

GOD'S CRUEL JOKE

ISSUE TWO

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Today's Call

by Sis Byers

I just got to bed about 20 minutes ago. The house was so cold it was hard to sleep. I tossed and turned most the night. I'm sure I drifted in and out of sleep but the kind that I'm choosing to not count because I'm still so fucking tired and am fairly sure I really fell asleep 20 minutes ago.

This amount of sleep feels an important time frame to note, as the phone has started to ring. And ring. And ring.

I look at the glowing clock: 6:46 a.m.

I'd be alarmed to get a call that early, but I knew who it was.

"Hello!" I barked groggily.

"Hello! Is Fran home?" Her Minnesotan accent was so thick I wanted to scream at her even more for having to hear it this early.

"Jesus god no!"

"She isn't? Where would she be at this hour?" Catalini was concerned.

"She's sleeping." I responded back.

"So, she is home, she's just sleeping then?"

I could hear Catalini piecing it together like some sort of puzzle.

“You’re a fucking genius.” Saying this surprised even myself. But I was tired. And I was sick of Catalini doing this every morning.

“Well, you don’t have to be rude.”

“I’m being rude?!” I questioned her just as I was hanging up.

I laid back down and regretted everything I just did and said. My stomach was sinking, and as I was holding my head, the goddamn phone rang again.

Just let it go. Let it ring. Ignore the sound. You like this sound.

My family didn’t have an answering machine. So, if someone called the landline, depending on that person’s own personal psychosis, they could just let it ring and ring, or, like a normal person, let it ring a few times and decide to call at a more decent hour.

Catalini was a vitamin salesman. She also had a yearlong garage sale that permanently took up all the space in her garage. She called it her “business.” Her vitamins were how she connected with my mom. My mom bought into VitaLife like it was the second coming. We had jars and jars of it in every bathroom in the house. We even had a little VitaLife water filtration system that was on our kitchen sink. I often wondered if there was actually a filter in there or if it was just a small beige container that forced our water to redirect through a tiny nozzle. She certainly didn’t sell my mom any filters for changing it.

My mother’s incurable, seemingly untreatable depression made her a walking target for women like Catalini. She was always looking for answers and would welcome any alluring trap she stumbled upon. For now, it was vitamins. My mom’s purse rattled like a maraca with each step she took. She’d pull

out a cigarette, a handful of vitamins, and a stick of gum and would be ready for anything the day threw at her.

She tried therapy once. And spent so much time at the therapist's office that all of us kids thought it would be funny to pretend she was having an affair with her doctor, Dr. Ray Haychek. It would've been disingenuous to who we were as little shits for us to show an ounce of support. So, she'd come home from her sessions to see all of us dirt-faced kids making kissing faces and saying, "Ooohh ahh help me Dr. Haychek." She stopped seeing him. Instead, Catalini made all her quarterly quotas taking on a client like my mom.

After the 25th ring I couldn't take it anymore. "Hello," I said, trying to make my voice as dark and as cold as one could.

"Can you tell her that I called?" Catalini added the sentence as though our previous conversation never ended. "I'm having some trouble with Steven, and I'd like to talk to her." I could hear the desperation in that nasally voice.

"Fine. I will tell her when she wakes up." I tried to steady my voice.

"Oh, thank you so much. Have a blessed day." She hung up.

I held the receiver to my ear and heard the dial tone. If I killed Catalini, would I be considered a local hero? My mind mulled this over as I leaned over to put the phone back on the cradle.

Her last call shook the last chance of sleep out of me. The sun was starting to make my room bright anyways, so it wasn't likely I would've slept. My mom insisted that we have white sheers for curtains instead of anything that actually blocked out light. She thought it looked better from the street to have these soft white windows. The effect on all seven of her children

manifested into lifelong sleeping issues. But that's neither here nor there.

Trouble with Steven. Catalini's plea to interest my mother into calling her back echoed in my head. Something my mother will surely want to inquire about. Catalini's usual tone did sound a bit tense.

Catalini had had a successful lawsuit against the state that summer regarding Steven. Before you celebrate a win against the man, you must learn the details of this case.

Steven was her oldest son, and sometime around his senior year of high school he started exhibiting odd behavior. He turned to drugs and alcohol and became an out-of-control maniac. Over the next few years after high school, he had many run-ins with the police and was in and out of jail. One of his final arrests landed him in the psych ward. While there, doctors determined that the root of Steven's problem was his untreated schizophrenia. So, with the power of the courts and his recent arrests, they moved forward with medicating Steven during his lockup and sure as shit if this didn't help him tremendously. He was almost entirely back to his old self. While on probation after his release from the psych ward, he was placed in the care of his mother, Catalini. She took one look at the medication list and put an immediate hard stop to his treatment.

“Big pharma!? Who even knows what's in those? It's not natural. It just isn't natural.”

She would instead treat him with a series of vitamins from her VitaLife collection. Doctors and licensed professionals strongly urged her to reconsider, as vitamin treatment did nothing to aid or affect his mental health. Steven went right back to his erratic, unruly behavior. And after yet another arrest, the state moved forward to force medicate Steven. So, Catalini did what any egotistical vitamin pusher would do – she sued.

Her success was shocking to anyone with an ounce of empathy.

She created a daily regimen of vitamins to serve him and realized after a few months of him living with her that she was too stressed out to be monitoring him all the time. So, she did the next best thing and bought a secluded farmhouse about 15 miles out of town and put him there.

She gave him no car, I mean, “How can someone like Steven drive? He really shouldn’t be.” And then had all his meals delivered through a small slot in the front door. Out there, isolated from society, treated with vitamins, and allowed to trash the house, was her way of caring for Steven.

