

Stonethrow Review
a journal of creative writing

2016

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The Journal of the Creative Writing Program at
The State University of New York, New Paltz

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Each generation of writers locates the new and the now of the world. With a savvy backward glance at literary progenitors, young authors keep literature alive through innovations that propel form, language, and subject matter in exciting ways. The contributions to *Stonethrow Review 2016* echo traditional themes—art, history, mythology, nature, and the evolution of humanness—illuminating twenty-first century concerns, at least “until the batteries die,” as one of our authors sighs. In this issue of the journal, ekphrastic celebrations of Vermeer and Dürer meet chronicles of the French Revolution and the legacy of human enslavement. Featured as well are the trials of Medusa, Orion’s progress across the night sky, and a sibling likened to an orbiting planet. Other poems, personal essays, fiction, and dramatic writings underscore the triumphs and challenges of global diversity and diaspora, whether perceived through the vision of “The American in the Room” or diners at restaurants or family meals. Another marker of multiculturalism, our first-ever translation illustrates how tenth-century Arabic writers grappled with meta-themes akin to those explored in our homages to Shakespeare, Chris Burden, and a college student compared to a comma. The natural world likewise calls, from vacation or hunting cabins and tree houses to ocean currents. The singularity also beckons: in a shelter for robots, or while refugees from a speculative technological disaster roam the Midwest.

Teachers should not have “favorites,” and one supposes neither should editors. So please allow me to merely invite you to celebrate one of SUNY New Paltz’s most remarkable creative writing anthologies to date.

—Pauline Uchmanowicz

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Hayley Nusbaum

Hollowed

The plywood assembled between the leaves
was a gathering of orphaned parts
pretending to be a treehouse. We believed it,
climbing and clambering until the birds
turned to bats and we'd trail our bare feet
inside to tell tales to our white sheets.

But, the loyalty of the seasons lulled us
into insolence, and soon the summers
crept by and the jungle gym of scraps
became a guilty twinge brushed aside,
like thank you notes sent too late.

Now, there's a cavity where the deserted
assortment of bits once stood, like a branch
after the wind shook it of the caught balloon:
an ominous vestige of youth.

Joseph Curra

Course of Wind

We set sail for coarser seas,
crucified sheets of our old skin
to the body and arms of a mighty oaken mast
that swallows the wind, exhaling us into new directions.

But wind, if you fail to show your face,
if you opt to save your breath, leaving stillness in your wake,
we will rotate the world beneath our boat,
cradling the water in our hands,
and paddle on. We will find land.

Carly Grinder

A Cabin in the Woods

From a plane, you will see the woods that surround a picturesque lake in the middle of nowhere. You'll probably think about paying a visit, or telling yourself to consider buying some land there. What you don't see is that a community of people surrounds the lake already, houses blended into the trees and hidden beneath their thick, untouched branches. Nearest to the lake stands a cabin, the frontage covered in panes of glass; the roof looks almost too perfect since its replacement, and the other wooden exterior fuses it into the forested trees that envelop the home.

In the winter, the snow reaches as high as some windows. The house sits undisturbed waiting for the big meltdown, thawing even the coldest of winters and bidding welcome to the family that returns to it. In the spring, these seasonal occupants will slowly shuffle north towards the mountains, hoping the sun will be warm enough that the house won't need the wood burner lit. In the summer, the residence is almost too beautiful, too serene to be safe after the lights dim. Like an expensive version of the cottages from a horror movie, the house sits ominously overlooking the lake. It watches its family swim. When they light their fireworks during Fourth of July, the tracers reflect throughout the cabin's interior, coloring the white-washed walls and contrasting against the dark found-wood beams.

The sun warms the house through the glass after a cool summer night. The family sleeps, but only until sunrise. In the morning, pale yellow light flows in and wakes them. The day awaits, the coffee brews. In the kitchen, surrounded by whisks and eggshells, there's a red-haired woman, both stern and warm, a line drawn by a glass of wine on an August night.

◇

John Froehlich

Frank's Fire

The pavement turned to gravel as we drove up further into the woods off Traver Hill Road, past the realty sign my grandfather had set up there not long ago. We had just passed this place called the Marlet house. I have no idea why it was called that, but my dad told me Jimi Hendrix had stayed at it back when he was still alive. There was even a video of him riding through the property on a horse, though I've never seen it.

I was riding shotgun in my dad's truck. I really didn't know what to say to him, but that was nothing new. We hadn't been up to the cabin in a while, and I knew we wouldn't be back up this way for a long time after, if ever. Over the bridge and past the decrepit house on the left, we turned up the cabin driveway. Perched on top of that hill, the cabin had been in the family for as long as I've been alive. I had had a few birthday parties up there, but I was never able to use it to its potential, and after that day I never could.

Pulling up, we noticed my uncle hadn't arrived yet, even though he lived closer and had left before us.

"I wonder where Frank is," I said.

"Johnny, I have no idea," said my dad. He wasn't in a good mood, but then neither was I.

I opened the door of the pickup, stepping out onto the gravel. Just like our own house, the way to get in was through the side of the cabin, not the front. We were so far out we couldn't hear anything but the wind whizzing through the trees and the mountain stream just a shot away. My house was in the woods as well, but it still felt like a neighborhood, with other homes and people doing things. Up here there was nothing. The closest inhabited structure was at least a half a mile away.

My dad pulled out his phone to call up Frank. I headed for inside. The door was locked, but my grandpa always put a spare key under a

rock around the side. I don't know if he thought he was being clever or something.

I put in the key and turned the knob, pushing hard on the door because it always stuck. It sort of busted open and I was inside, stepping over the dead leaves that no one had bothered to brush back out from the last time. The bathroom was right near the door, but even though we had put a toilet in, for some reason we couldn't use it, and had an outhouse instead. I never really found out why. I know we had plumbing because the sinks worked. Hung over the door leading to the porch was a wooden plaque that read "Froehlich," our family name, although I doubt it hung there for much longer after that day. I turned into the bedroom, which no one really used, because no one usually slept here. I went to the closet on the right. Near hung that painting I had always liked of the New York City skyline. In the picture there was just the regular buildings, and the Chrysler, and the Empire State, but in the reflection in the Hudson River stood that same skyline, plus the Twin Towers. It was the words at the bottom that I always liked the most.

We Will Never Forget.

Inside the closet were clothes I'm sure hadn't been worn in a long time. My grandpa kept an old .22 rifle in there. Old, brown, and rugged, with a sling to use to throw over your shoulder. It was bolt action and a single shot, meaning it could only hold one bullet at a time. My dad said it was older than he was, and he was born in 1960. I think it was the first gun I had ever fired—well, the first real gun anyway. BB guns don't count. I held it for a few minutes, looking over the old relic, before putting it back in its place. We wouldn't be using this today; my dad had brought his 30-30 lever-action and twelve-gauge shotgun, and I had brought my own, more modern .22. Not even God knew what my Uncle Frank was bringing. Could have been an arsenal. My uncle hunts a lot, and my dad said Frank owned more than twenty guns. My dad used to hunt too, but he said he lost the taste for it around the time I was born. But not Uncle Frank—he liked guns, though he wasn't what most would call a gun nut. He didn't own any AK-47s or AR-15s or anything like that, just a lot of rifles. Frank couldn't own handguns though, because he

had gotten in too much legal trouble. Not with guns, but DUIs from when he was younger. Those things follow you around I guess.

My dad came to the doorway, “Frank’s on his way. Said he stopped to pick something up at that convenient store.”

“The one next to the Dollhouse?”

My dad smiled. “Yeah, the Dollhouse.”

The Dollhouse was the ideal model of creepy abandoned buildings. Like the name implies, they used to make dolls and dollhouses, and not Barbie dolls, but those unsettling, soulless, empty-eyed things you’d see in a clichéd horror flick. Those things. I shouldn’t have to describe the place—it looked exactly how an abandoned building called the Dollhouse would look. Like a funhouse, except without the fun. Place was just asking to be burned.

“He’ll be here in a few minutes.” My dad went outside. I followed him—I wasn’t in the mood to wallow in this musty place any longer.

We waited by the truck for Frank. My dad was looking for something in that mess he called a vehicle, and I, never content to stand when I could sit, knelt down on the loose rocks. Call me lazy if you want to, but I hate standing in place. I’d rather walk around in circles.

My dad found what he was looking for—bullets for the .22 he had thrown in there. At the time my dad was probably around fifty-two or three. He had a few greying hairs but nothing you’d notice on first glance. Back then he always wore a cap, any cap—Yankees, fishing, Home Depot, Lowe’s—didn’t matter, as long it was a cap. He still does sometimes, but for some reason he seems to have fallen out of the habit. He wore glasses his whole life, just like me, but they were always beat to hell because of his rough line of work. Carpentry is hard on eyewear apparently.

We heard a truck charging up the driveway. My uncle was finally in sight. He was driving his new Ford pickup, back when he had it. It was less than a year old, and it wouldn’t be long after that day it would catch fire right at the bottom of that same driveway. For some reason he had come back to the cabin, even though I’m sure he hated seeing it. He said he was just weedwhacking the always overgrown route, and the

truck had some wiring problem. Frank said he didn't even notice until the whole thing was torched.

He pulled up next to my dad's truck. He slammed shut the door, mumbling something as he came around the side of the vehicle. I don't remember what he was wearing that day, but whenever I imagine my uncle Frank, he's always wearing a red-and-white plaid button-up, because he always wore plaid shirts. Chances are he was wearing one anyway. He stood shorter than my dad, but burlier, stronger. He had a pretty thick moustache, thicker than my dad's. He always had a little redneck in him. Not the racist type of redneck, but the buy your nephew a pair of hunting knives for Christmas when he's ten type of redneck.

He saw me, forcing a smile. "What's up Johnny?" he greeted, outstretching his hand. I shook it. I didn't used to like hugging, so my relatives always knew to shake my hand instead. I outgrew that a while ago, but even now, my grandfather, my uncles and aunts, even my dad still act like I'd rather shake their hand. I always hug them instead, but it always seems to surprise them.

"Hey Uncle Frank," I said as warmly as I could, but still ended up coming out cold as usual. I probably forgot to smile too. I always forgot to smile. When he's not around, I just refer to him as Frank, but it feels inappropriate to call him that to his face.

Frank turned to my dad. Frank was a few inches shorter and five years younger. I was 5'11 at the time and haven't grown much since, so even I was taller than Frank. Like I said though, Frank was strong and stable. He was a mason by trade, but with his arms, and the way he dressed, he could say he was a lumberjack and no one would call him a liar. All he needed was the axe.

"Hey John," he said, the false warmth dropped from his voice. "How're things?"

"How do you think?"

"Yeah," Frank sighed. "It's bullshit." He took out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one up. He had told me he had been trying to quit, but that was years before that day, and it's been a few since. He stuffed one hand back in his jeans pocket, and puffed a bit before speaking again. "I can't believe Dad pulled this shit."

"Yeah, I mean, yeah it sucks, but you know Dad, he's always been . . . sneaky."

"Yeah I know, trust me I know."

My grandpa had a bad habit of not telling people about important things. This wasn't the first time he had kept secrets. The deal hadn't been set yet, but none of us held out much hope. My grandpa said he was doing it because he didn't think anyone ever used the cabin, but if he thought that than he must have been stupid, and I'm pretty sure he's not. Maybe he needed the money, or maybe he wanted to get a place near the beach again because his Indian girlfriend had gotten rid of the house he used to stay at. Whatever the reason was, he should have said something. Maybe he didn't ask on purpose because he was sure Frank would have said no, and he would have been absolutely right. Frank used that place more than anyone. He would probably rather watch it go up in smoke than know someone else was using it.

"Fuck it," he huffed, tossing the cigarette. "Let's at least try to have some fun. I brought something interesting." He headed off back to his truck, going to get whatever he was talking about.

"Oh yeah, let's see this thing."

"What?" I asked, always curious.

"You'll see, man."

It was Uncle Frank, and we were there to shoot guns, so he was talking about a weapon of some sort, but the question was, just how crazy would it be? The answer was very. Frank came back with a small little silver box he carried like a briefcase. He placed it on my dad's tailgate, opening it up. I'm not an expert on guns, but I would say I know more than the average person, but when I laid eyes on that military-grade looking contraption, I had no idea what I was looking at. I can tell you one thing though, since the SAFE act passed in New York, which restricted guns with magazine sizes that were deemed too large, Frank had to get rid of the deadly thing. It looked like a pistol of some sort, or maybe a mini rifle, with a wiry stock attachment to hold against your shoulder. It was black, sleek, and looked like something the CIA or secret service would use, or a professional assassin, or in this case, Uncle Frank.

"What the heck is that thing?" I asked.

"Looks like something from out of Mad Max," said my dad.

"This," Frank began, displaying it to us like a prize, "is a Kel-Tec 9mm rifle."

"Celtic?" I asked, "You mean like, Irish?"

"Huh?"

"Celtic, the Irish, you know like the basketball team?"

"Oh, nah no, but it sure looks like something those IRA guys would use, don't it?"

"Man, I don't know about having that thing. Looks like you smuggled it in from Russia or something, you better be looking over your shoulder," my dad said.

"I already am, whaddya think it's for?" Frank joked.

"Can I fire it?" I asked.

"Yeah, in a bit, after I'm done."

We set up targets near the cabin, posters on trees, little stand-up figures, things like that. Watching Uncle Frank shoot that thing was something else for me. Despite my interest, I had only been to a gun range once, and I didn't get to stay long, so I had never seen anyone shoot a gun like this. It was semi-automatic, not full-auto, since fully auto weapons are illegal to own. Even then, Frank could fire that thing so fast it almost didn't matter. Laughing all the way, he sprayed the bullets at the targets like a flamethrower.

I liked my .22, and I was a decent enough shot with it. Unlike the ancient relic in the closet, it used a magazine, and it had almost no kick to it, so I could shoot it more or less as fast as I could pull the bolt back. The pump shotgun, on the other hand, was like firing a hand cannon. My dad brought me in front of a skinny tree, less than a foot in width and not too tall.

"Here, watch this." He lined up the sights, pumped, and fired. Splinters of wood and shrapnel burst into the air as the buckshot erupted from the barrel, tearing the tree trunk apart. It had taken a damning blow, but was still standing, so my dad shot it again, and again. Now it was on its last legs. My dad gave me the gun. "Try it, be careful though or you'll wind up on your ass." I tried to hold the shotgun steady, but it was much heavier than my .22 and I wasn't used to it. I had fired his

shotgun before but it had been a while. My dad helped me out, showing me where to place my hands. "Okay, go for it."

"Should I breathe first?"

"It's a shotgun, not a sniper rifle."

And he wondered where I got the smartass attitude from. I breathed anyway because I was nervous, pumped, and squeezed the trigger. I had braced myself, but the blast still knocked me off balance. If I had been holding it wrong I'd be on my back, or writhing on the ground with a broken arm. The tree finally broke from the blast, the bark ripping and tearing as it came down.

"Tim-ber," said my dad.

Later, Uncle Frank finally let me shoot his gun after my dad had a turn. It was like nothing I had ever done before. It didn't have much kick, but it was erratic, and it was hard keeping the thing straight. It felt like I could shoot it for a week without having to reload. Uncle Frank had to come reload it for me. He let me fire it for a few more clips, until the ammo ran out.

I wasn't sure how long we had spent there, but after a while the feeling started to fade, and at a certain point we all had an unspoken agreement we were done. Frank had been trying his best, but I'm not sure anything could have made him okay with what was happening. He put the Kel-tec back in its case, carrying it out back to his truck. It was a bit of fun to help distract us, but not let us forget.

"I don't know, I can't even just relax and try to have a good time," Frank said.

I didn't talk much after that. Frank's that type of person I always had trouble finding things to talk about with, so I mostly didn't. I usually let my dad talk to him. My dad didn't want to talk much either though, none of us were in a good mood. Frank shook his head.

"Maybe we could do this again, but right now I just can't stop being pissed off."

He and my dad exchanged a few more words before he got back in his truck, not wanting to stay any longer. "I'll see you guys later alright?"

"Yeah, we're gonna be heading out soon too."

"Yeah, well, who knows? Maybe something will fuck up. Hopefully this won't be the last time we're all here."

Frank started his car, taking off back down the driveway. We loaded our own stuff back onto the truck, and soon we were off as well. As we rolled away, I put the radio on.

"Not that loud," my dad complained. He never liked the music loud when he was in a bad mood, which was the opposite of me.

I rolled back the knob, but kept it as loud as I could. A new song started, and I recognized it the first second with the drum intro. It was one of those songs with an electronic beat that went a thousand times a minute and sounded like the singer was on speed. The type of song where you don't have time to think, or even breathe. The entire time the singer's urging you, inviting you to join him on his manic, musical rampage.

Come on! Yeah!

It didn't exactly fit the mood, but I didn't care. I didn't want to listen to a sad song. Fast-paced music always helped me out of an awful mood. I would have preferred to blast it, but not with my dad there. We pulled away, and the song played on. I didn't want to look at the cabin as we departed. As we came down the hill, we noticed Frank's truck stopped up ahead near the realty sign. Frank paced around the side of the vehicle squeezing a shotgun.

"What's he doing?" My dad got out of the truck to see what Frank was up to. Now that he was gone, I turned the music up.

I jumped in my seat when he started blowing holes through the sign. He kept firing, not stopping until the gun was empty. By the time he was done you couldn't even read the sign through all the burnt out buckshot holes. He said something to my dad I couldn't hear, tossed the gun in the backseat, and took off. My dad laughed. I stared at Frank's truck as he rumbled down the gravel road, shooting off as soon as he hit pavement.

◇

Magan Kasper

Deer Season

You know hunting season is here when
the Ford versus Chevy feud is parked on the side
of the road: trucks lined up one after another
along every stretch of land where trees cover.
The men will march out before dawn,
spend the day trying get some supper
and not each other.
Later, gathered around one large wooden table
another argument will ensue:
whose buck had the biggest rack.
The wives will just smile and shake their heads
because they know it all tastes the same,
like dinner and a little extra
Christmas money.

