instagram where you can watch her IG Live series inspired by George Ella Lyon's poem, "Where I'm From."

Kailey Tedesco is a caul bearer & a mother. She is the author of three full-length collections of poetry: *She Used to Be on a Milk Carton*, *Lizzie, Speak*, and *FOREVERHAUS*. You can find her work featured in *Electric Literature*, *Passages North*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Fairy Tale Review*, and more. For further information, please visit kaileytedesco.com.

Rodrigo Toscano is a poet and essayist based in New Orleans. He is the author of ten books of poetry. His newest book is *The Charm & The Dread* (Fence Books, 2022). His Collapsible Poetics Theater was a National Poetry Series selection. He has appeared in over 20 anthologies, including *Best American Poetry* and *Best American Experimental Poetry* (BAX). Toscano has received a New York State Fellowship in Poetry. He won the Edwin Markham 2019 prize for poetry. Rodrigotoscano.com / @Toscano200

Joanna C. Valente is a human who lives in Brooklyn, New York. Joanna is the author of several collections, including *A Love Story* and *η ψυχή, η ψυχή μας | the soul, our soul*. They are the illustrator of *Dead Tongue* by Bunkong Tuon and *Raven King*, by Fox Henry Frazier. Joanna is also the founder of Yes Poetry. One day, Joanna dreams of having a flower and vegetable garden.

Donna Vorreyer is the author of *To Everything There Is* (2020), *Every Love Story Is an Apocalypse Story* (2016) and *A House of Many Windows* (2013), all from Sundress Publications. She lives in the suburbs of Chicago where she serves as an associate editor for *Rhino Poetry* and hosts the monthly online reading series *A Hundred Pitchers of Honey*.

Jennifer Walker is a writer and doctor. Her short stories can be read in recent or forthcoming issues of *Arcturus Magazine*, *Eclectica Magazine*, and *Dark Horses*. She lives in the Virgin Islands with her girlfriend and their two exquisitely beautiful and understandably narcissistic dogs.

Jessica L. Walsh is the author of *Book of Gods and Grudges* (Glass Lyre Press, 2022) as well as two previous collections. Her work has appeared in *RHINO*, *Whale Road Review*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, and more. She is the Blog Mistress at Agape Editions. Originally from small-town Michigan, she now lives outside of Chicago with her family and teaches at Harper College.

Jim Zola is a poet and photographer living in North Carolina.

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself

Issue 1

Contributors

**Paul David Adkins
Jordi Alonso
Keisha-Gaye Anderson
Alessandra Bava
Ace Boggess
Dustin Brookshire
Curtis Bergesen
Melissa Eleftherion Carr
Alex Carrigan
Karen Cline-Tardiff
Juliet Cook
Tinamarie Cox
Linda M. Crate
Nina D'Arcangela
Samantha Duncan
Sophie Ewh
Attracta Fahy
N. Flaherty
Stella Fridman-Hayes
Adelina Gonzalez
Mathew Gostelow
Anne Graue
Barracuda Guarisco
Sarah Kain Gutowski
Jay Halsey
Shannon Hardwick
Jack Henry**

**Allison Joseph
Natasha Kessler
Hillary Leftwich
Jennifer MacBain-Stephens
Sally McHugh
E.A. Midnight
Eleanor Nesimoglu
Sarah Nichols
Grace Noel
Diarmiud O Maolalai
Kayshanielia Osbourne
M. Pelin
Jude Potts
Ken Poyner
Kimberly Ann Priest
JP Relph
Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir
Sarah Royston
Alyson Shelton
Kailey Tedesco
Rodrigo Toscano
Joanna C. Valente
Donna Vorreyer
Jennifer Walker
Jessica L. Walsh
Jim Zola**