I remember overhearing her explain the details of her smart plan while I perused the aisles of her “business”, the garage sale. The clothes were all middle-aged Midwest styles that she overpriced, and flipping through the racks was just my way of occupying myself. It may have been my mean teenage attitude that made my mom bring me to Catalini’s. While my mom always liked a good story, especially one where the person’s actions were beyond anything she could understand, she felt sorry for Steven. She didn’t say anything to her, but this Steven situation became the factor that forced her to ultimately distance herself from Catalini. Hence, bringing me on her visits. With me there, the visits were almost always cut short. My mom would act exasperated with me after a few of my comments and audible sighs and she would explain to Catalini that she better get me home.

I laid in bed a minute longer and decided to find my mom to deliver the message. I opened the door to her room and her unmade bed was empty. I went downstairs and found her sitting at the table smoking and reading a book. I saw that the phone next to her was unplugged from the wall.

“I see you heard that Catalini was calling?”

“Yes, I unplugged it to get some peace and quiet.” She barely looked up from her book. She had a cup of coffee and was using a small plant as an ashtray.

“Well, I didn’t think to do the same. She woke me up. And then called back to assure that I was thoroughly awake.” I sat at the table and looked off and out the window. It snowed again. I could hear the wind against the windows.

“She said something about Steven being in trouble and wanted you to call her back.”

If this interested my mom, she didn’t show it. She waited a few minutes and then set her book down. She plugged in the phone and looked at its potential energy. She measured carefully if she wanted to take this step. Her curiosity about Steven got the best of her.

“Oh, hello, Fran!” I could hear that stupid voice come loudly through the phone.

My mother did a small laugh, one that she does when she’s in any sort of social situation. “Hello, Catalini, I saw that you called.”

My father liked to joke that anyone who knew Catalini invested in a caller ID. I found his joke to be an astute and practical observation.

“Is something wrong with Steven?” My mother seemed to be interrupting something Catalini was saying.

“Well, I was thinking of changing up his treatment plan.”

This made my mother sit up. “Do you think you want to try the medication?” she said with relief in her voice.

“Fran! Do you even know what’s in those medications? Who knows if they will make him impotent or give him some disease.”

My mother was a sweet woman, and I could see how much she wanted to respond to both of those comments, but didn't.

"It makes the most sense to me if I give him a new vitamin C booster. We have this great new product that is a liquid that you add to water. This may be what we've been missing with his treatment – the ultimate mood booster."

I could hear her speaking. "Hang up," I offered.

My mom didn't even look at me.

"Fran, I think you'd really like this vitamin C mix, too. We've just got it in, and I'm only letting my most reliable clients know about it at this point. I don't have enough to offer it broadly. Not until next month. Do you want to get in on it now? I can get you six packs for the price of five. Truly a steal."

My mom takes notes when she's on the phone; it's her equivalent to doodling. I saw her write down "Vitamin C mix."

I was mad at myself for relaying the message. She was using Steven to pique my mother's interest, and it worked.

My mother sighed out loud and lit another cigarette. "Honestly, I don't think vitamin C is going to help his schizophrenia."

"I'm not even sure if he actually has schizophrenia, Fran. They labeled him without consulting me."

"You aren't a doctor," my mom reminded her.

I'd never seen my mom give this much pushback before.

"And frankly, I'm not even sure what's in VitaLife. Seems to me you're choosing what you're critical about, and one of them serves as a profit to you."

I could hear Catalini choke and guffaw loudly. My father walked in from the outside right at the same time. Cold air

rushed in when he opened the kitchen door. He stood there stamping his snowy boots on the small rug.

“Who is she talking to?” he said to me with a quizzical look on his face.

“Catalini.”

“Dear god.” He rolled his eyes.

“No, she’s handing her her ass.” I said this without really knowing what I meant, but my father looked interested and sat down.

“Fran, what has gotten into you. Are you feeling alright? Is there anything I can do.”

“I’m fine.” She let the silence speak for a second. “I’m going to go.”

And with that she hung up the phone.

The click of the phone on the cradle filled the silent room. I was beaming with pride and had a loss for words. Before I could manage to spit anything out, the phone started ringing again.

Knudsvig, C., popped up on the listing.

My mom bent down and unplugged the phone.

The rest of the day was unremarkable after that. I let a few of my siblings know what I had witnessed, and they were all in awe and disbelief. By the time night fell, the memory of my mother’s conversation was a hard and fast legend that will forever be included in the annals of family lore.

I woke up early the next morning to the phone ringing. It was 6:33 a.m.

It rang and rang and rang, and so I leaned over and unplugged it from the wall. I could tell somewhere else in the house someone had picked it up.

I managed to fall asleep and came downstairs around two hours later.

My parents were sitting at the table looking solemn. Before I could say anything, my dad said, "Steven is dead."

"What?" I sat down sleepily and looked at him and my mom. She looked deflated.

"He tried walking into town last night. In the blizzard. Some motorist clipped him. They found him this morning frozen solid on the side of the road."

"That is...horrible."

The three of us sat silently for a minute.

My mom lit a cigarette and said, "So much for the vitamin C mix."

Sis Byers

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Dog Days of a Blind Cottonmouth

part two

by Mads Levshakoff

Mystery Spot, Two Miles on the Left!

He stops tapping the steering wheel the moment he slams on the breaks, deciding to do so only once the car squeals to a stop. Splits off the highway into an abandoned lane and yanks the emergency break.

“Get out.”