Gabrielle Simonson

Él Machete de mi Abuela

Abuela's machete was always in reach.
You felt it before you saw it waiting
on the couch in the living room.
Gleaming in the stray sunlight it cut
the air from the house until the gold that shone
from her dark skin flickered, faded.
Abuela's machete, unearthed from
Panamanian soil, split fibrous
vines exposing bright yellow-green flesh.
Then it swung from inexperienced hands
grazing coffee brown skin, wanting to see pink.
Put it back on the table, next to your
coloring books. Her weathered palms smacked
the chipped table making the paper planes
take off. Under the chair you saw them touch down.
Abuela's machete opened her mail.
Her hands remember slashing flute-thin reeds,
the feel of hitting hardened bone.

April Schmidt

The Milkmaid (Vermeer, 1658)

Why are you pouring the milk so slowly that it dribbles out of the pitcher
and into the bowl? Are you distracted by the hardening bread,
the basket full of loaves, going to waste but still might be soft
by the time you throw them away, and you're thinking
you could slip some beneath you royal blue frock?
A child's squawking laughter outside wobbles
against the window's glass panels, reminding you
it's almost time for lunch when you never ate breakfast.
The muscles in your arms, though thick, start to tighten
as the milk runs out and you put the pitcher down,
adding to the pile of dishes in the kitchen, lined up single-file
every morning to be washed and bathed with your bare hands.

Gam LaFrance

Scotch Bonnet Chillies

I felt like magic. I never thought my hands could do these things. I watched them slice then dice a large purple onion, and with the same knife toss them into a pan. I cleaned the rice the way all the women in my family did, with wild arms and gentle fingers. I cut a lime in half and squeezed it over chicken breasts. I cleaned the meat masterfully as if I were some type of Michelangelo. When it reached the pan, the sizzle became a song. I was an artist. As I waited for that side to brown I looked down at my hands. They were cracked and calloused, speckled with new and faded scars. These weren't my hands.

* * *

I recalled that crazy dream last night as I sat in the backyard with Papa. The sun was hot on our skin but it was still a new feeling. School had just let out a few weeks ago and I still didn't know what to do with all this free time. Maman told me to get a job at the supermarket but I knew she only wanted whatever discount I had on groceries. Papa didn't tell me anything. He never really does. I looked to my right and there he was sitting on the grass right next to the plot of dirt in which he grew his scotch bonnet chillies. He marked the plot with four segments of an old broken broom placed in the four cardinal directions. A dear family friend, Madame Charitable gave him a few seeds from L'Artibonite. They grew pretty quickly and I was happy for him. Papa was not a man who did much or felt much of anything, so it was great to see him sing to peppers.

"Cherie, come inside! The bugs will eat you!" Maman called from the door, but we did not move. She put her slippers on and walked over to her garden next to Papa's plot. She planted many mint, basil, tomatoes, flowers, and beans. It was quite impressive on its own, but even more impressive next to Papa's and that she definitely knew.

If it came time to water her little garden she would only tend to her side. Papa, being the man he is, would water both sides. After he would come home from work he would walk to the yard and grab the hose. He would recall his day aloud then almost as if to save his words, he would place a cigarette in his mouth and keep quiet.

"I wanted you to come inside so I can tell you something," Maman said.

"What is so important you cannot tell me outside?" Papa replied after a pause. He repeatedly stabbed the earth around his peppers with a shovel, a method of questionable origin.

"Madame Charitable passed away a last night. She died in her sleep."

Papa stopped his stabbing and turned to Maman, his face appalled. The cigarette at the corner of his mouth motioned downwards until it fell. Although freshly lit, Maman stepped on it immediately. "When will you stop smoking these things? Do you want to be dead like her?"

"She came over last week! Just last week she made us her *legim*!" My stomach ached slightly. Legim was a complicated dish made out of eggplant, chayottes, carrots, and spinach stewed for a majority of the day. I never enjoyed it, but I remember how happy Madame Charitable was to make it for us that day.

Madame Charitable was love personified. She was one of those family friends who were always so present that the "friend" part fell off. She would always claim relation to my grandfather, but that wasn't needed to include her at every baptism, communion or wedding party. Everyone knew her and was happy to know her. She was one of those people who took cooking as an art and let the magic work her. The kitchen was no prison for her, so she sang, danced and amused herself anytime she was in there, which was often. Her door would always be open and a place at her table would always be set for you. Her good deeds were so infectious. Everyone in my town of Elmont, a Long Island enclave that Haitians made a stateside parish, felt her presence. She was everyone's friend.

"When is the wake?" Papa asked.

"Friday. The funeral and reception on Saturday. Her daughter called and asked if I can make two trays of rice for them and I promised I would." Confused, I asked my mother why she had to cook two trays.

"Because Haitians like to choose rather than take whatever given." Papa recommenced the stabbing of the earth. "We need to have a great meal in honor of Madame Charitable. For her, I will make *diri ak djon djon*." When Papa said this I smiled. *Diri ak djon djon* was one of my favorite rice dishes. It's flavored by a specific mushroom that only grows in Haiti, *djon djon*, which gives it an interesting black color.

Maman wrinkled her face, already smelling his burnt beans in the pot. "*Diri ak djon djon*? Who asked you to make that?"

"Nobody did. I volunteer." Papa stood up, now looking down at her. "What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing is wrong. I was just ready to cook both trays of one type of rice. But I guess we can do one each." Maman turned towards the plot. "Are you going to use those things in your rice?" She pointed to Papa's peppers with her nose.

"Of course. They are mine aren't they?" Papa grew defensive. He put another cigarette to his lips to stop himself from saying something he did not want to say.

"Oh, yes they are. How can I forget about that?" Maman snickered and began walking back inside. "*Cherie*, I have to start my rice as soon as possible. Will you come with me to the market tomorrow?"

I shrugged. Going to the market with my mother meant an entire day of anguish. The market actually meant three or four, driving back and forth to each comparing prices and quality. Usually an argument with the cashier was to be expected too, and the burn of second-hand embarrassment.

The very next day I found myself planted in the passenger seat in Maman's car. We drove to the Stop n' Shop three towns over to buy these mussels that were on sale. She promised she would only be a moment, then stumbled back into the car an hour later with an armful of plastic bags. "I found coffee on sale!" she was shouting in bliss. "So I bought three cans! Look!"

After a bout of sighs and grunts we finally made our next destination, a Western Beef a county over. This time I decided to go inside with her. The market was bustling with weary people aisle to aisle as if everyone had a funeral to cook for. We wheeled our cart over to the back and I immediately held my breath. I've been in the seafood section for as long as I can remember and still can't handle the smell. Maman was courageous in this sense. She did not grimace a bit at the stench of fresh snapper and conch meat. She rummaged through the freezer for a pack of shrimp so large I had to help her place it in the cart. The crisp sound of pressure on frost was endearing. Maman hadn't purchased shrimp in such a long time, especially that amount.

It finally sunk in. A formal family event was on its way. It finally sunk in. There will be all of my favorite foods. *It finally sunk in.* Madame Charitable is actually gone. I heard the melody of her laugh dancing right over the sounds of chopping. Spices slowly filling up the air. The room getting warmer as the fire of the stove grows. The clank of dishes being washed in the sink and knew it was almost time to eat.

"Are you going to get inside?"

I looked down and saw the trunk of the car wide open, yellow plastic bags tossed and tangled all along the inside. I almost forgot where I was.

"Are we going home?" I asked as I slipped back into the car. Maman was scanning the receipt, more than ready to find a mistake. Without responding, she folded it and tucked it into the glove compartment. Her old Honda Civic roared as she turned the key in the ignition. I felt the front of the car rise as the trunk sank with the weight of the groceries. "I'll take care of this next week."

In about an hour's time we were in the heart of the city at a fish market. The men who sold there yelled over every order. Again, the scent was unbearable. All around me were different people and different tongues, yet everything and everyone sounded similar. You knew every voice was comparing prices or testing freshness and what else was needed to cook what they had to.

In one corner was a bin the height of a growing boy filled with live crabs. I watched as they pinched each other as they struggled to move

around, stiff and rigid the way crabs usually do. The moment one would make its way to the brim it would be snapped back by three of its own kind. They had shiny black coats still glossed by the sea. Maman grabbed some tongs and filled two bags. “*Yo bèl,*” she hummed quietly to herself. “*Yo bèl, yo bèl. . .*” And I agreed. They were beautiful.

On the ride back my nausea went wild. The car smelled like high tide and we had far to go. “Why did you buy all of this seafood?” I asked, bringing my shirt over the bottom half of my face. “I thought you were making rice.”

“Seafood rice, of course.” Somehow Maman sounded different when she was smiling. I saw her perfect row of teeth peripherally. She was grinning in triumph. “They told me to make rice, so I am making the best.”

“You could have kept it simple and made *Diri kole ak pwa!*” a more common, just as delicious, and affordable rice dish made with red beans.

“Your father is making *djon djon* so let me do something special.”

“Something bigger? Something better?”

“Your words, not mine.” Maman was still grinning as we pulled into the driveway. Papa was lying on the couch watching soccer as we brought the groceries into the kitchen.

“Would you like some help,” he said instead of asking.

“Oh, don’t worry. I have this all under control. You have your own things to worry about.” Maman was heaving loudly under the weight of all of her bags. “Did you even go grocery shopping yet? I did not buy enough rice for the both of us.”

“I will go tomorrow.”

“Tonight is the wake. The funeral is tomorrow morning. When will you have time?”

“I will find the time.” He headed for the backyard with a tin bucket. Maman shook her head as she took dominion over her kitchen. Groceries were being put in their right locations; the fridge, the cabinets, or the countertop. She would place an occasional item in the sink to thaw and peeled off packaging or stickers off of produce. I collected bags as she began that *legerdemain*. My mother was and still is a fabulous cook. She worked well with whatever ingredients she had and always made a

meal that tasted like *perfection*. Her dishes always stood out at family events, especially her rice. She found the perfect consistency between sticky and firm, for which everyone raved. I can recall, many times, cousins shutting their eyes in bliss after a single forkful. However, her food was so consistently good it got tiring. For a little while no one gave her the responsibility of a dish for a party. Too often would it be something as necessary as *griot*, which was a highly celebrated citrus-and-pepper marinated pork dish. When it was time for everyone to fill their plates it would be the first thing gone. Too few guests had a chance to enjoy it, so everyone turned to the other dishes indifferently.

Our largest pot was placed on the stove and the green peas hissed as they sautéed. Her precise hand diced onions and a rainbow of peppers to perfect cubes that sang as they met the oil. Garlic was peeled and smashed with the base of her knife, an impressive voice to add in the sizzling symphony of the pot. Maman sliced open her bag of jasmine-scented rice right along the face of Madame Gougousse, the Haitian-American equivalent of Aunt Jemimah—our dear friends who live in the kitchen. She looked a lot like Madame Charitable; in fact my dad would call her that after he'd finish one of her comfort meals.

Maman cracked open a beer from the fridge. This meant things were about to get serious. "Go to your room, *Cherie*. I don't want your clothes to smell like spice." She shooed me away with her wooden spoon. I obeyed.

I dreamt again that night I was in the kitchen. I was attempting to properly squeeze limes. I grated at the fruit with my knife, extracting hidden juices from the rind. It was the most powerful feeling. I looked at my hands and again they were not mine. This time, however, I was at ease.

Papa woke me up the next morning bright and early. He looked as if he had just seen a ghost, then I remembered he went to the wake with Maman last night. "Would you like to go the market with me?"

Going to the market with my father was not as difficult as going with Maman. He was easy. He liked things as simple as they can be. He was my mother's toughest critic in the kitchen, always a constructive comment to say to her plates, regardless of their intricate craft. "Did you

put salt in this?" he would ask with a delicious plate of salt cod in front of him. He knew how to push her buttons, and Maman knew how to be pressed.

We took a short drive to our in-town supermarket, which was slow for a Saturday morning. Still buzzed from last night's dream, I randomly grabbed a pack of lima beans and placed them in the cart. I suddenly grabbed cloves and shallot too as if I knew what I was doing. Papa looked in the cart and smirked. "Nobody in the house wants to let me cook, eh?" He placed a bag of rice in the cart and walked over to the checkout, his head nodding approvingly.

When we made it back home, something possessed me. I immediately began to slice onions and de-stem my father's peppers. In the second biggest pot, he boiled the *djon djon* mushrooms and then gave me the *pilon*, our word for the mortar and pestle. I mashed away.

"Crushed spices are always better than sliced." Papa was not the most skilled cook, but he spoke as an authority anyway. I recall many times the slightly burnt taste of his rice and meats when he cooked. He always served it anyway and I enjoyed it. Too much of a good thing gets tiring sometime. I loved Papa's imperfect food. You tasted his effort, which was sometimes more delicious than skill.

Papa poured his rice into the black stock of *djon djon* in the pot. After stirring in his crushed spices he placed them all to boil. Almost somberly, he closed the lid.

"What now?" I asked, sniffing the garlic on my fingers. That scent wasn't leaving any time soon.

"Now you tell me. What would Madame Charitable put in the pot?" He slowly bat his lashes, tired, as if her name alone was enough to summon her weight on your tongue. Papa had a gift for speaking people into existence.

"I think she would admire the peppers of her seeds in the rice." Papa fought a violent yawn, quite random for this time of day. "I think she would admire me to sit for a little while too. I am getting old." He slumped his waist into his arm and supported himself to the sofa, as if he was a man twenty years older. Watching him put his feet on the coffee table I knew he was getting comfortable. I sliced crosses into the peppers

and tossed them in the gleaming water. I felt my fingers turn rougher yet they moved nimbly. Against the sound of the knife on the cutting board was Papa's thunderous snore. It did not sound like him. I looked at the pot full of water and closed the lid. My hands were not mine either. I could not believe what I was doing. I was being led in a dance I've danced once before. This time, I was more than able to follow.

"Your rice is going to be great," he spoke in his sleep. His voice was not his, but someone else's. Someone familiar. I poked my head into the room to see if some old woman from the church came by to say "hello," but only found Papa, fast asleep, corpse like. I looked at my new hands, wrinkly and lively and spotted. I had to get back to work. My rice was going to be great.

* * *

The funeral was upsetting as can be. My family had this fascination with death, but every time it happened no one seemed to be ready. I sat in the church service amongst aching cries and pitiful prayers. The room was littered in poor, familiar faces. A dull French struggled out of everyone's mouth, waking up heavy tongues stubborn to the Creole spoken at home. Too many tears were being cried and there was no space for mine. In the casket I saw familiar hands clasped over Madame Charitable's body, those same old hands that worked like a dream.

Graveside, Papa and I looked away while her casket descended into the earth. As much as I wanted to watch this moment, something took hold of my neck and kept it there. I wondered if the same thing held Papa too. Maman stared behind thick dark sunglasses. We were all impatient, but for different things.

Everything changed as soon as everyone made it to the reception in Rose Charitable's, daughter of Madame Charitable, home. She did not try to hide her grief as she hugged second-cousins and aunts great and great-great. That was the first tear I shed that day. To lose your mother, a woman like Madame Charitable, was a loss even I felt.

Kompa and old-school Boleros were being played, a nice mix to satisfy both your grandparents and their youngest grandchild. All the mothers in the family hustled in the kitchen placing food in chafer dishes. My mother took great care to present her seafood rice in all its prestige. The rice's golden color shone as if the sun itself was her secret ingredient. It was speckled with peas and beans and pleasant pink swirls of shrimp. Hefty crab claws grabbed at the air while open mussels seemed to invite you over for a kiss. Maman made careful arrangements to set her rice directly in the middle of the buffet. "Bravo, bravo!" Rose Charitable cried when she saw the tray. "My mother would have really appreciated this. Thank you!" she hugged my mother who hugged back, smirking.

Papa placed his modest *diri ak djon djon* on the buffet table. It took lovely color and reminded me of a candied night sky. His lima beans were soft and bright with flavor. He placed a massive scotch-bonnet in the middle as if it were a crown. One of the kitchen mothers moved his rice next to my mother's. Although it wasn't a vibrant piece of art like the seafood rice Maman made, his dish held its own.

"I'm surprised you did not burn the rice. I think it came out good! But let's see if everyone is going to eat it." Maman finally took off her sunglasses. You could see lines under her eyes, the labor of her cooking. She grabbed a plate and stood on the long line of people waiting to fill their empty, weary bodies with joy. Papa and I followed.

On the line, you could hear several guests gossiping about food. "Marie-Maude made the *pikliz* this time, don't touch it." "Blanche paid too much money for her *lambi*." "Margarette and her husband both made rice this time? How has she not discouraged him from entering the kitchen?" Papa frowned when he heard this and raised his plate to his face.

"Don't listen to them; I am happy you tried." Maman was not the best at consoling.

After what seemed hours on line we finally made it to the buffet. To my surprise a decent amount of all of my favorite things were still there. I filled my plate up with everything but rice. I prepared myself for none of my mother's seafood rice at this point, so I would eat Papa's and

he would be happy about it. However once I reached his tray, all that was there was the spoon. I couldn't scrape myself a spoonful if I tried. Papa's rice was all gone. I looked at the side and Maman's was barely touched.

"What is going on here?" Shocked, Maman grunted and disappointingly piled a plate of her own rice. She took a bite to her mouth and nothing happened. Nothing at all.

"Margarette's rice looked beautiful, why hasn't anyone touched it?"

"Eh. It is great. But I can't say anything about it at all."

"It looks beautiful, and that is about it."

"It was so many things, and so little rice."

"It was not rice at all."

"Margarette was supposed to make rice?"

The gossip was brutal, and although quiet, impossible not to hear. Maman walked away from the buffet, surrendering herself to an early slice of cake.

I heard laughing and I turned to Papa, standing outside with a few men holding beers. He was thanking them for the compliments to his rice and couldn't help but let himself unwind. His voice sounded like one of those churchwomen again.

I caught Maman's prodding eyes meet his. He pulled a cigarette to his lips and kept quiet.



Krystal Haas

Tea Leaves

England fiercely made its home in me.
Topsy touching and ten-pound wine—oh
how I longed for the sweet taste of tea.

Sticky strings echoed songs of the North Sea,
played by calloused fingers I used to know.
England fiercely made its home in me.

The air was wet and my hands clammy;
a cracked chest pressed upon me breathed slow.
How we longed for the taste of tea.