He rips himself from the car, the frame shaking, the slam warming his palm. Handles Fy with care even though she’s too tired to whine as he tucks her back into her proper kennel. The tranquilizers he’s been using on his girls are mild and temporary, keep ‘em a little soft and sleepy until he knew they could behave. He jabs the button on the hatch and grabs Lucy by the throat before the trunk closes, needing nothing to pin her but his hips.

“Feeling, uh, *bold* are ya?”

“You told me not to ca—”

“Don’t be a wise ass— oh, now, now, Lucy. Stop that crying, baby, you’re not trouble— sh, sh, it’s okay, we can make this quick,” he promises his syrupy eyed girl and licks into her noise of distress when her shoulder blades knock the window. Baby hairs tickle his knuckles and wet lips part as Lucy yelps at the grip on the nape of her neck. She’s strong willed, sure, but not when he’s stirring all 24 fireflies of her vertebrae into

nervous flight. Sticky lashes and mewling so sweet and helpless make him keep kissing her until he has to shove her to the ground.

John's shoe is on her cheek before she can get up.

"Settle down. I'm not hurting you. Come on, lift your hips for me."

Just the arch of her spine and colorless, silky hair spilling out from his heel in the pale moonlight. He takes care of slipping her skirt up with careful pressure of his weight, leaning away from her ear. John wasn't an animal; he knew what he was doing.

"Easy, baby, like I taught you—"

"Don't wa'nuh," she whines.

John unzips his pants and scrubs a hand over his face, into his hair, and slaps both palms down on the car to snarl down at Lucy, "'Daddy's' girls always come, just fucking do it."

All Gurgle and No Guts

"No," she groans and jerks when the grip on her waist reflexively tightens. Lucy rolls her eyes but still tranquil when she feels John's frame relax. Not the calm before a storm, but the sweet spot of open sky in the eye of a hurricane.

"No?"

"The bishop moves *diagonally*."

"You said that was the knight."

"No, I never," Lucy protests, turning on his thigh. He's leaning back in the chair, lashes lowered in bemusement. John smiles with the pink of his tongue peeking out as he licks from

canine to eager canine. There's no asking him *why* he asked her to teach him if he's going to be such an ass. Why he does anything isn't for her to know. "Stop actin' dumb and play me, I'm *bored*."

"We are playing," he says dumbly to spite her. Nails scratch down her stomach to twist the rosette of her waistband. Ever since McKinney, the gusset of her robin's egg panties have been the only barrier allowed between his fingers, light kisses, and nuzzles of his nose. As if he weren't doing any real harm— don't get so worked up, Lucy— merely rewarding his discipline for keeping them in place. The safety is superficial when he'll take them. He does every night to wash them by hand with the bathroom door firmly shut.

Lucy makes a face and hunches on her folded arms until a palm between her shoulders straightens the curve of her posture. The tuning pin of her spine undone and hips pushed forward by the correcting pressure sliding down her back. John creates a thrum in her limbs, a trembling need to writhe or run. His lower lip drags across her shoulder in a ghost of a kiss. A piece moves— his bishop takes hers— but she's dazed by how devastating John's gentleness is.

"Your turn," he murmurs. Twists the lazy Susan but pulls her deeper into his chest until her toes barely touch the ground. Lucy only has to look up to meet his eyes already looking at her.

"Queen to H2. Checkmate."

John chuckles against her hair and brings fresh water to her lips. The good stuff, bottled. He resets the board while she takes another drink.

"What was that, 11 moves, you wager? I must be getting better."

She snorts and yawns, drowsy with wishes of being homesick. Never knew the weight of her isolation until his own crushed her into her mattress. This wrong kind of love yanked her from her years haunting her home's hollow point history. John broke her down so thoroughly that Lucy relished in all she didn't have to do. Can keep ignoring the grime of neglect in the stained glass. No need to tend the collections of silver more tarnished than Lucy when she was first planted in her mama's womb. Now she doesn't have to clean or get dressed or help John track that poor girl's straw house to blow down. Damn near accustomed to it, never slept better, and even his moods, which change so frequently, she can expect, well— can't predict what he might do. Just expect it, what else can she do?

“Only one more before bedtime, hm? You look sleepy.”

The thick, woven shade is ringed in sunlight, glowing against the plastered walls because it can't be past three in the afternoon. Maybe it is late, Lucy tells herself. The honeymoon suite fades to a twilight dusk. Silence takes up space at her back. Slow blinks punctuate her thoughts. John makes a pleased noise. Not of success nor superiority. A contemplative tilt catching his humming mouth. Happy, somehow. Satisfied. So much time for white's opening move.

A languid knight to F3 mirrors the caress on the inside of her thigh. Touch of skin dream-like. New bodily awareness as the fragile barrier of her skin strums. Sinks. Sinewy as puppet strings. Starched fresh wires. Lazy Susan scratches in its rotation. Lucy tries harder to keep her eyes open. She can't let him win.

“John?” Sibilant. A bathtub faucet drips. Her wrists hurt.

A soothing shush curls around her. An embrace of tormenting comfort. Lips on her forehead. Words warm with the gentle violence of rain on the shell of her ear, “Your turn, baby.”

Lifting her hand makes her entire body sway forward and catch itself in a dizzying jolt. Fingers brush the center pawn but the pieces and her limbs spill across the board. Fingers comb her hair down her bare back. Living shape of possession against her cheek. Beating water on the crown of her head, dripping down her ribs like a broken heart. The sheets are wet and smell of soap when she wakes up. Wrung out and hung to dry and oddly rested, Lucy rolls over to an empty bed.

John keeps trying to right his wrongs with mandatory reprieve but has never given her the privacy to wake up alone.

Fy whines and Lucy kicks off the blankets, tangled in the sheets on the floor and crawls the last few feet to the kennel.

“Fy— *Fyodor*? Wake up, *wake up*. I can’t do this without you,” she cries and tears at the locks and gathers her puppy’s sleep slinky limbs, swallowing down spoonfuls of sorrow in hiccuping sobs. Fy doesn’t react to the commotion but a blister packet knocks loose and lands in the water bowl.

Valium (Diazepam)

“*Motherfucker*.” Lucy’s breath shudders to composure, sudden flare of fury extinguished and exhaled in a ridiculous laugh. What an absurd man going to such *lengths* to control how to contaminate and conceal them both to keep Lucy all to himself. Another laugh cramps her lungs in a dehydrated pang. She can see how John might just love her, but his love is a room locked from the outside. “Fuck. Alright. Okay.”

Lucy puts Fy back on her bed and rises on tired legs, joints weak as if her anger was all that was keeping her upright. Rubs her bleary eyes in the latest motel John stashed her in. There’s not much; cinder blocks painted yellow, wooden breakfast table, John’s luggage with clothes poking out. Uncharacteristically messy of him and makes Lucy gage her surroundings again for any other oddities John left behind.

His laptop has a stack of addresses and phone numbers labeled with initials. Unorganized or perfectly organized, no telling with how John's mind works. A glass of water and two Advil set out for her. In the bedside table, zip ties and duct tape cuddle a standard motel bible. Lucy slams the drawer shut.

Her lips are blue and the bathroom is cluttered. A wet toothbrush, towels on the floor, comb, scissors, a shaving straight razor (he's learned to not keep his belt laying around, but a girl like her with something like *this*? Get it together, John), and— "Scrupulous fuck," she mutters— a bag of trimmed hair. She goes to root around in the closed shaving kit except an odd shine makes her look closer. If he's so careful of his DNA then why a sprinkling of hair? She leaves the bathroom and bends over his luggage and, sure enough, more hair. Little boobytraps telling him of mice at play while he's away.

Tile cold and clammy when she returns to the bathroom and picks up John's leather bag. Blows the short stubble off, wondering why he wanted her to grab the razor— Lucy turns, ah, he would see it missing the moment he walked in. It felt like a test, one hiding whatever it is he doesn't want her to find. The zipper is louder than a passing semi, teeth rumbling with all 18 tires.

The shaving kit drops to her feet and Lucy drops to her knees with it. Vomit splashes in the toilet and the bag's contents clink as her stomach keeps heaving. Bile in her teeth as she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Lucy inches closer to squeamishly pluck a syringe from the top, careful to not uncap the needle. The concoction is clear and viscous, Lucy is glad he's never used them on her. Anger returns at being grateful for anything John did or didn't do.

There's something disturbing in how little he needs to subdue his girls. Brutally efficient in his minimalism.

She sits at the base of the sink on the sweat slick tiles and categorizes what she knew of his belongings. She can't wait for them to be caught in breach of his patrol but needs evidence of this wolf sneaking into the neighboring paddocks of Arkansas and Louisiana before he can smuggle Lucy back to Texas. Doesn't know exactly how to do that yet but it was dangerous to depend on John's wavering benevolence for the time to figure it out. It's close to a plan, what's formulation in her undulating fatigue, foolish, perhaps, in its simplicity.

Another thing for the lock box, she thinks with John's syringe absently twirling between her fingers; her witness testimony to give company to the Jones' diamond and .22 rounds. The thing is John's crimes and Lucy's choices are a Möbius strip, so she makes a decision with a sigh so deep her ribs crush her diaphragm in a breathless moment of clarity. She won't put herself in some sterile police station room to write transcripts of John's education and label each part of herself with his neediness. He's already deep in her marrow, their sweet yearning choking her blood. Skin holding sensations only they can translate into memories of John and Lucy in ways that can not be described on record. No one will find a trace of her or what she doesn't want the authorities to find because she only trusts blind justice to drag John through the trials of bureaucracy, reform and release him into the wild; where Lucy will not be impartial or objective when he steps into her crosshairs.

Exhausted by her stint of freedom, Lucy uses his toothbrush, resets his traps, and returns to bed. Maybe John will remember her like this when he rots in his own cinder block cell. Unconscious and docile as a tranquilized puppy.

Rubberducky

She was so light when he maneuvered her forward, chin on her chest as John made enough room for him to step in. Her zip tied hands bobbed in the water tick with pink suds as he rubbed Lucy's scalp until the bubbles were white. One hand on her neck to keep her upright, breath suckling his fingers holding her jaw as John rinsed her clean. Lucy sighed when he stamped a kiss to the band aid he applied. The split wasn't that deep, but the bruise looked like an impending headache.

Oops.

Conventionally, bathing them happened *after*, but Lucy needed extra care. Got too excited in her gunpowder fierceness that excited him in the few, slack seconds when she reached under her bed for her grandparent's rifle. Too bad John caught her by the ankle instead of in her crosshairs.

The zip tie bit the back of his neck after he stretched Lucy's arms over her head. With his girl flush with him, John groaned quietly as the hot water sunk into the knots of his spine. He'd forgotten how much work it all was. Rested his arms on the rim of the tub and closed his eyes to wait for what always came next. Tight teeth whines and panicked panting through her nose, what music.

"Easy. Save your breath."

Chuckled when she tried to yank her arms down which only jerked John's head forward. He couldn't help but find it funny when they tried to cover themselves up.

"Take this," he ordered as he kissed her temple, "It's only Advil for your head— trust me, Lucy, if you don't need it now, you will."