Shards of his were left with me, our bodies
entangled, ripped apart as we let go.
England fiercely made its home in me.

But this home within my bones began to bleed
as I broke through the skies with my breath in tow.
How I longed for the bitter taste of tea.

And here I sit, dreaming of maybe
while his fingers sing on the radio.
England had made its home in me,
and now I long for the taste of his tea.

Jay Higgs

Market Street

the spirits of the once sold
still exist here

one can sense their
scars in cracked
pavement of feigned
roads their tears
stinking up the gutters
their screams forever
red in stop lights
their hearts trapped
in bank basements
their limbs wishing
to be sent home
through the post

their darker kin
reside haunted
here even today
breathing in
their merciless deaths
suffocating

Patrick J. Derilus

Blue Eyes at Ruby Tuesday Dinner

You were a Blue-eyed White male
who stood at the front counter.
You hastily tapped your left foot, virulently oscillating the pupils
in your eyes waiting for a patron.

 You were self-absorbed in your patriotic posture,
 thirstily glimpsing through the tables.
Your wife surreptitiously explored the saloon
stocked with pub glasses
and rare etched glass from the back wall.

"The Redskins are working harder than they usually do!" she snidely
yelled.

 She adored the Country vocalists
who angrily lip synced Johnny Rebel covers —

*I'd take from Uncle Sam and let the White man pay
if I could be a nigger for a day*

. . .

*the White man worries, the nigger don't care,
cause at the end of the month his check will be there.*

 Five minutes passed on,
and I saw a Native waiter assist you.

 You sat in your seats; I wasn't too far away.
Your wife was right at your side.

 She smiled. Her teeth shone
as bright as Klux hoods.
You gestured a snarky grin and

looked up from three tables over,
glaring at the top of my flat, bushy hair
... in contempt.

"Did I frighten you?

Why?"

I peeked my Brown eyes
above the seat, a few inches
in front of me and
saw the stiff, blond ends of your crew cut.
You grasped oppressive visions.
They submerged in your drowning eyes,
leering your hatred at my skin burning!
Less of a human I was to you, wishing: that I have my flesh
gorged in a black river of crocodile,
weighed down by a metal neck collar,
castrated because I looked at
your wife.
Your eyes molded my Black being
into a faceless alien you weaponized!
You tried to control your rage
but channeled it,
depicting White Supremacists
circling around me, laughing at my demise!
Your Blue irises then drifted from the Brown of mine.

I timidly looked down at my pamphlet
trying to relax, salivating, hoping to
scarf chicken fresco, a shrimp platter
tempting ribs,
flaking in honey barbeque sauce
filling up my famished stomach.

"Did I frighten you?

Why?"

I spotted your curious eyes lurking
when I leveled my eyes with yours—
Your scorning colonized my curiosity
into submission, I looked down
in obedience like Uncle Tom.

"You worthless coon.

Go back to Africa, where you belong."

You scoffed at my Ochre irises
with vainglorious pride.
Ten seconds after our eyes crossed
you bitterly flickered your eyelashes
jerked your head, took a deep breath, and inhaled
your rage.

The Native waiter cautiously approached you
asking you and your wife for your orders.
How did you look your clerk in the eye?
His eyes were Brown, Brown like mine, Brown as loamy soil
Slaved in the grounds—

Oh! They're glazed by the same Blue
embodying the willful ignorance embedded in you.
I know, but I can't understand why.
Your eyes are Blue, but please change them Brown.
Look at me with Respect,
stop looking down.

John Walsh

Amendment

In this democracy, everyone speaks.
Martín speaks to Facebook about
Puerto Rico's economy saying,
"If we were a bank they'd bail us out."
Jaden speaks to therapists at his
boarding school about how he wasn't meant
to live in the body he was born with.
Ronnell speaks to government officials
about the assisted healthcare Obama
promised the struggling Americans.
Ada speaks to no one about her drunk
ex-boyfriend's angry visit but the words
often slip out with the shakes in her sleep.
I sit in the back of class and put my
pen to paper and wonder when these
voices will be heard.

Michael Tuccito

In Pursuit of Equality

One side of a coin is as bad as the other —
to swap tails for heads
solves nothing,
and leaves just as many dead.

Benan Saracoglu

This Land

Where the pious play politician,
and mold their sizable share
of dried-up Play-Doh,
caked with blood oozing
from broken hearts,

bombs don't drown children
and acid does not reduce flesh
to sinew and marrow.

Lead rain casually hails upon
classrooms of twenty.

This land is your land.

Daniela Dale Velez

The American in the Room

I feel like an imposter as I pull the thin blue chiffon veil over my head. It is richly colored and embroidered with silver thread. I get the strange feeling that I am appropriating my mother's culture—but I take a selfie anyway. I forget to put my phone on silent and the shutter sound goes off. My family snaps their necks in unison and stares at me. I laugh involuntarily, a nervous tic I may never conquer. I continue to convulse in a fit of suppressed giggles, long after they turn their heads back to the imam. My face flushes crimson and it's not from the sticky Caribbean heat. The hot color of shame works its way into all religions. My mom, who is sitting to the left of me, digs her elbow into my side and I inhale deeply to calm myself. A few moments later she reaches for my hand, and I take it gratefully. She squeezes gently twice, always a mother, seeking to comfort after scolding the young woman at her side, whom she will always see as a child. I study the sandals I am wearing and silently curse the long, unshapely dark blue pants my cousin lent me to wear. I had packed an array of dresses, tank tops, and shorts but those were all inappropriate for this event, so I sulked over to my cousin. She had scrutinized me in her Trinidadian accent as if I was some daft juvenile.

"No gyal, yah cant' wear dhat," she had exclaimed while she looked at my shorts and T-shirt.

"It is ninety degrees and humid as fuck though," I replied in a whiny voice.

"Yah only have to wear it until the prayers ovah," she said. "I changin' aft-tah." An amused smile spread across her face and I suddenly couldn't wait for her to come to New York. Her twin brother had stayed with my family and me a few months ago. Watching someone experience culture shock was as fun for me as it was for her right now. She turned away from me and rummaged around in her closet. When she turned back, she stretched her arms towards me and

presented me with an oddly constructed pair of dark blue pants and a veil. I kind of felt like MC Hammer when I put the pants on.

After I think everyone has forgotten about me, I lift my gaze to observe the scene around me. Sitting in front of me is my eighty-year-old grandmother. Her dyed, inky black hair is covered by a red veil that wraps over her head. Its embroidered end hangs over her left shoulder and shimmers as it catches and tosses the light. This is her house and her annual Muslim prayers, technically called a Niyaz, and these things only take place in a private home. Although it isn't necessary, she has one every year. Her leathery brown hands are cupped and turned upwards in prayer as the imam's deep voice recites verses in Arabic. He has already read from the Quran and now is praying to give thanks to Allah. He seems to sing the words and his deep, resounding voice fills the room; this prayer is called a dua. Latin words sound just as nice to me. They sing too. Both languages sung by men alone. I think of my paternal grandmother, a devout Catholic, and I smirk at the idea of jumping up and doing Hail Marys or beating my back with some rope. But I'm not Catholic, or Muslim, or Hindu like some of my other family members here in Trinidad. I'm not even sure if I am a Christian like my mother and father. I wonder what their God, if he exists, is thinking right now. Does he want to strike her down with lightning, or make my father sacrifice me up on some mountaintop? Then I remember I'm not a son; I won't get that privilege. I'd be Magdalene or Lot's wife.

My eyes are still fixed on my grandmother's hands as I drift back to the memory of her late husband; the image of his hands in a similar manner float up from somewhere in my memory. They are gripped around a black, worn-down leather-bound Bible. I see him in my mind, reading from that Bible to my mom when she was a child and decades later, to me. I remember these ceremonies vaguely when we all lived in the Bronx, less than four bus stops away from each other's houses, but I don't remember any fights or even discussions about whose God was real or not. I felt the same way as a child as I do now. As if I am Deanna Troi of the Star Trek *Enterprise*, going where no one has gone before. I wonder if they think all Christians are like the members of the Westboro

Baptist Church. I was still living in the Bronx when the towers fell. That's when the perception changed, America's, but not mine. Never mine.

The cousin who lent me clothes makes her way around the room, stepping elegantly through the aisles. She is carrying a dainty bottle and spraying the tops of everyone's wrist. The smell is overwhelming. I never know what to do here. I let her spray my hand and wonder what's the significance of it. I wonder what I just acknowledged or agreed to as I watch the wet spray vanish like a warm breath on a cold window. I turn towards my mother for an explanation.

"What does that mean? Did I just become Muslim?" I say just above a whisper.

"No Dale, shush and pay attention," she says as she rolls her eyes and then uses her chin to point to the imam.

"Seriously ma! What does it mean? Come on! I want to learn!" I say persistently. Her chest rises and falls as she lets out an exaggerated sign and turns to face her unruly child head on.

"Listen, I don't know wah dhe ass it means, okhay!" she says, and I find myself suppressing another nervous giggle. Her accent is a delightful magic trick—*Now you see me, now you don't*. She ignores my reaction and continues on. "I'll ask mama and find out lay-tah. It's almost over and aftah the men over there eat, you cahn go stuff yah face." I reply to her chiding with a wide grin.

The smell of rich curries, buttery warm roti, meats and spices creep across the room and diffuses the smell of the flowery perfume. It wraps me up and squeezes my stomach, makes it rumble in response. I want to eat. Now. I picture myself half running, tumbling over everyone here in their metal chairs, and diving head first into one of the many trays of food. I may get away with it; I get away with a lot here because I am considered American not Trinidadian. 'Merica 'Merica 'Merica. I look above the veiled heads, to the deliciousness that awaits me. I do remember the Niyazes I was dragged to when younger but like I said, only vaguely. The clearest memories are of the food. Ah—the great reward I get for enduring this instead of sleeping late, like I've been doing every day on my Spring Break vacation here. Earlier in the week, my mom swore to me I would benefit from this religious and cultural

experience, now that I am old enough to understand. She forgets I didn't even like attending church back home. I wonder what she would do if I decided, here and now, to worship Allah for the rest of my life. I should. It would serve her right. I think she knows what I am thinking. I see her stealing glances as she gauges my reactions, from the corner of her eye. Her face is blurred but still visible through the softly shifting, sheer material of her black veil.

Across from the food, a few feet away, is a table where my two uncles, another cousin of mine, and the imam sit. All men. It is believed in the Muslim religion that men are always known as the leaders, but Trinidad has a female Prime Minister. She was the first female Attorney General before that. She must be Hindu. She couldn't have won without the votes of Muslims though, go figure. The men all have yarmulkes on their heads—wait—no that's not right, wrong religion. But they look like yarmulkes. The imam looks like a plump little Jafar and I wonder who here would be best fit to play Jasmine. I am the only one dressed in blue and as an American it would be appropriate for me to butcher a culture in the name of Disney. I better look for Aladdin.

Suddenly a bowl of golden brown wrinkly dates is shoved at me and I recoil, my eyebrows knit together in confusion. Dates? I look to my interpreter in this strange land and she shoots me a look of exasperation. My mom turns her gaze to the giver of the dates and shakes her head gently from left to right. She takes one for herself though and takes small, calculated bites around the seed. She says that this marks the end of the Niyaz, the sharing of the dates. It's a sweet gesture, brings everyone together, except for my dumbass. I lean and say to my mother in a hushed tone, "Doesn't Mama eat those when she can't shit?" A laugh bursts from her lips, as does a piece of chewed mushy date, which drops and sticks to the floor. All eyes are on her now, and I smile demurely in retribution. I tilt my head down gracefully, letting my veil encase my expression in its shadow. I am too busy enjoying the moment to notice my family smiling while my mother points her finger at me. I'll take the blame as the American in the room.

◇

Danielle Tralongo

Pause and Reflect

He seems like a comma
in the sense that he does not stop,
only pausing occasionally,

and further than that,
he reads like a paper written by a sixth grader
who does not yet know how to write,

not nearly enough commas
punctuating his day-to-day,
a life littered with run-ons,

I sometimes consider his rare hesitations,
and thinking about it now,
I realize I have never seen him break —

Azer Khan (translator)

The Poem That Killed Its Writer

If chance were to allow your eyes a meeting
 with the bared teeth of a lion,
Woe to you! Never! Not ever must you think
 that the lion smiles at you!

And my heart's blood, how many a time have I fended
 off its seeker,
Atop a war horse, whose back to any other was
 forbidden:

Its legs and my two hands moved as one,
 its command demanding no hand or foot.
Scimitar held in readiness, I strode between two rivers
 fending off the waves of death until I had them vanquished!

The horseman and the night, and the desert and
 the sword know me,
And the spear, and the paper, and the pen.

— Abu-Tayyib Al-Mutanabbi (915-965)

القصيدۃ التي قتلت صاحبها

إذا رأيت نيوب الليث بارزة, فلا تظنن انا الليث يبتسم
و مهجت, مهجتي من هم صاحبها, ادركتها بجواد ظهره حرم
رجلاه في الركز رجل واليداني يد, و فعله ما تريد الكف والقدم
و مرحف, سرت بين الجهف لين به, حتي ضربت و موج الموت يلتطم
الخيـل و الليل و البيداء تعرفني, والسيف والرمح والقرطاس والقلم
الم تذ بي طيب اب و

Kylee Greenleaf

Postscript

I wonder if Shakespeare is writing
for that Globe in the sky,
sitting in the tavern discussing
rhymes with the good doctor.

They'll talk about whether green eggs
were rotting in the state of Denmark
before they ask Sylvia for her opinion,
always so hot-headed when the men exclude her.

She'll turn to Virginia who is just too
weighed down by her stream of consciousness
to care about what they are saying,
as Will looks at her and is reminded
of a girl he once wrote.

Julia Ponder

St. Jerome in His Study (Dürer, 1514)

What grandness can be captured by a word?
The science of her nature and the secret
brilliance of her texture are so pretty when I
speak. But these letters know that they are cut

and bled by my insistent scribblings.
It makes me think, could it be that we were
always wrong? Can nothing be summoned
into our lamp-black light? Salvation

comes for those of them who bow before
long-winded explanations and succumb
to the scratches of our arithmetic. It was foolish
to believe that art was only ever right; that a

cure could be captured by mere visions. Forever
these thoughts and more make me sink
into my chair and pound my heart with comets.
Still, never will I admit that I know

all things are still beautiful. So centuries
alone I stop to stare into that darkened pulp,
looking ever deeper to answer the beg
and cry of endless characters in stone.

Sara Vinciguerra

Riding in the Cart with Robespierre on the Way to His Execution

Paris, July 28, 1794 or 10 Thermidor, Year II

Hours earlier he was shot in the jaw.
Nobody knows if it was an assassination
or suicide attempt, and it doesn't matter.
The Thermidorian heat is as red as the blood
that seeps through his bandage
and as draining as the shouts of *Tyran, Tyran!*
from the hordes of the spiteful Parisians
treading closely behind the cart's rickety wheels.

And to think, he was once called *L'Incorruptible*.
The faith of the French people was entrusted
so beautifully in him and all the others
who traded their monarchy's heads
for a new nation of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*.
But, somewhere in the flaws of man, these concepts
became misplaced and forsaken under an order of Terror.

In his drowsy state of semi-consciousness,
I wonder if Robespierre regretted leaving
his quiet life as a lawyer in Artois, where
helpless peasants ran to him to defend
their innocence against those cruel and unjust landlords.
Did he know his ideals of *la vertu*
were probably set just fine in that small courtroom?

The sharp blade of the guillotine
glistens in the short distance, ready to shave
off the heads of those fantastical Jacobins.
As the cart halts, I take one last look at Robespierre,
his slight body hunched over in agony and exhaust,
blood spotted all over his sky-colored coat.

Darren Lyons

Legends of Chris Burden: Linguistic Diptych

First Legend: Life

It's 2005.

Art-world legend and UCLA art teacher, Chris Burden, half-thinks to himself, "I've hurt so much I've banished double-u's from the language. here am I?" His head in his hands, he should be cleaning out his desk, putting his shit in the copy-paper box in front of him. His red plastic apple, his chipped "Best Professor!" mug, his custom ballpoint (all gifts from students) should be in that box. Instead, he half-dreams, "My hole life and now this. here am I?"

All this, because Chris's retiring. A student at Chris's university allegedly chose to play Russian roulette in another teacher's class. (All this is hearsay. The stories of what happened are spotty.)¹ The student allegedly came into the classroom with a revolver, allegedly spun the barrel, allegedly aimed it at his head, and allegedly pulled the trigger. Allegedly, it was intended as some sort of performance art, Chris had heard. The gun didn't allegedly fire, but then, the student allegedly rushed out of the classroom, and a gunshot ("Boom!") was allegedly heard out in the hallway. Allegedly "freaked out," the student allegedly reentered the classroom, now allegedly unarmed. When the university allegedly refused to discipline the student, Chris protested. Now, he's retiring. Now, he procrastinates at his desk, thinking this might all be *his* fault. After all, *he* was the one who most definitely got himself shot by a rifle-toting buddy, all in the name of art, back in 1971.

Chris's made a career out of hurting himself. In 1974, he had himself nailed to the roof of a Volkswagen Beetle. A friend hammered real nails into his very real hands while he screamed very real screams. For two minutes, after being pushed out of a garage, the Beetle's engine revved while Chris suppressed what was left of those screams. He saw

¹ The author doesn't want to be sued in case none of this happened.

pain-stars that day. After the performance, the Beetle was pushed back into the garage with Chris still on top.

For his graduate thesis in 1971, Chris locked himself inside an art locker for five days with only five gallons of water with him. That was the first time he banished double-u's from the language, just for something to do in the dark, listening to the skitters and twitters of art students passing by his self-entombment.

And as mentioned, that same year, another friend shot a .22-caliber bullet at him from 16 feet. It only grazed his left arm, but it bled, and he can't help now thinking he inspired the aforementioned student's alleged performance, now 31 years later.

Now, Chris's banished double-u's again from his vocabulary in some sort of desperate attempt. The student shouldn't have done it, if he did, but Chris really doesn't take back anything *he's* done. Life.

Chris takes up his chipped "Best Professor!" mug and crashes it against the wall ("Crash!"). He has to live another ten years (he'll die of melanoma on May 10, 2015), trying to get through it, getting by, making new art (he guesses), working without (he thinks) double-u's. He half-dreams, half-thinks, "herefore art thou, double-u? here am I."

Second Legend: Life after Death

It's now 2021.

Nine months after Chris's death, in February 2016, among other comments about Mexicans being "rapists," women being "bitches," and political opponents being "stupid," the front-running Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States innocuously remarked that if elected President, he would like the government to fund "some sort of tribute to Chris Burden." Because Chris's was not a household name, the mainstream media mostly ignored this comment. However, two industrious investigators for a specialist art publication looked deeper into the genesis of this strange remark. They discovered that the candidate considered himself a "true artist," and that he believed *he* was the logical "heir to the throne" of Chris's brand of shock-reality performance art. Prior to becoming a politician, the candidate had

become famous on a reality show in which he “fired” off the program well-known celebrities with the slogan, “You’re fired!” Because the candidate never mentioned Chris’s name again during the presidential campaign, his remark about the desired “tribute” was forgotten.

But then, everything changed. The candidate was elected President of the United States, and he took office in 2017. Within his first hundred days, the President announced, and the government began broadcasting, a series of reality television programs, all falling under the umbrella title, *Chris Burden’s Performance Art Olympiad!*

On the first and most popular show, *Shoot!*, contestants took turns shooting each other with .22-caliber rifles. The winner at the end of each program was the contestant who was shot the most times, who still remained standing. This show was so popular that communities around the country began hosting “Shoot Your Neighbor!” parties. The proliferation of cheap guns, sold at tremendous markdowns directly by the NRA, made hosting these events a snap.

On a second show, called *Trans-Fixed!*, contestants were nailed to the roofs of automobiles and driven around obstacle courses. The contestant who stayed on his or her roof the longest won a new car at the end of the program. As this show became popular, the cheap cost of gasoline² and an unspecified government benefit for the US automobile industry combined to make the price of new vehicles extremely low. Almost everyone could afford to buy another car. All across the country, with the assistance of the government, motor speedways were built, and promoters began hosting “Trans-Fixed-Offs!” To these events, people would bring their new second vehicles and race around tracks with volunteers nailed to their roofs. Everyone began referring to their second vehicles as their “Nailin’ Cars!” Stigmata was now a sign of status.

On a third show, called *Five-Day Locker Piece!*, illegal immigrants were shut into lockers for the length of an episode. At the end of that episode, they were given the option of either returning to their home country or going back into their lockers during the next week’s program.

² The cost of gasoline was so low, because the President had, in his own words, “made Islam give us its oil.”

Aside from a few holdouts, who lasted many, many episodes, most of the illegals quickly chose to return to their own countries rather than spend another show inside the lockers. In this way, the President efficiently solved the country's illegal immigration problem while also entertaining its true citizens.

All this entertainment in the name of "Chris Burden" has made everyone happy. Burden is now considered by most to be a "founding father." The country he lived in just a few years ago is virtually unrecognizable. Due to the occurrence of many accidental deaths during Olympiad-inspired events, and because of the deportation of over eleven million illegals, the population of the United States has plummeted. Now in the first year of the President's second term, there's nearly 100% full employment. Cheap oil, cheap automobiles, and cheap guns have made the cost of living much lower for all Americans. The economy is booming, and one would like to hope that wherever Chris Burden is, he's humbled by all the adoration and looking upon us with a shocked, but entertained, smile.

◇

Bridget Smith

Red like Wine

The following is a list of lies that Sarah H. has told me:

1. Her grandfather was in the FBI and I was not allowed to know his first name.
2. Her grandmother was allergic to both strawberry and banana seeds—even the mere *thought* of ingestion sparked immediate reactions.
3. Sarah once got locked out of her house and had to eat Chinese food from a garbage can while waiting for her family to get home.
4. When she moved to Geneva, New York, she told me she was actually moving to Genovia—the fictitious European country *The Princess Diaries* takes place in.
5. Betelgeuse was real and he would visit her. (He was always on “vacation” when we tried to chant his name together.)
6. Her outie belly button was an indication of a terminal illness.

Sarah had a flair for the dramatic, which she undoubtedly got from her mother, Mama H, who performed in *The Sound of Music* as Elsa Schröder when we were in the second grade and still makes Facebook updates about it to this day. *Oh it's all for the fans. I'm willing to sign autographs whenever.* Sarah had perpetually goose-bumped skin and she made our classmates call her Frogger. She was a natural-born leader and I was her eager second-in-command. During recess, she would perform a one-woman show as her alter ego Fork Girl, parading a plastic fork around the playground (which was actually just a parking lot with a crudely drawn box-ball court and two basketball hoops). Sarah drew a smiley face on the fork with a red pen she had stolen from our teacher. As she sang the only lyrics to the only song Fork Girl knew, *Fork Girl!*

Everyone sing with me! it was my job to make sure people sang along. I kept track of Fork Girl's performances by filing information in an olive-green manila folder my dad let me have. We wore our matching faux-leather jackets to school on days of performances until mine ripped one too many times and we (she) decided Fork Girl had run her course.

My tumultuous friendship with Sarah ended abruptly in the sixth grade when she left school after a classmate called her a bitch while they argued about the Dewey Decimal System. Sarah lived on a private road named after her grandfather—yes, the one whose name I was forbidden from knowing. There were only two houses on the entire road: hers and her cousin's. Turning onto that street meant sharing in something exclusive and special. I was always excited to go to her house; it looked like a cottage I had only ever read about and had a big screened-in porch. Their computer room was below the staircase à la *Harry Potter* and her parents let everyone who visited sign their name in crayon on its walls. It was in this room that I got yelled at for the first time by an adult who wasn't my mom: Sarah and I were on AIM (under her screen name 8808BubbaBug) asking people whom they liked and we got in trouble for being nosy. Sarah said it was my idea. I didn't say anything.

When we were in the third grade, Sarah invited me over to ride the horses that her family owned. Her horse, Dakotah, got spooked and bucked as we trotted in the field just a couple miles from her home. Sarah got mad at me when her father asked if I was okay before asking her. *You like her more than me!* I remember her crying. I felt guilty as we piled back into her dad's truck, putting my bruised head on the cold glass window, watching the trees blur into one another as we passed them by. She did not stay angry long; we went back to her house where we ate popsicles as she showed her mom and me a routine she choreographed to an S-Club Seven song. *Sarah, you're so funny. Why don't you have any friends?* Mama H sighed.

During our town's St. Patrick's Day Parade in the fifth grade, Sarah tried to kill me. Like, *actually* kill me. As we held the red and white felt banner our junior varsity basketball team had won and paraded it through town, we argued. *Bridget, sometimes I just want to choke you!* I, ever the master with retort, responded with a simple challenge: *So then*

do it! Next, a woman with dark hair and a gray sweatshirt grabbed Sarah and separated us. Neither of us was allowed to finish the parade loop.

When Sarah left to go to a different Catholic school that was in the parochial school league, I wanted to stay in touch. Despite our friendship having more bumps than her mile-long, unpaved driveway, I continuously found myself wanting to be the person she felt she could confide in. My mother and I visited her home a couple months after she left. Her room was now decorated with photographs of her and her new friends, though the piece of fool's gold I had given her was still on her dresser.

Later that year, she and her family moved to Geneva and were out of Orange County for good. I haven't seen or heard from Sarah since, though I did see her mom over the summer at the restaurant I work at. She drank one too many glasses of cabernet and spilled the fifth one all over me.

◇

Nick Magnanti

Keeping Track

Characters:

Allison, a waitress, seventeen years old and plain-looking.

Max, a pancake enthusiast, mid-forties.

Setting:

A dirty IHOP in a small town outside of Amsterdam, New York.

Time:

The present, 2016. Quarter to five p.m.

(It is nearly quarter to five on a Sunday night. ALLISON is wearing a black waitress smock and a food-stained grey tee shirt. There is nobody in the restaurant except for MAX, a regular with brown hair and grey stubble, who always arrives at 4:45 p.m. A bell rings, and Allison jumps to the hot plate. A stack of pancakes with a side of blueberry puree is sitting on the pass. She grabs both plates and heads toward Max's table.)

ALLISON

Here you go.

(Setting the plates down.)

Anything else I can get you?

MAX

Looks great. I think I'm all set.

(Allison begins to walk away.)

MAX

Uh, wait. Some coffee please?

ALLISON

Sure.

(He begins cutting into his pancakes. Slowly and methodically, he pours the blueberry puree mixture over his pancakes.

Allison comes back with a pot of coffee. She leans over his right side and pours into his cup. They don't talk.

Suddenly, and clearly purposefully, Max drops his plate all over Allison while she isn't looking. The food dramatically spills on the ground—and on her shirt.)

ALLISON

Ah—

MAX

Was that—I think you were reaching and it might have—

ALLISON

Yeah, I must have knocked it over. I'm so sorry, sir.

MAX

It's alright. Don't worry about it.

ALLISON

I'll get you a new one.

MAX

Yeah. Sounds good. And, uh, sorry—while you're back there. The coffee's a little cold.

ALLISON

I'll go get a fresh one.

MAX

Thanks.

(Allison walks away and comes back
with a fresh pot.)

MAX

I drink too much coffee. It's a bad habit.

ALLISON

Join the club.

MAX

Your mom let you drink coffee?

ALLISON

Sure she does.

MAX

At your age, it's just surprising—it can stunt
growth, that's all. And you don't want to get in
the way of, uh, you know . . . growth.

ALLISON

Right. Well. Your food will be up soon, sir.

MAX

Thank you. You're doing fine. What's your name?

ALLISON

Allison.

MAX

That's my daughter's name.

(An uncomfortable pause. The bell rings. They
both jump.)

ALLISON

Let me go get your food before it gets too cold.
(She leaves, runs to the hot plate, and sighs.
Takes a moment. Then brings the plate back to
Max.)

ALLISON

Here you go. Now try not to spill this one, alright?

MAX

Alright. I'll try not to. Hey, Allison?

ALLISON

Yes?

MAX

Forgive me if this is weird to say, but there's
something about you. I think we might have met
before.

ALLISON

Maybe. It's a small town.

MAX

Huh, sure it is, but—

(Beat.)

Your eyes are beautiful. You must get that a lot,
I'm sure. Allison, right?

ALLISON

Yeah.

MAX

It's my daughter's name, you know.

(A small chuckle from Max. He pours the blueberries over his stack of pancakes, again, and starts eating. He doesn't look up. Allison pours him another cup of coffee without asking. She adds one cream and one sugar.

She leaves to the table and walks to the back of the restaurant, where she opens her employee locker, its side door, overused and ancient, filled with old pictures and sharpie marks and graffiti. Toward the bottom of the locker, in sharpie marker, is her name: "Allison." Underneath a row of tally marks. She quickly adds a mark to the list, just one of an already abundant set.

She takes a spare grey shirt from the inside of her locker and pulls it over her blueberry-stained shirt. She takes her apron off. She pulls a coat over her shoulder and walks out. She waves goodbye, halfheartedly, and without hesitation slams the back door.)

◇

Samantha Wahl

There's a Bee in My Orangina

Three bees,
Wheat-gold and streaked with charcoal,
Challenged the wind's whistle
With aggression and thirst
And a persistent *hummmmmmm*.
They swayed toward my perch on the porch,
Blinded by desire, and dove together
Into the citrus-flavored soda
Resting beside me.

Two bees,
Fuzzy bellies slicked thick with wet sugar,
Soaked sick in excess and orange,
Pull sopping wings
From beneath a sticky liquid demise.
Their *hummmmmmm* now plagued with rage,
A fury of confusion,
A brother down, drowned.

I mistook the sound a sign to sip
And raised the drink up to my lips, and
One bee,
Amongst the hum,
Plunged his bum
Into my gums.

Myasia Fajardo

Loisaida

It was the kind of heat that would drive someone crazy, that left people lethargic. Even though the heat and the summertime was in Diego's blood, the sun was his kryptonite. He was positive he was melting into that apartment stoop, but anything was better than going home. He sat still. He kept a dripping rag on top of his head and a multipurpose half-empty bottle of water by his feet. His mother would have lost her mind if she saw him in that moment, when he was looking like one of those guys whom she loved to turn her nose down at. He looked presentable earlier that morning, when she last saw him, because he was on his way to a job interview then. But that only lasted an hour, and then he was back on his block and dressed down because it was ninety-five degrees with no breeze. He was waiting for Dito to come downstairs, but Dito had to ask his mother. She was the kind of mother who needed to hear who, what, when, where, why, and how and two episodes of *Caso Cerrado* before she even considered the plea.

He carefully wet the rag again and then scrubbed his face with it. The water was lukewarm from sitting out in the sun, and it was no longer providing any kind of relief, but Diego held the rag to his face anyway and pretended that he couldn't feel the sweat trickling down his forehead. He thought about the interview again. He wanted the job, but the other guy applying was a student at Columbia, so Diego understood his chances.

Diego sighed and looked up. There wasn't much to look at on Dito's street. He lived on the corner of a residential block that they would call *Loisaida*, a block filled with wire fencing and discolored bricks. It became the Lower East Side just around the corner, and that was all restaurants and community gardens. There was a mother struggling with her two kids a few apartments down, and there was an older man pushing a *piragua* cart on Dito's block. The cart was covered in a chipping orange paint, and there was the faint leftover of a coqui and

the Puerto Rican flag on its front. Diego didn't really know why, but he found himself reaching into his pocket for a dollar. "Excuse me."

"¿Quieres? Cuestan un dólar." The old man stopped suddenly and began to point at the different bottles and list the flavors.

"Quiero una, uh, naranja, por favor." Diego stood and moved over to the cart. The man began to shave the block of ice. Some of the bottles were nearing empty. "You must be getting a lot of business."

"No hablo inglés." The man flashed a partially toothless grin.

Diego smiled awkwardly. "I said, *dije que debe ser ocupado hoy.*"

"Oh! Yes, yes." The man kept grinning. His yes was pronounced like the name Jess. He filled a cup with the shaved ice and picked up the orange bottle. "*No se quede fuera de, ¿eschuchas?*"

Diego smiled again. He sat back down on the stoop when he got his icy, and the man wheeled away at a slow pace. He played with the stirrer before taking a sip. He noticed the two girls coming down the block, who did not look like they lived there but probably did. Girls his hipster sister would hang out with, even though he told her not to a million times. One of them had stringy bleached-blond hair with dark roots, a septum piercing and a t-shirt with some rapper's face on it. Paired with a polka-dotted dress, the other girl wore the same kind of doorknocker earrings that Diego's mother practically tore off his little sister's ears in the fourth grade. The blonde leaned towards her friend because they were having a private conversation, but he heard every word.

"You see that cart? They're like these Mexican icy things and they're so good. You have to try them."

When would Dito come downstairs? He wondered, and he sweltered.

◇

Cornered

Giggles and crayon scribbles accompanied intricate cracks in the white plaster. Each crack in the wall had its own web of complexities like the many facets of childhood. Bare feet explored the cold wood. Many years ago the floors hosted tea parties and teddy bears had littered the enclosed space. While the musty air of the room was inviting nostalgia, it did not offer the same freedoms of fresh air. So with that, preparation for a departure was made. The humid air from outside was full of dew and reverberated the morning sunshine. It celebrated the childhood divergence from each corner with one foot firmly on the glossy grass while one foot remained stubbornly on the cool wood.

Each corner was different. One had cobwebs; one had chipped away layers of paint from the many families before ours; and one became the cat's reprieve from the noise of the house. Each corner comes from a place I have lived, eight to be exact. A change in home was not a novel occurrence. In each corner I left a part of me. I also grew in each corner. I grew in terms of pencil markings that highlighted a new inch in height, but in ways other than those mundane markings indicated. I grew to accept changes, to accept the monsters that followed from home to home, and in each corner came a greater understanding of what it means to be an adult. Each corner provided a new lesson and a new place to lose things and get lost in.

Each corner had its own artifacts to love. Though different, all housed similar objects. Crayon shavings, forgotten pencils, missing socks, and a place to hide from monsters. At four years old, one hosted a dollhouse, and at eight a hair salon, at twelve an art studio, at sixteen a makeup vanity, and at eighteen bulky textbooks. The contents did not matter. Contents shifted, but each corner was a shelter, a welcome home. But what happens to bygone corners coated with fresh paint, when their angles vanish like houses razed?

◇

Creases

My grandmother's closets were always full of shoes. After her children grew up, married, and made homes of their own, she commandeered the spaces in their vacated rooms and expanded her collections. Peeking into my mother's childhood bedroom, I would find summer clothing: strappy sandals with cork platforms, cool white blouses and bright-hued skorts. Aunt Kari's closet, the closest to Grandma's own bedroom, held her favorites—the simple slacks she wore at home, her casual "in-between" clothes, and the three-inch heels she referred to as her "sneakers." In Uncle Gary's old room were the heavy cable sweaters, gloves, and stacked-heel boots of my winter Grandma, with the fur coats my grandfather insisted were her due. I loved to infiltrate that vault, to stroke the sleeves of those coats, so much friendlier as sleeves than in their original incarnations. "Nasty creatures, minks," she would shake her head each time she put on that splendid coat. "I don't know why he thinks I need this, but the things are already dead, and they weren't very nice alive, so I'm not arguing with him." Even better than the furs were the contents of Aunt Leslie's former closet, where she kept the real treasures—her tango clothes.

Her oldest daughter's room held her youngest collection. Marilynne and Walter Kane learned to dance Argentine tango in their sixties, when they were already grandparents. They started with one set of dancing shoes each, but those first pairs were worn down, and relegated to practice duty as their skills developed. By the time I was old enough to discover the wonders hidden away in those spare bedrooms, my grandparents were expert "Tangringos" with more than three dozen pairs of shoes between them and regular tango lessons held in their basement-turned-studio.