She glared with a trembling lip looking like a wet kitten.

"Lucille." Impatience enunciated her name in a click of teeth. "I will not be in a giving mood for very much longer, I suggest you open your mouth."

John placed the capsule on her offered tongue and pressed a glass of water to her lips. Leaned his face away, reckoning she might be the type to spit.

“See how easy this can be? Be a good girl and lay back a little longer. You hurt your head, baby.”

She sniffled and winced as John lifted her sore arms from his neck. Lucy folded her knees up, so he pushed them into her chest with his forearms. Held her with his cheek pillowed by her hair.

“Are you going to kill me?”

John grinned darker than the inside of a wolf.

“No, baby.”

The faucet drips once, twice. Fat plinks on water edging closer and closer to cold. Lucy was shaking when he unfolded his arms, adrenaline made her shiver in jerky movements sloshing the water. Kept his hands on her waist to help her twist around in the awkward space cramped with their bodies. John tugged at the end of the zip tie, the lock eating at the teeth when Lucy tried to sit back on her heels. Another tug and Lucy blinked up at the ceiling, trying to keep herself from crying or looking into the lap she crawled into. Liked testing boundaries, John learned, when Lucy sat on his thigh. Or—

“I knew you were going to be a spoiled thing needing to be spoon-fed, but goodness, Lucy don’t tell me you’ve never done this.”

“How many times have *you?*”

John kept the truth behind his teeth and lenient smile when he pulled her tight to hook a hand under her thigh. Water cascaded off them, splashing the lion paws, as he stepped out and set her down. Face hard planes of fury and tight-lipped fear and nose wrinkling between her high cheeked flush as he

draped a towel over her head with the question, “Sure you really want to know that?”

She nodded and John caught her chin, fresh terror guttered her need to know. Her gaze darted from his eyes to his mouth to the breadth of his shoulders leaning toward her. Their first kiss is firm and quick and makes Lucy gasp in his ear as John held her cheek to his.

“Does it matter, baby, when I’ve been looking for you in all of them?”

He stood back to his full height and rubbed water from her hair as her breathing became ragged, sternum stumbling in her hyperventilation.

“John?”

“Yes?”

“I’m a virgin.”

His hands pause under her ears at the confirmation. With a dismissive noise, John sighed through his nose. Bottom lip slipping on the sweat at her hairline, John murmured dryly, “Hm. Well. Little thing like you was going to bleed anyways.”

John brushed a thumb under her cheek below her blank eyes. Front porch light on and no one home, so he hooked a finger into the zip tie with a little shake and guided her from the bathroom. Left her standing as he sat heavily on her plum-colored bedding, his hip close to a lock box. He grabbed the key from her bedside table, fiddling with it between his fingers.

“I’ve been wondering what’s in here,” John intoned with two sharp taps on the lid. “This big ‘ol house with only one puny safe. Makes a man curious.”

She was a little too quick to tell him, “Just paperwork. For the house.”

“Oh, yeah? So, you won’t mind me looking?”
He balanced the lock box on his knees.

“I promise. Deeds and permits and—” she stopped when the key turned in the lock and twisted her vocal cords. “Please, don’t.”

John started to open the box but paused to ask, “Were you lying, baby? What is it that you don’t want me to find?”

Flipped the lid open before she could answer. Paperwork once likely neat now jostled by his handling. In the corner was a lump of velvet he emptied into his palm. The ring held a staggering marquise cut diamond, radiant against the aged gold setting matching the plain wedding band Lucy wore. A simple tag tied to it in familiar, slanting cursive; *LuLu, I know He will guide a man you can trust into your life. Love, Mama.*

His heart thundered through his chest but his lungs were still with wonder before he looked up to coax Lucy back in relentlessly ardent urgency, “Give me your hand, LuLu.”

“Don’t call me that,” she shrieked, “I’m not her, it’s not for me— please, *please*, no!”

He already yanked her hands up but stopped as she put up an actual fight.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s my mama’s— please, John, don’t make me— don’t make me wear it.”

The ring slotted onto her finger and punched the last bit of air from her chest. Lucy sagged in shock, knees pulled together and prepared to fall. In a sudden flurry, her hands twist and twin to pull the diamond free.

“It’s stuck,” spilled from her mouth again and again. Lucy tried to shove her hands down, perhaps between her legs, but John held her elbows hard enough for her to squirm. He’s

genuinely alarmed when she rushed though he didn't budge, his brow furrowed when she hid her wet face against his chest, tears freckling his stomach.

"You're asking me to— help you?" he repeated as her bound fists started to beat against his chest but she's weak with whines for him to get it off, get it off, *get it off*. Three fingers of scotch didn't make Lucy's eyes that glassy and guileless as they were when she looked up to promise him something so, so stupid in exchange of his aid. He stroked the wetness from her cheek and licked it from his thumb and crashed into her, risking her teeth to taste her hiccuping moan. Broke the kiss long enough to pull her hands up and hide the ring behind his neck. Lucy's fingers sank into his hair so John kissed her as gently as he could, nothing apologetic in the way he nipped her lip and tongued at the seeping blood. Her copper groan like flint striking steel, igniting and depleting the air in his lungs. John ripped himself back, snapping the zip tie and suddenly held her at arm's length by the throat.

A dog might know the difference between getting kicked and bowled over, but everything was skewed, wrenched to the left, crooked as his conscience as they reorient themselves into their proper places.

"I'm sorry this won't be easy for you, but how long have you wanted to be made a mama you couldn't have— love a little girl the way you should have been loved?" John's imploring truth only became bolder when Lucy bit her lip to keep her jaw from chattering and squeezed her eyes shut. He pressed closer with a soothing whisper, "How many times have you wanted it to happen just like this?"

John was her only relief from a resentful ache of wanting to see for herself if her heinous conception can kill her love the way it killed her mama's. She huffed an uneven staccato, petrified that he could see just how spiteful she was. A product

of rape shivering with capability to love and be loved and Lucy, caged in his arms, was just the same and he'd prove it.

“Did you feel sick with yourself, baby, or do you need it as badly as I do?”

The magnitude of her pupils were astonishing and flat enough for the thought, oh, *hell*, she's going to make him pay for that. So, John kissed her again with every intention of finding out how.

Two Dollar Pistol

“Who was my daddy?”

“A goddamned wolf who ate up your mama.”

Or some such variation whenever Lucy asked less and less over the years. Wolves only knew feast or famine, adapted to go two weeks without food. Winter can trap them much longer than that, spring turning the fawns and calves that fought to survive to wolf meat. So, it was never her mama's fault she got mauled before she got to push Lucy on the swing, patch up her knees, and braid her hair. Her mama's false start womanhood left Lucy all tangled up through. Half girl, half wild— just look at her father, at the dampness of her panties as John paces the room.

Lucy sits with her legs crossed, swaying around John each time he passes. Small pleasure found in adding wrinkles to his shirts for him to iron out. He'll wear the rug down with his worrying, but she keeps her gaze on the TV. A glare of technicolor as static buzzes through her skull blurs whatever program on interior design or renovation. All perfectly white teeth, tearing out picket fences, and curated showrooms no family lives in. A din of how essential a pop of color is and John is already doing that. Dead-end leads burn the room red,

scorching the bathroom door by slamming it shut when he needs more, always *more*.

She's used to silence, but there were times the house felt alive as a rattlesnake, hissing at Lucy's inattention and inability to carry on as Jones' women always have. Unkempt books a thud, a glass holding an inch of water a wet shatter, coolness reverberated by phantom melodies imbibing the music room. Dehesa lavender perfume and saltwater and wildfires sigh through windows left open. Alligator bellows living in the copper pipes, warm groans of endless summer as wood expands and warps. Cracking thunder in the struts, joists popping with sparks of charred cedar. All the natural rumbles of the Jones' house never startled her, so she doesn't look, doesn't flinch. It's just the motel, it's just *John* stirring up the air in her chest by watching her from the corner of his eye.

He's action, she's reaction. He slams the door, she's supposed to curl up tight. He unravels her limbs how he wants or pushes her face into the mattress, she whines and squirms and sucks at his fingers. Coos of how she's too tender for more than the easy friction on the gusset of her panties become hushed demands to thank him for not fucking her and she comes and comes and comes, so on and so forth. But Lucy didn't react so like a tornado changing directions John's gambit does as well.

He stops in his tracks, as if remembering something and turns to Lucy. Fury buckles between the looseness of his shoulders and arrogant curve reappearing in his neck as he lifts his chin. Hungry grin behind glowing cherry and obscuring cloud of cloying, menthol-cool breath. John's flicks his cigarette, tobacco smoldering cheap carpeting and Lucy's nostrils.

Her limbs are stiff with sleep but once she read if muscles are relaxed the body can take an impact better. Easy in a plane or car or train. What crashes into her are blunt fingernails, a hot

mouth, and sweet pressure. Above hers, John's face tightens with worried lines before a mocking smile slithers into a slant of amusement. His breath is less of a grunt when he takes a final breath and pries her legs apart.

"Is this all for me?" John asks, dog hair from condescending.

Lucy pushes back his humidity curled hair with her pinky to avoid the pained wilderness and cruelty in his eyes. She can offer the wolf food but can't quite fault him for snapping his distrusting jaws.

"Put your hands over your head."

Her knees jump at the first kiss below her navel and he uses it to push her legs wider, shouldering her open. Somewhere between her thighs, Lucy can see a smear of dark hair. Through robin's egg cotton, his tongue is firm and sure and lazy, because it's not about *Lucy*, not really. Below his mouthy, immoderate attention the shallow press of his thumb introduces a hip bucking friction.

"John, ye— " she can't say it, can't tell if this arousal is hers or an extension of John's pushy, parasitic love. Lucy weaves her hands into John's hair, scratching over his scalp and tightening her fingers when he doesn't bark at her.

"Good, that's good." Lucy wishes the word would shock her tongue, scald her throat, but *fuck*. Doesn't know any other words to whimper and whine and keen than, "Good, oh god, that's so— so good, good boy, good boy."

Her panties are ripped off before John's done groaning. She seeks sanctuary in the pillows away from John where he's risen to his hands and knees, head hung and his ragged breath expanding his shoulders. Her hand slips and she's caught by the ankle again. John pulls her back and smacks the inside of

her knee. Lucy looks to his thighs sliding to the back of hers, to the growing stain on the inside of his unbuttoned slacks.

Being wretched back by the hair hurts, almost, hot as a bee sting, so it doesn't make sense to her when her smile widens. She swallows a surprised moan in a breathy laugh asking, "All for me?"

"Shut," he growls so quietly and forcefully, Lucy can hear his teeth grinding before her lips are pried open and her panties are shoved between them, "your mouth."

Lucy hates it, how small he makes her feel when he's strong enough to keep her in place with one arm. How his grip never lessens and practiced fingers keep her blood in place. John makes her purposely lightheaded enough to not complain about the fingers splitting her overripe core. She's dripping between her thighs and down her throat when two fingers become three in too quick succession and make her scratch at his wrist. Attempts to dislodge him only work when he notices her struggle and yanks the panties from her clenched teeth while his fingers ruinously curl.