I never touched my grandfather's shoes, but Grandma was a willing tour guide. The trove of elegance that was her tango closet held such fascination for the both of us that I never had to ask to see her shoes. She wanted to free them from their boxes, to run reverent hands

over their smooth suede soles, to feel the powder from the dance floor ground into their heels. Her shoes were not tools of an art, for she was no artist. They were not accessories, because the dance was not about her outfit. Every crease across the instep of a stiletto was a dance with him, the man she'd loved for so much of her life that he hardly seemed like a separate entity. When they danced, even before they learned to tango, before they became instructors, before she had a closet packed with graceful black clothing, they were so completely *together* that people around them could not help stopping to watch. When she danced with him, they were alone. They rarely spoke—standing so close, one could not possibly say anything the other did not already feel. She leaned into the circle of his arm, her forehead against his cheek, her eyes softly closed. I thought once that she was looking down, watching her feet, because she was taking such tricky steps and twisting so quickly. I asked if she was counting steps.

“I don't need to watch my feet dear.” Her eyes were still closed. “He knows where we're going.”

◇

James Crowley

Chelsea Hotel #3

for Leonard Cohen

Archaic arpeggios echoed off walls,
and you sat unimpressed.
I crooned on the couch,
and we tried to connect.

I sipped a whiskey sour;
you drank white wine.
I tried to find your eyes,
while we listened to Frank Sinatra.

As he sang of New York,
I kissed your cheek,
trying to make a Chelsea Hotel
of the cheap loveseat.

You told me you prefer confident men,
so I'd have to move with conviction,
but when I tried again,
"That's not better," you said.

You left for the evening,
and now, we don't think of each other
at all.

Robynne Yokota

Nine Lives

Lou throws himself into it like someone throws himself in front of a car. He rocks back and forth with the beat, acoustic guitar cradled against his chest. His sorrows fill the sordid and smoky bar, voice echoing through the microphone. The bar patrons sit there in the low light, an audience of shadows with clinking glasses and orange-tipped cigarettes hanging from tight lips. They take in the sight of Lou whose strums become harder, who breaks into the heart of the song and lets it bleed from his fingers and onto the stage. Lou's raspy voice fades out on the last note, and he hangs his head, dark curls falling into his face.

"That's what I got," he breathes into the microphone. He looks up and shoves the curls away. The small shadow of an audience claps out of courtesy, and he takes his leave, retreating towards the bar. The next act takes the stage, some skinny boy from Oklahoma who sings about dodging the draft. Lou really couldn't care less.

Lou's a familiar face here, one of those local legends who nobody would miss if he disappeared. Night after night he takes the stage of *El Tren*, a hovel of a bar shoved below sidewalk-level off some side street in Ramos Arizpe, Mexico. It's an underground sort of place where drifters slip in and out, a place that sees most of its action during the night hours. But Lou has always been a constant figure, someone who'd shown up one day and never really left. The bar owner, Miguel, lets him stick around without explanation.

Lou sidles up to the bar and orders a Bloody Mary, exchanging a few words with the bartender. He fiddles with the celery stalk, stirring his drink and chatting lightly with the bartender before someone seats herself next to him.

"I really liked your set," she says. Lou turns, slurping down a large sip of his drink. He swallows, picks up a napkin, and wipes at his mouth and beard before answering. It's a whole long ordeal.

"You speak English," he grins. The stranger nods. She's pretty with red hair and green eyes, pale skin like cream.

"I can speak a bit of Spanish too, but," she shrugs, trailing off with a coquettish grin.

"Not your forte?"

"You could say that," she giggles. "I'm Jane by the way." She extends her hand, a forward gesture that takes Lou by surprise. He awkwardly fumbles to set down his glass and meet her halfway, but the handshake is clunky. She giggles again. Lou can't seem to figure out why.

"I'm Lou," he offers back. He pulls his hand away from hers and cranes his head around the bar. "Miguel," he calls, waiting until the older man approaches. "Have you seen Maria around?"

Lou misses the way Jane's face falls just slightly at the mention of another female.

"Can't say I have. You check out back yet?" Miguel says. He puts a hand on Lou's shoulder, squeezes, and then continues past.

"Maria?" Jane asks, plastering on a smile. "Your girlfriend, I take it?"

Lou laughs. "Oh no," he chuckles, fiddling with his glass again. He doesn't elaborate.

Jane considers herself a good person however and, while disappointed, is always willing to help. "What's she look like? Maybe I can help look?"

Lou turns to her, unperturbed. "She's got orange hair, about this big," he says, lifting his hand about a foot off the bar top. "Has a little collar that jingles so I can keep track of her."

Jane relaxes. "Oh, she's your cat."

Lou's face falls. "No, I mean—yes, but also my wife. You see," he turns to face Jane entirely now, his demeanor growing more animated. Jane can't tell if he's joking. "Maria's my wife, you see? Years ago, we went hiking together in the mountains, and this witch turned her into a cat because—and I shit you not—because Maria was too pretty. And this witch? She was this old, wrinkled hag." His face scrunches up in revulsion, as if he were an animated parent recounting a fairytale to a small child. He stumbles over his words, like he can't get them out fast enough.

to explain himself. "Real nasty. And, uh, s-since then, Maria's been stuck as this orange tabby."

Jane stares, a growing sense of self-preservation overshadowing her usually kind demeanor. She shifts away from Lou, lips pulled into a tight smile, eyes wide with barely contained mockery.

"Look, I know it sounds like some real crazy shit, but I can't just leave my wife, you know? What was I supposed to do? Dump her in some pound and hope for the best? The euthanasia rates in those places are appalling. That'd be like sending my wife to her death sentence!"

Miguel who stands at the end of the bar averts his eyes. The line of patrons down the row of the bar avert their eyes. Jane is alone in her endeavor, but she still clings to some shred of hope that *someone* else will help her.

"You can't be serious," Jane laughs. She can't help it.

Lou's face falls. "I am," he says. His voice is small, but teeters on the edge of something dangerous. Jane, who does not know Lou, presses ahead.

"That's insane. You're insane," she laughs, looking around for support. Nobody meets her eye.

"She's my wife!" Lou snaps, standing. He throws his glass onto the ground. It shatters, red spilling everywhere. "She's my fucking wife!" he repeats, louder now. The music at the front of the bar has stopped and patrons are beginning to stare, but only from far away. Like ducklings, they all know to stay in line. Miguel comes around from behind the bar and pulls Lou away, shoving him outside.

"I think I heard Maria outside," he says, gripping Lou's arms hard. "I think I heard her over there," he says. He points towards the other side of the street, fog thick and indecipherable. Lou spares one last glance back into *El Tren* and starts crossing the dark street. He mutters a curse under his breath and scrubs a hand over his beard, hands itching for something to do, but all he does is press forward. He steps off the curb and hears the skid of brakes. Then a thud, the clatter of bells.

Lou lets out a shout and his heart quickens. He pushes through the curtain of fog, but the squeal of tires is already fading into the distance, and Lou is left kneeling on the damp street. A small orange body is

cradled against his chest, and he rocks forward and back, his heart bleeding. He presses his face into the fur and lets out a sob from deep inside the hollows of his chest. It's the kind of cry that carries not mended sorrow from ages long past, the kind that needles into his own skin at the sound of it. The screech of tires still plays over and over in his head.

A soft mewling noise catches his attention and Lou turns. A bright orange tabby meets his eye. He wipes at his face with his sleeve. Lou watches it, rapt, his fingers fiddling with the bell collar on the dying cat. The orange tabby mews again and steps closer. With a shaking hand, he unclasps the bell collar and reaches out, giving it a shake.

"C'mon Maria, we gotta get back inside to the bar," he whispers. "It's not safe out here. It's not safe." The cat approaches and Lou scratches under her chin, a weary smile on his face. Maria quietly complies when he fastens the collar around her neck then scoops her up.



Jesse Keplinger

Wally's World

"The old man next door is pissing on his house," I say with not more than a slight dash of amusement and a large pinch of perplexity in my voice. David, that's my pop, nails his head on the ceiling, because he's a giant, and comes to the window to look out across the lawn at the neighbor next door.

His lawn is spitting distance from my bedroom window because, as David tells it, "The man that built this house was a real genius."

Past my bedroom, in-between the old man's house and the huge lilac bushes that surround the front side of our house, a sidewalk runs under my window and on to our backdoor, its width the only separation from Wally's World. This proximity gives us a rather intimate view of our neighbor's questionable and erratic behavior as well as his pussycats, and boy, does he have a lot of young pussycats, but I've never seen another primate.

Wally has no relatives visit that we know of. Whether this is due to the excessive amount of brown juice he consumes, or the fact that gagging, wretch-inducing odor of ammonia wafts through the oppressively humid New York summers, I don't know. But I do know that the smell could make a chipmunk puke. The overwhelming stench of cat feces drifts over to our windows with every breath of western wind, so we can never open them. The young buds of spring have passed, and now we are in the thick heat of summer.

All the kids of the neighborhood always laugh at Wally when they ride by, and none of us are ever able to figure out how the old man can put up with the smell. We all just figure he has a magic nose, like Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Charity, that's my mom, goes over to help him clean up the cat cookies, but today she's at her second job.

"Just ignore him," my dad says, smiling at me, and rubbing his head vigorously, as he turns to go back to making lunch for us, and doing dishes.

"He's old and lonely, and it is his house. He can piss on it if he wants."

This sounds logical, like something Spock, whom I love, would say, and I look forward to pissing on my own house someday. I wonder why I don't see more people doing it, since it is efficient. I go back to watching the old man doing his spring-cleaning.

His electrified white hair stands out at all angles, and he has large black glasses that cover his sun-worn face. Lavender suspenders hang around his ankles while his patched black pants fall away from his bony hands. The white undershirt he's wearing is stained with yellow and some remnant of the canned dinner from the night before, and it looks a lot better than what we had. It must have been a pasta dish, or ketchup maybe, probably hotdogs. I had to have bean sprouts and salad.

He still has an amazing arc though, and he's proceeding to direct it onto the outside of his living room window with the determination of a man set upon doing a decade of window cleaning in the time it takes others to relieve themselves.

"Wow, he can hold a lot of fluid," I think.

I cut myself off from watching any more of the old man's peculiar form of spring-cleaning as my father and myself continue our own chores, in a far less efficient way as far as I can tell, on this quiet Saturday afternoon. I do ask if I can piss the windows clean, but David says no. He's a real drag sometimes.

Wally has disappeared back into his stench-ridden home by the time I walk back in front of the window, but his other friends have emerged. They litter the neighborhood with the corpses of birds, chipmunks, and other small rodents. I even saw one attack a small dog, but he ran away, and now there are no more birds, and I haven't seen a chipmunk in months. I miss them.

I have named at least twenty of Wally's feline friends and am still trying to see if I can name the other fifteen. There are golden ones with long whiskers, and shaggy black ones with yellow eyes, and tri-colored ones with different colored eyes. My favorites are the grey pussycats with pale blue eyes that seem to get along with all the others.

There's Ariel, and Biscuit, and Jug, and Baby Bear, and Bitsy, Britches, and Candy, and Bushy, and Celia, and Lilac, and . . . oh yeah, Chubby, and Spooky, and Violet, and Dog, and Skittles, as well as Snickers, and of course Speedy. What are the last three? Oh right, Tramp, and Twiggy, and Ugly, so named because he looks like he got hit in the face with an ugly stick. (David said that wasn't nice to say, so I don't say it anymore, but it's still true.)

Today there are more pussycats than ever before. I wonder whether or not these are new denizens of the neighborhood that have moved in for free crunchies or are simply more housecats of Wally's that can't take the smell inside anymore. The stench nearly knocks me out whenever I have to be twenty paces from the front door, and as David and I come out the back door, with our leather mitts and a baseball, the wall of foulness hits us in the chest like a wave at the beach.

David and I cover our noses and mouths and walk up the sidewalk to the street, to play catch, as fast as we can. David tells me to get psyched for baseball season. I don't want to tell him but I don't really like playing in the actual games, because the adults are always drinking brown juice in the stands and screaming at the coaches and umpires for . . . something that none of us can understand, since it's just a game. But catch is different!

It's just David and me. He'll throw popups that seem to go all the way to heaven, and grounders that keep hitting me in the face. He tells me to get in front of the ball and not be afraid of it, but that's easy for him to say; he's not the one taking balls to the face. We play for hours. My glove's still stiff, not like his, and it's a little too big for me, but David says it'll fit soon enough. He goes to work a lot, so I love every minute we get to play together. Someday I know my glove will be as well-oiled, smooth, and supple as his is, and I can't wait.

While we're playing, Wally wanders up past us, juice bottle in hand, and proceeds to stumble across the road to his 71' Buick Skylark. This is a monster car that David said has a 250-horsepower engine. I thought they must be really tiny horses since I can't see how anyone can fit more than one horse in that trunk and maybe one under the hood. Leaves litter the windshield and a slow large black stain has begun to

creep out from under the car's front end and sink into the once soft brown earth. David and I have not seen Wally drive—or start—the car in at least a month, not since Charity had started picking up his groceries.

"Apparently, the old man has a hankering for a Sunday drive," David says, looking slightly concerned, as he throws the ball to me.

I hear the crack of the ball hitting the leather of my glove at the same time a sound like a jet engine erupts from the direction of the forest. Wally is cleaning out the engine from spiders, by revving the filthy black engine up to full throttle. It does sound like there are more than two horses in that beast.

"Maybe their ponies?" I think. You could fit at least six ponies in that trunk! Either way, it sounds like they're angry ponies. It sounds like the howling of a demon, or the other next-door neighbors who sometimes wake me up in the night with their shouting.

Five of the pussycats tear out from under the Skylark and all the others bolt from the porch—even Snickers—the pussycat that doesn't move much. They speed away from the old man and his Skylark, as David begins to call over to the old man. His glasses haven't been cleaned in at least the same amount of time as his ears, apparently.

"Wally! Hey hold on! Where are you going!" David screams.

The old man looks over to us with a raised eyebrow and a foggy yellow grin. That must be why Charity and David keep telling me to brush my teeth. Man, Wally's life is all right. I can't wait to get old.

"Ehhhhhhh . . . what'd you say now? Speak up . . . Hold on . . . I'm coming. . ." the old man screams over the sound of his ponies.

Wally, in order to hear my father better, throws the mighty beast into drive, and attempts to gun it ten feet closer to us with one foot on the gas pedal—and one foot on the brake! I never knew you could do that! I guess he wants to exercise his horses . . . or ponies . . . or whatever? Maybe they're horseflies?

David grabs me and we take cover in the trees next to the street. It's lucky Charity has the car 'cause Wally sprays gravel in every direction! His car does a short, twitching, jerky sort of dance that keeps going on and on while rubber smoke begins to billow out from the wheel wells and then the old man turns the wheel hard and lets off the brake

some, causing him to revolve in a wild circle again, and again. Wally abuses the car for at least ten minutes until my father and I are on the ground in tears of hysterical laughter—behind a tree of course. After all, we can still see him drinking his brown juice as his tires spin like Ferris wheels in the night. Going nowhere.

There is so much smoke in the neighborhood from the burning rubber of the wheels it looks like the world has caught fire. David holds me close and we laugh till our sides hurt and tears are running down our cheeks.



Tiff Scott

Over Time

Who is looking for that heart beating fast, mud-stricken knees
Feeling of safe? Brown spit shoots out and yellow dirt
Kicks up. He gets the home run and our pleas
For victory, met with his bloody white shirt:
Explode into cheers. The man in the mask calls out
(And we are all) *safe!* I found mine on my father's lap.
He was my yellow onion, garlic, and tomato hideout —
But I didn't know the stain on his white baseball cap
Was wine. So I found mine in the yellow chair,
Drinking coffee and reading about a cat in the rain,
It was mustard and tweed and square.
I didn't even know I was looking for my father's lap in vain,
 Until you found me, and lingered inside,
 Patient while my yellow knots untied.

Caitlin Corcoran

Mote

A sliver of dusty skin slid off my face
and landed at his feet.

Gracefully he knelt beside it,
using the tip of his finger to guide it back to me.

Working a needle strung with bittersweet thread,
he put me back together.

Christine Fahnestock

Letters to a Lover Part II

i.

The hushed whispers of interlocking lips are woven into the stitches of your comforter now—I hope one day when you’re tossing it to the trash you stop for a moment and remember the sultry August night we combined ourselves into one being.

ii.

When your fingers rustle through the pages of that old black notebook, I hope you come across the tattered corners of love notes long forgotten, that the ink on the pages burns your skin.

iii.

As your lover’s fingers dance through your hair, I hope you are reminded of the summer nights we spent hiding from the world, the nights we used each other to get away.

iv.

I hope five years from now, small things send you back to me, that my name will tie itself around your tongue.

Sequoia Rose Stone

Lover

six blue stones in a random pattern in the sand not
like they'd be in order
(or something)
you know there is no order to anything
no real structure to the slowly expanding universe you can feel in your bones

there was a structure to the way she would smooth your hair
behind your ears as you fell asleep
routinely
but like all structures like Rome or the idea that every morning would be
good that structure too
crumbled apart
in no real order and with no real reason

you prick your finger on a cactus needle like
Sleeping Beauty except instead of eternal sleep and black thorns
blood splashes against the cactus flower in fireworks of red amidst
a yellow sky
you wonder what a yellow sky would look like—
surely,
no stranger than a blue one

you remember marveling at the stars before they began
to make you feel
empty
and you threw up electric light after electric light
and kept the radio on even as you slept
in an effort to keep out
the stars'
encroaching and never ending
silence

she was silent when she told you
about a dream she had
where the world was washed away by a monstrous wave
and she reached out to you as the water began to crash down
and you
were too busy staring death in the face
to hold her

it is very lonely
to be in love
you think
as you look back at the six blue stones in random order
in the sand
and feel a rush of envy for the way they have fallen
together but still
beautiful in their disorder

it is hotdrynight in the desert her touch
was cooltearssleep
as you tried
to blink away the stars

Shannon Buckley

Hell Is in the Conditional

The kitchen is filled with the vague buzzing of the ceiling fan. It seems like the only sound, but if I concentrate hard I can hear the grandfather clock in the other room. When I've spent decades hearing the same ticking, it becomes as ingrained as inhaling.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I wonder what it would be like if I went an entire day without once thinking of Emma. She's here like the ceiling fan and the ticking clock, constant as they are, and known, but she is louder. She cannot disappear into white noise. She comes unbidden and always. She is gone and still slices have stayed: a fallen strand of hair, a folded letter, a curve of thigh, a sliver of a loud laugh. Bear with me.