"Come on, baby, tell me—"

She's caught between a sob and a moan because, oh, she *hates* repeating it, what she wants him to do to her, but she lets it happen. Comes on his desperate mouth, his chin, the disgusting bed saturated with sex and sweat of dozens of girls just like her. Until she's twisting away, stomach cramping with spasms and thoughts of how horrid it is to want him to do it again when he crawls up, licking her off his fingers. What could starve a man so deeply to drag her under him to eat raw in the snow?

Her winter drought of all that's been taken from her is ending in spring floods of an aching craving she's never let herself name. John doesn't suspect, doesn't feel her take

possession of his monstrosity as he once did her naivety in a sweet plea, “Let me make you a daddy, John.”

The last thing he ever expects to hear makes him sit dumbly on his haunches. Pert near the edge of her sanity and with all the affection she can muster, Lucy crawls between his knees, kissing him sloppily until John’s limerence pushes her down.

“Stop s-squeezing so hard, baby, breath,” he slurs, nose rubbing along hers, “Say it again, Lucy, it’ll help, I’ll help you this time, sa-say it again, Lucy, *please*.”

Made to remake her or made to be remade by him, Lucy’s molded to his shape and so slippery he’s suddenly entirely, perfectly inside her and under her nails and rolling in his pace. She can’t hate herself or how she exhales a moan or even John when his smile sparks something bright to burn up all the fight in her blood. All of this is hers for the taking, she sees that’s now.

“Give me a baby– you’ve been so good and I’ll be a good mama, right, J-John–?” she stammers, panting into his mouth.

“That’s right, that’s my girl– my little mommy,” John murmurs to make Lucy go butter soft, hips and mind pliant. He knows if he can just fuck her through it, she’ll seize up again. And she does, cutting what humanity this so-called man ever had.

“You’re going to be such a good daddy,” she promises and it’s that easy. John’s groaning and straining and shaking; all those damn lies shivering through him all at once. His face is hot and wet and pushed in the crook of her neck. Lucy gives him sugared encouragement because playing at love is what they’re good at and all they’ll ever have. Under the sweltering weight of his chest, his hips dig a shallow grave in her pelvis to fill with her kindness and veracity and whatever else he

wants to gnaw on because the snow is melted and the wolf is hungry.

Don't he know wolves who live to true old age only die of starvation?

Sweaty hand groping, Lucy pricks her finger before she plunges the needle into his neck. John jerks with a howl and she— well, she must be like him after all. Lucy watches his world shatter like broken glass raining down on a body at the base of a skyscraper. His body starts to sag but she knows how to hunger now and she wants *more*. She kisses him to taste his anguished groan from his terrible mouth chasing Lucy instead of consciousness.

“Two little wolves jumping on the bed,” she sing-songs and pushes him off her, right off the damn bed and giggles. “One fell off and bumped his head. Mama called the goddamned cops.”

Ignorance is Gliss

John's throat rasps, vibrating his knuckles folding over the bruising leather Lucy had wrapped around his neck. A painful laugh leaves him in a rough, grunting exhale. How crass of her, his poor Lucy, deadly only in her capability to learn how to get the job done.

Harp music that eased him to consciousness rolls and rushes like a smoke plume, agitating the stagnant air in his chest. Each inhale an ache, each exhale faintly tasting of copper. He slumps into sleep as the melody becomes a soft gallop of all the pretty horses, blacks and bays, dapples and grays.

Startles awake and pulls himself up. John falls back heavily when his foot slips through spilled scotch. By its

smoothness, he knows it's older than Lucy. He mourns the slight loss as his heavy tread takes him to the stairs where his girl ages backward in cluttered photographs with each step. Pigtails and jumping into her granddaddy's open arms, catching Lucy and her dirty overalls by the time John passes through the foyer. Vision obscured by the curl of his lashes; he follows the music melding into a warm timber, an intensity in the tilt of her plucking hands when he enters the music room slowly with an earned wariness. The mercurial nature of her odd resiliency disarms him again with an ill-contained flinch when her kissed bruised lips lift.

The scream of wood jars Lucy's melody when John pushes a velvet couch with his foot. Fingers with his DNA wedged under her nails fumble as he sits at a sloppy angle to settle in for his private concert and looks Lucy over. Every inch rode hard and put away wet. Hasn't even tried to clean herself up, bless her heart. That's fine, he's dedicated to the wellbeing of his girls. He'll soften those toffee batter eyes, cold with petulance she's mistaken for anger.

John's throat sounds and feels like gravel grinding his vocal cords, "Is that my shirt?"

A string snaps.

Mads Levshakoff

Mads Levshakoff is an enrolled member of the Alutiiq tribe of Alaska, beadworker, history undergrad, and amateur writer. Living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, she writes and reads in the sun with her two dogs or untangles plot points with her husband over margaritas. Inspired by authors such as Stephen Graham Jones and Samantha Shannon, this is Mads' first publication but she is going to continue exploring her style through wild and resilient women who are a little fucked up.