With the familiar thrum of my alarm I would wake up, and as my dream cronies would recede into painted plants and aluminum siding I would rise and stumble across the floor to turn the noise off. *Dismiss*, I would command the beeping box with a button-push. My first action of the day would be to unplug my phone and coil the charger's cord around itself. I would squint to try to hold in the muddled snatches of fern fronds and some kind of clouds as they slipped off. *Nope. You won't remember a thing today either.* The dreams would escape.

I would reach my arms straight up with laced fingers and suck in the pleasure of stretching rested muscles. There would be an abstract notion of the time of day: nine-colored and nothing urgent. I would bring my phone back into bed with me and fold myself sideways against a pillow. Two conscious minutes into the day would be the first checkpoint: I would not think of Emma as my unfocused eyes caught the strip of sun along the bottom corner of the room.

The internet would welcome me to the day as usual. Facebook would load on my phone to three new notifications, none of which would amuse me. This would be the second checkpoint: social media of any kind—but I would not think of her. Instead I would toss the phone across the bed and stand up. From across the yellow room, the bright striped windows would grin at me as if we were friends.

In the bathroom I would look extra long at myself in the mirror and observe the pimples and sleep marks. So often I read her in the arcs of my chin and the pronouncements of my collarbone—not today: I would not think of her.

Downstairs in the kitchen there would be peaches. I would pick one up and press its fuzz to my nose. Outside the window the leaves would be shivering. The introspection caused by a quiet moment with a peach and the morning trees would be the next checkpoint, however: I would not think of her. Instead I would think of the last time I ate a peach, a week or so ago in a different place where I was happy but no more happy than now.

After eating the peach, I would sit down with the newspaper. The pages would crackle loudly when turned, and the stories would take me through many thoughts but none of them would be of her. There would be weddings and politics and book reviews, all taken in with the scent of new ink. I would sigh, but it would not lack contentment.

A flashback would interrupt me and I would remember a thin hallway filled with people talking, pushing through the crowd to a lopsided staircase; darkness, nighttime. That would be the extent of the memory of last night's dream. Oh, more now . . . a small room at the top of the stairs? An open window filled with navy sky and shining clouds perhaps. I would not wonder if she were there with me.

On a sudden impulse, I would turn on the radio to the country station and fling myself around the room, hopping and singing along. I would have to rest after two songs because my heart would feel like a wooden egg rotating within my ribs. My kitchen chair would catch me and in between recuperating breaths I would smile at the music and I would not think of her.

While putting a load of my laundry in the washing machine, I would pause a moment to look at the shirt she used to tell me was her favorite. But the pause would be strictly practical: there would be a small grease stain. I would take care of it, and I would not think of her.

In the shower, I would make the water just wavering on the edge of cool. It would be hot out, so a hot shower would seem ridiculous. When I would turn the water off and push back the curtain, I would

catch my reflection, hazily thin in the fogged-over mirror. I would cock my head at the memorized lines and leeways of this body. Looking down, my eyes would catch on the birthmark above my hip, the one she loved. I would press my thumb to it gently in acknowledgment, but I would not think of her.

I would put on my favorite pair of cat earrings and I would not think of her.

A stone would not plop into my stomach when the phone rang because I would not think of her.

In the middle of the afternoon I would spread out a blanket in the yard and read a book. When an odd yellow leaf would fall on my leg and stay, held, even while the wind would blow, I would whisper to it, "Hello!" In this moment, the color yellow would not belong to her because I would not think of her.

Back in the house, I would shuffle through the day's mail and find nothing interesting, just a few bills and a catalogue from the shop where I bought her favorite coffee mug. I would flip through a few pages, not really looking, before dropping the mail on the uneven stack from the rest of the week. There would be no thought of her.

I would sit in the blue armchair and hug my knees against the soft flat of my torso. Across the room, the couches would blur into soft masses of gray as my eyes fell out of focus. My chin would rest perfectly on my knee and I would think or I would not think. Either way, I would not think of her.

The trains would come rolling in between the floorboards of the living room and I would not think of her.

While eating dinner, I would listen to my teeth crunching a carrot and think how much louder the sound feels when it's stuck inside my own skull. For once, it would be the only thing echoing around in there, nothing louder, nothing more.

My choice of movie after dinner would be a romance, because crying is a treasured pastime. Through the couple's meeting and carefree courtship and unexpected conflicts, I would consider personal resonance and find myself empathetic, but I would not think of her. When our song would emerge behind a heartbreaking stretch of dialogue, I would feel

the tears coming, but it would be testament to the film's pathos, not because I would be thinking of her (I wouldn't). When the sex scene would come on, I would turn my eyes from the screen and politely look at the armrest of the couch instead. This would be modesty; I would not think of her.

When I would find myself back in my bed, cross-legged and browsing the internet to end the night, there would be another checkpoint of social media updating, but I would not diverge from the simple strip of my newsfeed. Many voices and thoughts and articles would arise, but it would be late, and my capacity for thinking at all would dwindle to near nothing—I would not think of her.

I would surrender to my sand-coated inner eyelids and lay down to sleep. The edge of my comforter would curve up over my ear to keep me safe, and my body would fold warmly into itself. Everything else would slip and, just on the edge before careening, my mind would light like a lift-and-drop butterfly on the things that are always there: I would think of my hands, I would think of the nearly half moon, I would think of the sound of a double hiccup and the smell of laundry detergent, I would think of a white-gold ring and chocolate cupcakes and one bunch of blue hydrangeas and a black car and the taste of lovemaking and six fireworks in rapid succession and peeling sunburnt skin and a tangle of snapped guitar strings and the sound of a Skype call ending and dry-heaving and paper ripping and a freckle like a north star, and god—GOD—I would not think of her.

◇

Stephanie Christine Mendez

Orion's Belt

I was busy connecting the beauty marks on your back when you
asked me why I couldn't sleep
They looked just like the stars we searched for in the sky while we stood in my
parking lot
And all over you, there it was,
Orion's belt

I found it on your body and that's why it was lost out there in the dark
Beautiful how the spots were identical to the night's constellations
Endless stars glowed on your skin as my fingers played with them
down your back
I told you I couldn't sleep because I felt like I was already dreaming
But that wasn't true
Your body made me feel like I was in space,
because all I could see was your skin, like a luminous point in the night sky,
like an incandescent body, like the sun

Emily Zogbi

Brother Born Blue

My brother was born blue and upside down.
He didn't cry. He looked at our parents
with eyes like Jupiter, lost in orbit.
I'm fine, he gripped my dad's finger,
just a rough start.

My brother and I found a robin's egg
beneath the tree in our front yard.
Lost and small in the space of my palm,
part of me wanted to prove it was fake,
so I slammed it against a tree.

Yolk ran Saturn rivers down my forearm.
We screamed at the sticky massacre
between my fingers. My mother said,
Great, now she'll never eat eggs again.

I eat eggs for breakfast
and remember climbing into the toy chest
during hide and seek, how my brother
sat on top as a joke. My fingers got caught
beneath the lid. *It hurts, it hurts*.
He wouldn't get off.

At a family barbeque, I wished my brother
would be sent to the moon and never come back.
We couldn't find him for 20 minutes after that,
I thought I'd launched him into space.
I take it back, I cried, *I take it back*.

We finally discovered him in the field
beyond the fence, picking flowers
and watching the birds, back
from his orbit around the Earth.

Irene Corvinus

Snake Eyes

Maybe Medusa was just being guarded,
after losing herself to Poseidon.

After the Trident God turned her away
and she realized he was shallow—not deep,
like the dark, depths he guards.

Turning others to stone means
they can never get close enough to harm you.

Antonia Carey

Nøkken

Flecks of gold reflect
against the water's surface
luminescent stars hit piercing eyes
his feet contour to the rocks
wedged in the riverbed
holding him steadfast as he plays

The stream carries his music
warbling through the night
entwining her in the tendrils of sound
caressing the cool hard air
dry leaves collapse
flaking beneath bare feet

She carries her load to this gold boy
standing atop the river
on his pedestal of stone
pulling the sound of the night
from his shaped-wood
silence

He senses her stares
he turns to greet her at the shore
black and crimson shift as
he beckons her into the water

She learns the music
its sound doubles in the dark

After the End

After the world ended I started getting weird in the head. At least that's what Tex told me. This was right after Al had the baby and we had just moved from the settlement in Isenberg to the house in Ohio. And wasn't *that* the worst thing in the world.

We went to the Midwest because we heard things were better there, because on the East Coast pickings were getting slim and we'd been eating spoiled canned goods and whatever vegetables we could find. Tex's dad, back when he was still alive, had been an off-gridder before the world ended and his house's solar power still actually worked a little. So the three of us—Tex, Al, and me—we put what we could into our packs and we started walking. And for a while it was okay.

We didn't see that many people on the way, just a few skinny husks drifting through what was left of the city. Even though we were loaded down with food and stuff nobody bothered us because Tex had a semiautomatic from before the gun ban and Al and I had pistols. The weapons were complete bluff, of course, because who possibly had bullets except for really old geezers who never turned their weapons in during the metal shortage. Very few people, as it turns out, will challenge you when you hold a gun to their head, even if the gun is unloaded.

We knew better than to help them, though it was tempting. Some people might be sweet to your face and they'll call first watch, but while you're sleeping they'll take all your stuff and leave you starving and wandering what's left of the U S of A. It didn't happen to us, thankfully, but we'd heard stories.

So we walked and we walked and we walked for just weeks on end, the three of us, through the sun and the rain. It was summer so it actually wasn't too cold except for sometimes at night. Despite the threat of actual armed drifters we mostly followed interstates and highways, because that was the easiest way to get somewhere. They roads were all still choked up with cars, especially on the East Coast where the flooding

was the worst. At first we razed the cars, and we found some pretty good stuff too, like blankets and hand-crank flashlights. A good majority of them didn't have dead bodies, because most people had the smarts to jump ship and walk. But some people, usually in older beat-up cars, got killed by the initial EMP blast that somehow caused a spark and set engines on fire. We never searched those cars because Al was too squeamish.

Even though Tex said it was a waste of room in my pack I took two things. One was a set of keys with a beaded keychain that said "Sammy" with some hearts. Another was a stuffed cat, just a little one, covered in pink and lavender spots with one eye missing. I imagined the little kid that left it behind by accident and prayed that they were okay.

It was a good thing that I took the cat in the end because a few weeks into the walk we found out that Al was pregnant. One morning she just started throwing up, which wasn't entirely uncommon considering our diet of mostly spoiled food, but then Tex pointed out that I was the only one still washing out rags every month. Tex and I wanted to bust into an old Rite Aid and steal a pregnancy test for her to take, or something, but she just shook her head and said that it was probably because she was stressed and underweight, but I was underweight and apparently not affected at all.

We got to the house way before she had the baby, thank god. That was when Tex's father was still alive. But like the whispers we'd heard from the few friendly survivors on our walk, some people were just not right in the head after the EMP blast. They were starting to go crazy. When we found Tex's dad, a man named Daniel, he was sitting at his kitchen table with a long butcher's knife crying for some woman named Tiffany. He was soaked in his own waste and burning up, and he died a week later from what we think was pneumonia. We tried to save him so hard, because Tex loved his dad so much even though they'd been fighting for years because Al was black and Tex was not. I thought it was really dumb and sad. But Tex was hoping to make up with his dad and he died before he could.

For the two months or so after that Al and I had to take over because Tex was grieving and he couldn't do anything but sit on the couch

and stare out the window. That was all he did after we helped him bury his dad. He didn't even clean up, he just sat in his dirty clothes on the couch for two days. Al and I had to make him eat. The only thing he would do was go and use the latrine. But then one day I snapped and screamed at him because his partner was going to have a baby and she needed to be taken care of too, and that started to bring him back. Then Al made me go upstairs and lay down with a cloth on my face because I'd burst a blood vessel in my eye.

The house in Ohio is as nice as nice gets for the apocalypse. It's on a hill so we can see drifters coming for miles, though there aren't many around here. There's a really big vegetable garden with almost anything you can think of, miles of tomato plants, eggplant, cabbage, carrots, even some potatoes, and plenty more seeds. There's also a huge tank for collecting rainwater and a well with plenty of clear water, and a latrine as well as flush toilets (but we don't like to waste the water). The plumbing in that house is a luxury. I would have showered every minute of every day if they didn't stop me.

Even nicer was power. Daniel had been this man everyone thought was crazy, living all self-sufficient, with plenty of food and seeds and extra wiring and surge protectors for his solar panels, but we benefited from it. After we buried Daniel and Tex was feeling a little better, we discovered that the TV and DVD player still worked. Up until then we were more preoccupied with the upkeep of the garden and Tex, but Al, eight-months pregnant, was resting on the couch and she got curious. She went up to the flat screen and she pushed the button and it turned on, and she screamed so loudly that we both came running. And then I tried the DVD player and it turned on and I screamed too. So then the three of us crowded on the couch and we watched *The Wizard of Oz*, and Al cried and I couldn't stop smiling and Tex laughed even though he hated the movie.

I should have been happy. We had plenty of food and water and we had each other and we even had movies, but still something wasn't quite right.

It started the day Tex and I tried to build a crib for the baby. Tex had taken a dead tree on the property and spent days and days making

the planks that would be the body of the cradle, smoothing them over and over again with sandpaper and wondering if the baby might still get impaled with splinters. I would put it together and make a mattress. I wanted to paint it but there was only wall paint in the garage, and I didn't want the baby to lick the side of the cradle and get poisoned.

So there I was, out back working near the garden with Al reading nearby, nailing the few pieces of wood together when all of a sudden the feeling went out of my body. Just like that. I still kept working, unable to stop actually, and I kept pounding nails and pounding nails not even into the cradle, and Al screamed at me to stop but it was too late, I'd accidentally nailed my hand, but it didn't hurt and I just laughed and laughed.

I snapped out of it not long after that, because Tex and Al were in the other room and my hand was wrapped up and I heard them worrying about me getting tetanus, because most of the nails were rusty and we had used most of the antibiotics on Daniel. And then Tex said that he thought my brain was starting to get messed up from the EMP, and Al said that maybe something else had just happened and it wasn't that. They would keep an eye on me.

And for a long time everything was fine. Al went into labor in early May. Aside from the excruciating pain of labor (we didn't have any painkillers safe for the baby) her birth was smooth and sanitary and relatively quick, and I was the one to help take the baby out of her and hold it up for them to see. The baby was a little girl and she was healthy and it was good, and I was the very first person to hold her in this entire world.

But soon after that the days started to slip from me. I blinked and it was August and the baby was three months old and she could look me in the eye. I blinked again and it was November and the baby could sit up and reach and smile at me and we were getting the house ready for winter, storing as much food as possible. And then it was the New Year. We didn't really know, because Daniel's wall calendar was old, but we guessed by how cold it was. One day we were sitting around the fireplace and it occurred to me that I had forgotten the baby's name. Just like that. And I started crying and I told them that my mind was

unraveling just like Daniel's had. I would never be a mother like Al or a lover or anything but a broken girl they'd found on the side of the street right after the apocalypse happened and I lost my parents in the line of cars.

And Al held me while I cried and patted me on the back and told me, no, Dev, this will straighten out, you'll be fine, even though I could tell by her tone of voice she didn't believe it.

I sat up and I covered the baby's ears and I told them that I wanted to die before I got as bad as Daniel. Tex said that it would never happen in a million years, that they would keep me alive no matter what, and then I pointed to the scar on my hand and said that if I did that to myself I could do even worse to the baby and not realize it. The baby whose name was Julia who had big beautiful green eyes just like Al's. Al and Tex might be able to stop me from hurting them but a baby could not. I was strong in the way the apocalypse forces you to be.

Then Tex said, There's no way I'd be able to do it, Dev, I love you too much. We'll watch the baby. We'll make sure you don't hurt anyone.

But he was missing the point, that I didn't want to be that burden to anyone, that I didn't want to ruin this baby's life because her life will suck anyway, after the end of the world with no prospect of friends or school or anything but old DVDs and gardening and scraping by but not living. I just said okay and that I was going to bed.

So I waited for them to go to sleep and I took the stuffed cat from my room and I crept into the nursery and I put it in with Julia and I kissed her goodbye. And then I went into the garage and I got my pack and packed it up, and I bundled up to protect myself from the cold. I thought about writing them a note telling them I was leaving, and I almost didn't but I couldn't help but tell them how they were the two people I loved most in this world. And I said thanks. And I left in the middle of the night, cranking my flashlight.

For about two hours I was going strong but then I began to wonder why I didn't just wait until spring to run away, because it was frigid and even though cranking the flashlight and walking kept my blood moving I was still shivering, and I was tired. But maybe it was good I left in winter because I would die faster and it wouldn't be that

bad. Tex said hypothermia was like falling asleep. He was studying to be a doctor when the world ended though he never got past his first year.

I walked and walked until it started getting light out. By then I was so tired I thought I might pass out, but my body wouldn't let me until I found somewhere safe. Numbly I plodded through the town closest to Daniel's house. We'd been here hundreds of times and hadn't seen a soul. It was a one-stoplight sort of town, with a grocery store and a drug store and a library. I headed towards the library. It would probably be safest.

The door was boarded up. I pried up the nails with my hatchet. It wasn't locked; I guess people didn't think a library was important for survival. I locked the door behind me just in case, and boarded it again from the inside. I went into the basement section and set up my bedroll between two bookcases and almost pulled a third over to cover me, but I was too tired so I just put a pile of books at my feet so it would make noise if anyone came. And I wiggled into my sleeping bag and I put my empty pistol under the coat that was my pillow in case I needed it. I fell asleep right away.

The books didn't wake me. It was a cold metal click that did. I used to be able to wake up at the slightest danger—my body had trained itself—but all those months at Daniel's house had let me sleep more deeply.

I woke up with my pistol between my eyes and a person standing over me.

For a second I just looked up in confusion. I had thought this was a good hiding place. But I guess the fact that the library hadn't been locked was a sign of some sort, that this was someone else's hidey hole. Maybe it was the exhaustion or my brain giving out but I hadn't seen any evidence of human life. I hadn't even smelled it.

This person smelled, but mostly like wet wool and not body odor. I think she was a woman—she had on heavy-duty boots like mine and a cabled red sweater. Her black hair was all in braids. She was maybe few years younger than me. She asked me, in a terse voice, what I was doing here. She didn't know the gun was empty. I explained I was passing

through. I didn't mean to take over her spot. I asked her if she was surviving alone.

Surviving. That's a funny way to put it. Why should I tell you? For all you know, I have three big guys right behind me.

But she didn't. I told her to pull the trigger if she didn't trust me. She did but at the wall, not at me, and discovered the gun was empty. She confessed to me that she'd run away from her boyfriend because she thought she had the EMP sickness and had tried to strangle him in his sleep. I told her that I had it too.

She told me her name was Zhu Li, and for a second I panicked because I thought she'd said Julia. I told her my name. We agreed to get through the winter together if we didn't end up killing one another. Part of me expected to wake up and find all my stuff gone, but Zhu Li wasn't that kind of drifter. She was crazy like me.

We spent most of our time reading when we weren't foraging for food. The grocery store was mostly raided by now, but we did find some dog and cat food that wasn't completely spoiled, as well as my preserves. There was a fireplace in the library and we did sometimes have to burn books to keep warm, but we only chose magazines and pulp fiction.

The bond I had with Zhu Li was different than the one I had with Tex and Al. Had it not been the end of the world I don't think we would have been friends. Our personalities were too different but we were too lonely and too desperate to do anything but get along. Before the end she'd been the rich daughter of businesspeople and had grown up sheltered.

I knew that at the end of winter I would have to leave. It was comforting to be around another person but Zhu Li and I could seriously lose it any day. There was no telling what brought the spells on. They happened to her more than they happened to me. She would yell out in Mandarin and cry for hours and hours, and she wouldn't eat. One time I tried to feed her and she ended up screaming and throwing the can at me and wasting a meal. Others she would sneak out when we were sleeping in nothing but a sweater and jeans and I would find her almost frozen to death.

During those times I missed Tex and Al and Julia so much it hurt like a toothache. I wondered what they had thought about my disappearance, if anything. Had they looked for me? Part of me hoped they had, part of me hoped they hadn't.

Spring came. All my clothes were loose; we were practically starving by February. And then I woke up one day and Zhu Li was just gone. She took nothing but her stuff and my empty gun. I looked for her for an entire day, but by that point the snow had melted and I couldn't follow her footsteps. I hoped that she would be okay, even though I knew that she wouldn't.

Time started to slip by again. Sometimes it felt like watching myself in a movie, others I would just wake up in weird places, suddenly. My body was becoming undependable but I was surviving until one day I came to and my pack was gone. I didn't know if someone had stolen it or if I had just lost it, but all I had left was the keychain with "Sammy," clothes on my back, and a serrated knife.

I started to starve.

It wasn't conscious at first, I just would lose consciousness and not eat. But then I decided that this wasn't a terrible way to die. I didn't hardly feel hungry anymore, anyway. My belt got looser and looser until I had to make notches with my knife. I could see the bones in my hand. I got tired. I got cold. This wasn't so bad. I started sleeping more and more, until one day I decided I would go for a walk. Then I could feel it starting, low in my spine, the sense of time pulling away from me, of consciousness pulling away, something I wanted to resist but never had been able to. I had a feeling this was it, this was the end, and that was okay. But I had wanted my last thoughts to be of Tex and of Al but I had no control of it. My head was just empty and gray like my insides.

My legs walked for miles and miles until finally they started up the huge hill but couldn't make it. My body went over to a rock and sat down. My body saw three people coming, two big and one small, carrying wildflowers and something else that wasn't quite clear. They put down the flowers and the other thing under the willow tree at the pond at the bottom of the hill and stood there for a long while. And then they left started back up the hill.

My legs complained but moved doggedly towards the tree. My arms picked up the wildflowers and shredded them. My hands glossed over the stuffed cat, still pink and lavender but now blind in both eyes. My eyes stared at it for a long, long time, seeing nothing, comprehending nothing.

A voice behind me. Two, then a child screaming happily.

“Dev? Dev, is that you?”

But I was already gone.

◇

Sarah Emmett

All Hallows

The dead wander in a yellow wood,
drifting among the whispering
silver spruce;

here, the veil between life and death
has grown thin, wavering in the hushed
weeping of the wind—

now is the liminal hour of silence, of
ascension, where souls teeter and
sway on the sharpened edges of the afterlife:

a tightrope strung between realms.

Zach Locascio

Trip to the Tombstones

The writing on the others has faded
Starting the day they were buried,
But your print never wavered.

Its freshness is glaring—
Reminding me of my emptiness.

Eirini Melena Karoutsos

The Time We Laughed (at our grandmother's funeral)

You would have scolded us,
Frowned at our informality,
But how could we not
Full-teeth smile in front of full-suited death,

When our heads are bent

(but eyes peek out at the corners),

When the room is full of flowers

(that you might have liked
but rearranged regardless),

When you're dead

(and we're all trying to keep our faces blank
because when you died
the space you occupied
stayed behind to haunt us with absence
and hover next to the collapsing husk of your husband
and there might be ten of us
but there's one of him
and he told us not to cry),

But it's so easy to picture
You leaning over,
And whispering
"What is she *doing*" (at my funeral)?

Derek Hawkins

Love Me Until the Batteries Die

Through greasy streaks on a smudged phone screen, I see you.
You
buffer in between sentences and sometimes your
face freezes like Venus de Milo.
But here you are, immaculate, I feel your presence six thousand miles away.

Waves, an ocean of satellite signals keep us together. The moon we once shared
sets the tide above our electric reunion.
I'll abide with the lagging voices and
an interference of clouds over rooftops.

"What did you say?"
"I said how is the sunrise over your rooftop?"
"My battery's dying . . . I gotta go"
Three beeps chirp along to cricket songs
behind my windowsill.

Sometimes I confide in the deep void of black skies
searching for stars bleached out over foreign heads.
It reminds me of a monitor, speckled in flakes of dust,

The Shelter

“We need more batteries, and the rent is due tomorrow,” she said in passing, with a deadpan expression. To be honest, I felt as much resignation as her face showed. The shelter had been running up expenses, amongst which rent was only a part. Nora’s expression didn’t tell me anything about what she felt at that moment; she just always seemed like she wasn’t quite there. Somewhere behind me I could hear a whirring sound. I knew it was Edward, because one of his servos still makes that clicking noise when it’s moving. The warehouse was a cavern of whirring, clicking; the sounds of metal on metal, plastic on metal, it was a discordant symphony at any time of day or night. After two years working here, I could tell you about every sound in this place. Edward was easy to notice; he was a FlipBot 3030 Xtreme, designed to tumble, roll, cartwheel, and teach kids the value of calisthenics and healthy food choices. After losing an arm and having his leg dislocated, someone had left him in a soggy cardboard box next to the front door. They all come in with some kind of damage: Some in better shape, some in worse. Edward tumbled by the workbench, and went off tumbling and cartwheeling past a pack of Aibos that were chasing a Roomba along the wall as it vacuumed up dust.

We have almost every model of Aibo, the robot dogs. The later models had fur that looked just like the real deal; some of them could even lift their leg (we turn that off for obvious reasons). We have so many of them that a new delivery guy once asked me why an animal shelter needs pneumatic actuators. If you looked around the room you could trace all the design improvements made over the years. You could also notice that the more realistic they got, the worse people treated them. I found one with cigarette burns, if you can believe it. That took a while to process, mentally, I mean. I knew people abused animals, and I figured that abusing any animal was a sign of mental disorder or just pure disregard for life, but this was not an animal. Sure, they look real

enough, and the behavior algorithms are uncanny. Still, I couldn't grasp the intention. It wasn't real; they must have known it wasn't real, but that wasn't the reason why they did it. Maybe having a walking ashtray was someone's deranged idea of a joke. That model had had 50 pressure and temperature receptors baked into every square inch of its artificial hide! It could "feel" when you pet it, and it had a rudimentary pain response to keep it from being damaged. It probably yipped and howled each time, and more likely than not tried to run (they can't bite, so it couldn't have defended itself). They had GPS and wireless networking, so that they supposedly couldn't get lost, but I suppose the constant negative feedback must have given it sufficient "reason" to get lost. You can ping the GPS to locate them with a smartphone app, but nobody ever came to claim it. We found it with its batteries totally drained, lying in a muddy ditch next to the road. At the top of the line, these things cost almost as much as any purebred. I couldn't figure out why someone would pay so much for something just to take such poor care of it. Nora almost broke down when she saw it.

I got it back to the workbench and spent five hours cleaning and patching artificial fur, and then another seven figuring out how to even begin to repair the behavioral algorithms. Most of the stuff made after 2018 had some sort of learning software at the core. You could go in and wipe the memory, and then bootstrap the behavioral settings from data surreptitiously pulled from a floor model at a store. Nora disagreed with the memory wipe, so I had to do things "by hand," altering stimuli weights and excising recursive loops in the neural net so that we could "rehabilitate" them. It was a crude analog to psychiatric surgery, but it was done in software, and involved a hell of a lot more finesse than an icepick. Sometimes it took days, but in this case, more like half a day once I mapped out the net. I named him "Patches." That was six months ago, and he still doesn't deal with strangers so well, but he sticks to me like glue when I'm in the shop. He'll sit around my workbench and occasionally beg to play fetch with "his" orange tennis ball that he dug out of the junk bin.

“Jooooon, doo yooou waaant toooo plaaay ah gaaame?” Her voice synth still had some problems with vowels. Merry had rolled across the room, over to my workbench. Merry was a Carol Singalong, another educational toy robot for kids. She looked like the product of a relationship between an old-fashioned rag doll and a Segway. She was supposed to be able to sing all kinds of songs, and play word games. For a brief time before the recession, almost every school or nursery had one. She came here with a box of toys when the new tenants cleaned out the old daycare down the street that closed down. I guess they thought we were the Salvation Army or something. She hadn’t been mistreated, just neglected and left to wander around, after the kids were gone. When they were remodeling the place, she was probably still rolling around — must have juiced herself with an inductive charger someone left plugged in. Listening to her rendition of “Old MacDonald” was unsettling with the effect of the hanging vowels. I figured singing and word games weren’t her thing now, so I taught her how to play some board games, like Monopoly. She was ruthless, and would often let out an impish giggle whenever I landed on one of her hotels.

“Maybe later, Merry. I’ve still got to fix Boz’s hand.” Boz had arrived a week ago; someone had probably thrown him out of a car while driving by.

“Oooooookaaaaay Joooooon,” she replied as she rolled off to investigate what the Aibos were doing.

Boz was lying still on the workbench. He was one of those butler robots that were popular last year, the ones that speak with an exaggerated received pronunciation. He’s only about two-feet tall, but he can tidy up, carry small items, and will even sort your mail for you. I had already replaced the broken eye cameras, which were hanging out of Boz’s skull when I found him. To cover up the bare lens on the one eye, I had given him a tiny monocle I made out of some wire and a gold-coated filter I took from an old pocket camera. I had done a memory dump and found some pretty awful stuff in there. Turns out he was the property of a fraternity house at the university. There was some distasteful imagery, but nothing illegal. Last visual records revealed that the boys at the house got good and drunk, and then tried playing baseball with him and

a “pledge paddle.” I thought that kind of thing didn’t happen so much these days, but there are no anti-hazing rules for robots, I guess. I unscrewed the casing of the arm, carefully splitting apart the shell with a nylon putty knife. The wires were all intact, but you could tell there was some liquid residue, probably beer, or at least I hoped so. I cleaned it up and started reassembling the hand.

I’m not a forensics expert, or a shrink, but I have a theory on how they get here. In general, most of the ones that show up at the door don’t look like they suffer from chronic abuse; not like Boz or Patches. They’re treated well for a while, and then something goes wrong or stops working. Maybe a glitch from wear and tear causes a joint to stick, or the voice processor cuts out intermittently. After that, people stop treating it like a friend or a pet. I think it has something to do with the uncanny valley. That’s where something looks like it’s really alive, but there’s something incongruous about it. On a scale from brick to living creature, there’s a gap towards the living side where people are unable to accept what they’re presented with as belonging to either category. The effect is a mix of confusion and outright revulsion. Manufacturers managed to get over the uncanny valley a while ago, creating automata that were largely indistinguishable from living creatures until you found the battery port or noticed patterns in the behavior over time. There wasn’t too much of a burden to suspend disbelief. But, when something goes wrong, it pushes the experience right back into the valley. Oftentimes this results in neglect, or aversion. Not long after that is when the hostility sets in, and then they end up here, if they’re lucky.

Boz’s hand was back in some kind of shape now. I had to print out a replacement for one of the finger joints, and after some frustrating sanding and detail work with a hobby knife, it moved pretty well. I replaced his batteries, put his little tailcoat back on, spent five minutes trying to make what had to be the smallest Double Windsor knot ever, put on the tiny white cotton gloves Nora had sewn together for him, and then powered him up. His eyes blinked open and then looked to me after scanning around.

"Good morning, sir! I am Boswell, your humble servant. How may I be of service to you today, sir?"

"Good morning Boz. Could you move your left hand please?"

"It would be my pleasure, sir!" replied the tiny butler. He lifted his arm and went through a series of grasping and waving motions with his hand.

"Does this meet your approval, sir?"

"Yes, that's fine. Thank you Boz."

"You are most welcome, sir. Would there be anything else you need, sir?"

"Not right now."

"Very good, sir." I lifted Boz off the bench and set him on his feet on the ground. He wandered off in a stilted gait, presumably looking for some decorative furniture to polish. I knew Boz wasn't a person, but something about him made me want to be polite. Please and thank you just kind of came out automatically, as though I was the robot and Boz was the human.

When I started working here, I treated it as another tech support gig. I was just finishing up my graduate thesis, "Machine Learning in Complex Abstract Automata." I wasn't sure about what I wanted to do next, and my advisor, Dr. Falstofe, had told me that I should go down and help out a friend of his who ran a repair shop for robots in town. Said it would be a "good experience." I met Nora that day. She had the same kind of neutral expression as she often does, and asked me if I wanted the job like she was asking me if I wanted a stick of gum. I accepted, and started working that week. At first, almost everything I said to the machines came in the form of monosyllabic imperatives. One day Nora started talking to me like I talked to the machines. After a while I became irritated and asked her about it.

"What's your deal?"

"You know that's how you sound, right? Why can't you talk to them like you talk to me?" she asked me as though making a statement.

"Well, for one they're machines, and you're not." She obviously was not satisfied by that.

In a matter-of-fact tone, she responded, "We're all machines, Jon. The only thing different about them is that they don't understand what that means."

"I don't even understand what it means, but I get your point. I'll lighten up, okay? But all I'm saying is that you anthropomorphize these things too much and you'll get attached!"

"Isn't that the point? People throw them out like garbage, but they still work, they still move, they still can feel."

"Yeah, but not like you or me."

"How do you know that as a fact, Jon? You look at the interconnection inside of their minds every day. You don't see growth? You don't see more complexity? How can you be so certain?"

"First off, calling it a mind is a stretch. At a fundamental level they're just doing math and matching data to patterns stored in memory."

"Jon, doesn't that also happen inside of your head? Even if the way they do it is deterministic, maybe your mind is also deterministic, only more complex. So complex that you just can't see it."

"Well, I mean it's not totally different, but it's not the same."

"Just try talking with them. Treat them better and see what happens."

"Alright, fine. Just don't expect me to wipe their ass or anything. . . ." I looked at her with a smirk, and noticed her lips start to move. That was the first time I saw her smile.

I heard a loud crash in the storage room. We usually kept the door closed so that the machines couldn't get in there, lest they knock something over or worse yet fall trapped under some junk. The storage room was and always will be a mess. I walked over to find the door ajar. As I went in I saw Nora's arm hanging over the far side of a shelf that had fallen over, she was pinned under it. It must have weighed a bit because I could see a tangle of components that were all smashed up under the side near to me. I scrambled around the shelf, worried about what I would find. "Nora! Are you ok?" I half-shouted. As I got around to the other side of the shelf, she was just lying there with the usual

blank expression on her face. I thought she was dead or knocked unconscious, but her eyes slowly moved over to look at me.

“Jon, I’ve had an accident,” she said, deadpan. I picked up a 2 by 4 that was propped against the wall, and went around to try and lever the shelf up so I could get her out of there. I had first aid training, but I wasn’t sure what I’d be dealing with until I could see underneath the shelf. Most of the heavy bins of parts had fallen loose, making it just easy enough to budge and then shove the now empty shelf upright.

Nora was on the ground, amidst piles of assorted machine parts and electronic components. I looked her over, and that’s when I saw it. Her leg was gone below the knee. Or not entirely gone per se, as I realized that the crushed object I had first noticed under the shelf had a shoe on it. Hanging from the end of her knee were wires, a couple of detached hoses, and what looked like a mangled strut made out of some kind of fiberglass.

“Nora, what is this?” I said softly.

“Oh, you didn’t know?” a look of genuine surprise or something like that appeared on her face now. “I was the first one here.”

◇

Michael Timpert

All Is Well in the World

Back then there were
No doctors who knew
What damage was.
They'd look with steel tools
For blood, but saw no
Trauma in the hollowed eyes,
The sagging cheeks

Of men and women who
Lost children. Of their
Children, who lost everything

That the soft-tissue of memory retains
Like a sponge in warm water.
Never to harden, never to be
Numb again.

And on the blacktop where boys
Wield sticks instead of truncheons
And little blond-haired girls have
Flowers instead of black trench coats
And the tapping of little feet has relieved
The rapping of machine gun bursts
A doctor may look and say—

See?
Everything is all right.

N. J. Haar

Paranoiac

black helicopters hover silently in cloudless blue sky
 sending out malicious rays and evil beams
seeking and scanning
discovering the troublemakers the mad ones and the bright ones
the eccentric and idealistic the naive and alive
 weeding out rebellion wherever it may hide
cowering in darkened closets and among the reeds and tall grasses
 on the banks
 of slow moving viscous rivers
crowded like cattle into nightclubs and classrooms desperately
 trying
 to conceal their brainwaves amongst those around them
red-rimmed eyes turned ever skyward pleading cajoling
 please please don't let them find me
I know they're here I can feel the cold pricks of their eyes on my
 skin
 so many eyes
green and blue and neon violet
but mostly white searchlight eyes illuminating darkened bedrooms
 where the
 unshaven pound desperately at unresponsive keyboards
psychotronic scanning devices stealing the wifi and jamming all
 electronics
 because the watchers can smell original thoughts
as the dead-eyed shark beneath the cloudless blue sea can smell
 blood from miles away
uncomplacent wanderers beneath the black eyes in the sky
craven and afraid to move under mattresses in bathtubs
prostrated against the wall in studio apartments
 checking out the blinds as the silent watchers move
 sinuously back and forth

walking the streets at night with tinfoil hats as the helicopter rays
 bake their thoughts
crumbling ideas and turning them to ash the second they leave the
 mind
 falling at the feet of those who dared to have them
feet which scuff through the mixture of dead leaves and murdered
 ideas which coat the street
 from end to end
leaves are the ideas of trees and autumn is the silent hovering craft
 which inevitably bleaches
 branches black and cold
walking past police cars with artifacts of pleasure smuggled in the satchels
attached to their hips
 and concealed in assholes already stretched from previous
 passages and midnight trysts
petrified that their fear will be discovered and the prize may be
 confiscated and that
 they may be imprisoned in tiny jail cells where they will be
 attached to a multitude of
wires and car batteries with electrodes affixed to their temples
(temples places of worship mosques of the mind)
and every thought they ever had projected onto tiny TVs and
 replaced
 with the static that previously covered the screens
intellectual white noise injected with hollow needles and electrodes
veins bulging and pulsing with authority-administered
 complacency while they
 scream the poems that they have memorized and struggle
 against their bonds and call
upon the names of the long-dead angels to release them as their
 eyeballs run down their cheeks
and their eyelids are pried from their fast-emptying skulls
 the ideas projected on the screens and then stored on hard
 drives to be sorted and
catalogued for eventual incineration as the remaining fugitives from

satisfaction
hang around the smokestacks in multicolored coats and inhale the
essence of their fallen brethren
and become high on ideologies and philosophies and weep
before they are driven off
by the nightsticks and tear gas of the black-cowled employees of
reality and cynicism
the smoke from the stacks mixing under the red sun with the
smoke from the
ever-burning pyres where every day angels are found and their
bodies immolated
spines crackling and twisting as every word they ever said is
released to the sky
body after body thrown upon the ever-growing piles as the smiling
violet-eyed workers stoke the
fires
and don gas masks before they stroll to work every day so
that the smoke won't give
them any funny ideas
earplugs secured firmly in ear canals so that they may not hear the screams and
shouted
obscenities of the angels as they burn
Armani-suited cat burglars breaking into apartment flats in
the dead of night and
smothering the tenants in their beds simply because their employers
hovering high above picked
up evidence of dreaming on their monitors
whispering in ears as their targets die all hail the new state
all
hail the triumph of order all hail the victory of serenity shh-shh
dream no more be at peace your body will feed the fires of
logic for a day at least
holding down the squirming bodies until all movement has
ceased and carrying out the
corpses before tossing a lit match down the alcohol-soaked hallways

and smoking the rest of the
tenants from hiding because who knows
if one may dream then why not the rest?
the displaced wandering the streets under the sun which has
become yet another searchlight
blazing their souls bare and reveling in the discovered sins
or so it seems
approaching literary booths on the streets only to be handed the
works of Kooser of Collins and
Mehigan and
taking them to slowly die under bridges while reading the
about the virtues of church
school and turning ten not to mention applesauce and creamed corn
while the book venders squeal and laugh above them taking
armloads of subversive
tomes to the crematorium
helicopters crop-dusting college campuses with toxic aspects of the
new bio-warfare to smoke
out the deviants reading Kaddish in library bathrooms and injecting
needles in unwashed and
forgotten janitorial closets
driving them from the buildings coughing up rum-flavored
blood crying the smoke of
their forbearers and collapsing on the cold concrete ground as they
are surrounded by blinding
white eyes
as the unremarkable slumber on in their beds built to only
accommodate one
ignoring the commotion outside their windows
as the unrepentant flee through artificial forests filled with towering
ficuses
pursued by the twin starving hounds Complacency and
Unoriginality
salivating at their pounding heels and baying at the ever-
searching moons

which light the fugitive's path but also allow visibility to the
 ravenous dogs who pounce
 upon the pursued and rip at their flesh and devour their
 livers so they can no longer drink
to forget
to obliterate the deliriously feverishly happy new world which has
 formed while they slept
 nestled in nests of torn-out pages and dreaming of walking
 across
the entire united states
but some of them drink anyway
 as at the dawn of each new day checkpoints and roadblocks
 are set up on all the major
roads and thoroughfares and cars are randomly stopped
 and the officials (gas-masked in case the car is hot-boxing)
 approach the windows
rolled down when tapped with a nightstick and inquire as to the race ethnicity
origin sexual orientation place of birth date of birth hometown destination
origination restaurants visited thus far food ordered amount tipped number of
glasses of water consumed today email address time spent on the road that day
average rate of speed number of children gender of children perceived sexuality
of children make of car model of car perceived sexuality of car license plate
number personal identification code social security number birth certificate bank
account number first childhood pet facebook password mother's maiden name
political bias hopes dreams (a trick question) fears and favorite author of the
driver
 and if it is Joyce or Burroughs or Eliot
the driver is dragged out of the car and shot in the head on the shoulder of the
road on the back of
earth which slumbers restlessly as it burns and squirms in dreams
 darkened by the ashes of
incinerated authors
as stargazers and hikers are discovered and executed in the dark
 places of the night by police
officers in urban camouflage for they had been marveling at the

complexity and vastness of the
 universe
 as they are stalked through the woods by patrolling wonder
 hunters carrying shotguns and
 lanterns with a strobing violet light and treed at last by the very children they
 spawned after they have been flushed out of hiding by the tumultuous ringing of
 iPhones and the flashing of a multitude of cameras
 tousled fugitives run down on deserted highways by news
 vans begging for a statement
 any comment was it those words those evil words which made you
 not want to buy the double
 venti-iced chai soy mocha frappe at your local corporate coffee shop
 any remaining wordsmiths strapped to massive arc reactors
 slithering silicon ethernet
 cables piercing their eyeballs tongues nipples navels genitalia soles
 of their feet and souls of their
 fragile bodies tied to cell phone towers and wired to the Implacable
 Machine of Progress
 which harnesses the brain-waves of the troublesome and
 converts any uncouth ideas
 into data plans so that the content can continue to refresh their
 instagrams
 raised up upon a technological Golgotha
 the screams of the skewered atop the mountains attributed to the
 piercing calls of birds of prey
 the cries of the vultures which circle the homes and schools the
 businesses and shops
 of the artificially satiated as they slowly rot away in
 Egyptian cotton sheets
 artists pushed down into pits of water electrified by cell-phone
 chargers and deep fat fryers
 windows of jazz clubs broken by tear gas canisters and the sax and
 trumpet players
 forced out by the fumes as a sullen wedding dj sets up turntables
 inside and cranks out the

newest pop hit to an audience convulsing and chanting on the floor
before him
scribes smoking opium in forgotten libraries suddenly
seized by agents smashing through
the roof, descending from dark helicopter-shaped clouds
tables overturned and ashtrays smashed as the addicts fight
for freedom yet are injected
with the tranquilizers of rational thought and are hauled into to the
air to be dropped to the
distant asphalt
as agents wielding flamethrowers and wearing scuba-masks
advance on the doomed buildings
archives of unknown artists flooded with acid rain reservoirs
we knew it'd be worth saving for something the black-suited
executives say
as they turn the valves which sanitize the underground
strongholds of all resistance
brain-damaged users taunted in their cells by hallucinations cooked
up by the corporations they
used to work for
artificially synthesized non-organic nightmares dancing before their horrified eyes
as they foam at the mouth and slam their pre-destroyed bodies against their
restraints and cell walls lined with a thousand screens big and small all projecting
their worst fears
as the doctors and psychologists laugh and clink glasses of non-alcoholic
beer in their
plush high-rise penthouses watching their patients die on plasma screen
televisions and ignoring the nightmares conjured up for them squirming and
gibbering outside their 42nd-story windows
citizens deprived of sleep by the constant public service
announcements from the
low-flying dirigibles which hover over their towns and cities
spouting the propaganda of security
authors out taking a stroll while burning the midnight oil
pounded on and brutally beaten

by representatives of Shell or ExxonMobil because oil is valuable or
 haven't you heard
and still they remain
treading silent country back roads and sneaking from one
 skyscraper shadow to another
 hoping not to be spotted
hiding in local bookstores during the day and climbing to the summit of the
Tappan Zee bridge in the dead of night and folding pages of restricted poetry into
paper planes which plummet from the summit of the doomed structure and may
end up in the hands of a still free citizen by
 morning
blinding literary censors with sharpened pencils and pens devoid of
 ink
engaging in backroom bisexual orgies as animatronic dobermans
 sniff and snarl at the doors
 barred to keep out the Enforcers of Decency
shooting morphine in full view of the authorities hovering twenty
 feet in the air brought down by
 tasers and bean-bag shotguns
publishing profane manifestos on public bulletin boards for all to
 see
 hunted through squalid apartment windows with the high-
 powered sniper rifles of normality
and brought down with a shot to the neck twitching and spasming
 in their bed of empty bottles
 decapitated and mounted in the dens of their killers
who brag about how big the dreams of *this* one were
 dying dying dying
 some more quickly than others
 and everyone says it's paranoid to leave my room unoccupied
 with pillows emulating the human form
 under the covers of an empty bed

CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Biese: Born in the Hudson Valley. Travelled extensively to wind up there again. Further travel ongoing.

Shannon Buckley graduated from SUNY New Paltz in December 2015 with a degree in Creative Writing. She loves books, ice cream, and crying. She has been published in *Chronogram* and *Stonethrow Review*.

Antonia Carey is a senior who double majors in English and Theatre Arts with a concentration in Performance. Antonia is currently working on a post-apocalyptic short story and is attempting to memorize *The Wasteland*.

Caitlin Corcoran writes: "I am a graduating Music major and Creative Writing minor with a love for poetry that has flowered from taking workshop classes and having read work by my talented peers. I am intrigued by surrealism and horror, and have been significantly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe's work."

Irene Corvinus, a double-major in Creative Writing and Digital Media Production, graduates in 2016. Her poetry has appeared in *Chronogram* and *Stonethrow Review*.

James Crowley, a senior English major graduating in May 2016, likes argyle sweaters, podcasts, and peanut butter. He is also a member of the New Paltz Slam Team and a contributing editor for the music-news website Sensationspress.com.

Joseph Curra is a senior at SUNY New Paltz who majors in English with a concentration in Creative Writing.

Patrick J. Derilus, a third-year student at SUNY New Paltz, majors in English with a Creative Writing concentration and minors in Philosophy. Patrick writes poetry, fiction, and memoir.

Sarah Emmett, a Creative Writing major who graduates this year, plans to pursue an MFA in Poetry.

Christine Fahnstock, a twenty-two-year-old who majors in English and minors in Creative Writing, has a passion for the English language. "I am constantly trying to find the right words to say what needs to be said, especially for those who cannot use their voices," she writes.

Myasia Fajardo loves short stories, chocolate, jalapeños, and filling her online shopping cart with things that she cannot afford.

John Froehlich, a senior at SUNY New Paltz, majors in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. He enjoys writing both memoir and fiction, generally with darker themes.

Allison Giese, a sophomore, double majors in Creative Writing and Theatre Arts. In addition to possible careers as novelist and stage manager, she is considering going into video game design.

Kylee Greenleaf earns her bachelor's degree in English in May 2016. Her writing often reflects her life-long love of literature. She aspires to publish a collection of poems inspired by literary heroines.

Carly Grinder, of Wallkill, New York, is a junior in the Adolescent Education Program with a concentration in English. After amassing a sizeable collection of literature, she pushed that love of reading toward a newfound love of writing.

Noah J. Haar, a sophomore at SUNY New Paltz, is an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Theatre Arts.

Krystal Haas, a senior Psychology major, enjoys writing poetry in her spare time, especially when pissed off. When sad, she badly plays guitar and sings even worse.

Derek Hawkins is a senior double-major in Digital Media Production and English from Binghamton, New York. "Love Me Until the Batteries

Die" is the title poem of Derek's first poetry anthology / thesis project. His work has been featured in *Chronogram* and *Stonesthrow Review*.

Jay Higgs, a December 2015 graduate of SUNY New Paltz, received a Tomaselli Award honorable mention for distinction in poetry. Her work has appeared in *Black Magnolias*, *Chronogram*, and *Stonesthrow Review*. She gives praise to professors who mentored her throughout all of her creative successes.

Leah M. KaneGraber, a junior Creative Writing major, relocated from Washingtonville to New Paltz to pursue her dream: spending hours on homework and agonizing over paper deadlines. When not studying or working her wonderfully gross job in a local seafood market, Leah relishes taking long naps.

Magan Kasper, a senior in the Creative Writing Program, writes both fiction and poetry, but poetry has always been her passion. Magan says, "I use my small, rural hometown for inspiration, and because of this many of my poems are nature-based."

Jesse Keplinger, a licensed massage therapist and graduate of the Diver's Institute of Technology in Seattle, Washington, worked as a metal fabricator and high-end furniture maker prior to earning his AA in Mathematics. He is currently completing his BA in English at SUNY New Paltz.

Azer Khan writes: "I was born in New York and thrived off of a multicultural smoothie of ideas and beliefs." An aspiring linguist who can communicate in four languages, Azer is on a quest to master Arabic and the recitation and meaning of the Qur'an while pursuing a degree in Computer Engineering and a minor in Communication Studies.

Eirini Melena Karoutsos is a writer from Long Island, who has published in *Chronogram* and *Stonesthrow Review*. Eirini's escape attempts have gotten her only as far as SUNY New Paltz. If found, please return.

Gam LaFrance: Brooklyn-born Haitian-American writer who wishes to incorporate as much of the intricacies of his background in his writing as possible. Student. Communicator. Artist. Dreamer. Friend.

Jeannette LaPointe is a photographer and undergraduate student working towards obtaining her BFA Photography and Visual Arts Education degrees at SUNY New Paltz. Her photography reflects her close attention to detail and her interest in portraying simple subjects in a visually appreciative way.

Darren Lyons is a senior at SUNY New Paltz who double majors in Creative Writing and Art History. He would like to thank professors in both disciplines for their inspired teaching. Darren says, "I'm not naturally a political writer, but I do believe considerate creativity 'trumps' crass egotism every time."

Zach Locascio writes: "I am an English major with a Creative Writing minor. I have two cats."

Nick Magnanti, playwright, actor, and journalist, is a senior at SUNY New Paltz. His work has appeared in *Borgen Magazine*, *Chronogram*, and *Stonethrow Review*, as well as on stage across New York State with The New Paltz Players, GEVA Theatre Center, and Method Machine. Nick would love to hear from you: NickMagnanti@gmail.com

Stephanie Christine Mendez, a twenty-two-year-old poet based in Highland Falls, New York, majors in Sociology and minors in Creative Writing. She enjoys language, word play, metaphors, storytelling, art, nature, bodies of water, and genuine people.

Hayley Nusbaum is a third-year Creative Writing major at SUNY New Paltz. This is her second time being published in *Stonethrow Review*.

Julia Ponder is a senior at SUNY New Paltz studying Secondary Education with a concentration in English and a minor in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *Chronogram*, *Stonethrow Review*, and

Susquehanna Review.

Sequoia Rose Stone is a junior, majoring in English, who hopes to become a college professor. Her hobbies include listening to *The Lord of the Rings* soundtrack and crying.

Benan Saracoglu is a dual-major senior, studying Creative Writing and Theatre Arts with a concentration in Design & Technology.

Katrina Scarimbolo, a sophomore, majors in Psychology and plans on minoring in English and Disaster Studies. She loves cats, shopping, writing, and the smell of the ocean after a long warm summer day.

April Schmidt, a graduating Creative Writing student at SUNY New Paltz, was the spring 2016 editorial intern for Codhill Press. She smells like she sounds, she's lost in a crowd, and she's hungry like the wolf.

Tiff Scott is currently pursuing English and Philosophy degrees at SUNY New Paltz, the perfect pair of donut-printed socks, and the funds for next Wednesday's salmon roll.

Gabrielle Simonson is a Journalism and Creative Writing student at SUNY New Paltz. When not writing, she's watching cooking videos online. Gabrielle cites Emily Dickinson as the inspiration for both her writing and lifestyle.

Bridget M. Smith, a senior at SUNY New Paltz studying English and Creative Writing, can think of no better way to end her college career than appearing in *Stonethrow Review* for the first time. Bridget loves writing, laughter, and the people who inspire her to do both.

Danielle Tralongo, a junior English major at SUNY New Paltz, primarily focuses on fiction and poetry in her writing. Danielle would like to thank professors who helped her improve her poetry during the past year.

Michael Timpert is a junior at SUNY New Paltz. A writer of prose and occasional poet, he still has no idea how to do either but works at his

craft all the time, with the help of amazing teachers. Also, Mike hails from New Jersey, which is neither here nor there.

Michael Tuccito writes: “I am a prospective writer of poetry and fiction in the final semester of my undergraduate degree for Creative Writing.”

Daniela Dale Velez, a young New Yorker, is working towards her BA in Creative Writing. The child of a Trinidadian mother and a Puerto Rican father, Velez has had a uniquely diverse upbringing both ethnically and religiously. She has been published in *Stonethrow Review* and *The Odyssey*.

Sara Vinciguerra is a senior at SUNY New Paltz from Saratoga County, New York. She studies English and Creative Writing but also loves history.

Samantha Wahl was born and raised in Greenwich Village, New York.

John Walsh, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, is a fourth-year Creative Writing student at SUNY New Paltz.

Robynne Yokota is a third-year Creative Writing major at SUNY New Paltz with minors in German and Film Studies. Her favorite writers include Kerouac, Wallace Stevens, and Ishiguro. Robynne believes that in order to write well, one must live well—and pet some dogs, too.

Emily Zogbi, a third-year English major, is co-captain of the New Paltz Slam Poetry Team as well as the founder and president of the New Paltz Writers Society. This is her second time being published in *Stonethrow Review*. She wishes very much that she’d been a dancer.