Scott Pilgrim vs. the State of Indiana

by Henry Kneiszel

It's like the spice girls always say:

If you wanna be my lover

You've got to carry out a series of strategic political
assassinations

Aw, come on mom, the CIA's parents let them do it

They tried to kill Castro like 600 times

This is bullshit

Henry Kneiszel

henry kneiszel is a midnight laundromat rolled into a convenient modern shape. the vending machine is full of teeth and the dryers are inside out. between the muted television and the locked bathroom there sits a small selection of literature. (they/them) IG: friendly.dirt.pile

Also published in star*line, mutiny!, and others

Salvia Eagle Loses the Prize

by Ben Gibbons

It's 7:30 AM, and I feel like I've lived a full day. Pushups, futile bath, handful of wet coffee grounds, flossing, two meals, more coffee grounds, flossing, puff on a salvia cigarillo, synthesizer practice, inexplicable spluttering spell, all in a few precious hours. I hope to become a master synthesizer player, perched onstage in a top hat and a rich purple cloak, terraforming sonic worlds with my spindly fingers, but that won't happen today, because my prize awaits.

As I load my supplies—computer, thermos full of mead, flask full of coffee, week-old sandwich, cigarillos—into my bindle, I worry that if the construction workers return to the site that they've abandoned out back, their *fe-fi-fo*-ing will shake my house until it pitches into the sinkhole that dwells alongside; it's been growing rapidly, and recently devoured an air conditioning unit that the landlord left too close to its lip. The landlord, a miserly criminal who lives in Florida, refuses to address the sinkhole because he thinks it's the city's problem, and the city thinks it's his problem, so it's my problem. Its depths have swallowed several of my mossspots. As I walk outside to my decrepit sedan, parked haphazardly in a gravel pit across the way, I see the sinkhole sucking on a detached drainpipe inserted into its maw like a novelty straw. The sinkhole growls and gurgles.

Wild turkeys stalk the demoralized hills that encircle my valley like fat, verdant arms, their gobbles echoing off empty houses and rusted construction equipment. A pack attacked an old neighborhood woman; pecked her face clean off. Her son put an "in memory" sign outside of his hovel to honor her life,

and the turkeys annihilated that, too. Little cardboard shreds of old woman face swirled in the breeze. I inhaled one, and it lodged in my throat. I writhed on the ground and clawed at my neck. Later, while I was out for a skulk, the turkeys strutted down the hillside, waddles bouncing menacingly. I knew what they wanted. A turkey's necksack has the same fragility as a person's ballsack, so I charged the leader, Big Roethlisberger, and gave him a big punch in the throat. His eyes widened with panic as I tightened my fist around his sack and pulled him close. "Stay away from people's FACES; I nearly died from that cardboard scrap," I whispered. Then I ate his head, like Ozzy Osbourne did with that ostrich. The rest of the pack scattered in confused horror. The next night, I saw them perched around the rim of the abandoned quarry, heads tilted back in the moonlight. The rocky hollow captured and held each forlorn gobbler until the sound waves reached a critical mass and reverberated out as one eternal body, which took on the shape of a diaphanous Big Roethlisberger as it ascended. I had been smoking salvia, and may have hallucinated the sight, but now, as I open the door of my decrepit sedan—the awful chariot that will carry me to my prize—I can sense the vengeful eyes of turkeys upon me.

I'm pretty fucking ugly. Not in the way that a good-looking or average-looking person trolling for compliments is ugly, but genuinely, unsettlingly. I look like I should have hooves. Tattered wings would find an appropriate home folded against my scoliosed back. An olive green hue spreads across my skin. Hair hangs in long, seaweedy clumps from my misshapen skull. I'm wet—more amphibian than mammal. A nose lies broken in the middle of my face. My lazy eyes are simultaneously too close together and too far apart. My right leg is shorter than my left, and still shrinking, so that each passing month twists my stride further into a drunken lurch. I try to clean myself, but my brand of grime thrives when

exposed to water. “At least you have your prize,” the universe mocks.

The prize is work, and I win Monday through Friday, and on Saturday I am haunted by the trauma of past prizes, and on Sunday I dread the coming prizes. The dream of every child: growing up, getting a job, having freedom and a nice car, kissing and marrying. I lease my decrepit sedan and wretched.xxx.flesh is my internet homepage, but the job is mine.

My parents, who are for some reason proud of me, say that I’m fortunate to have a job because it’s good experience and because work has inherent value. They are like the dad from the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, always encouraging me to undergo character building. I’m fortunate in the way that Sisyphus was fortunate to push a boulder up a hill every day.

I keep an eye out for openings. This morning, an opening presents itself as a backhoe teetering on top of the high overpass that I’m about to drive under. The backhoe’s big scorpion tail is swinging wildly, upsetting the balance of the machine. It pirouettes, a beefy mechanical shot-putter, towards the edge of the overpass. People in yellow vests flee, hardhats and lunch pails flying. Stomp stomp goes my club foot on the gas pedal as the backhoe topples and lurches off into space, still whirling. If I get it right, I can align the passenger side of my decrepit sedan with the fall path of the backhoe’s tail. With luck, it will crush through my vehicle’s flimsy roof, taking along my outstretched right hand in its descent toward the tarmac.

The expanding shadow of the backhoe washes over my decrepit sedan; a thunderbird diving toward its willing prey. I can no longer see the falling object, but I believe in its power of deliverance. Eyes closed blissfully, foot preemptively easing off the gas, I worship at the altar of the plummeting insectoid behemoth. But there’s no impact. The roof doesn’t crumple, my

hand remains attached to my eel arm, the car stalls out and skids along the road with a jarring screech, its blocky rump swinging back and forth until it comes to rest on the shoulder beyond the overpass. I crank my window down, grunting from the effort—I didn't pour enough bacon grease into the window well today—and stick my head out, grimacing and blinking against the rays that beat through my post-mydriatic sunglasses.

The backhoe is zooming around in the air above the overpass, carried by some square-jawed, Lycra-clad hunk who knows how to fly. Flexing a cantaloupe bicep as he hovers, the meat man hoists the backhoe overhead with his other arm, a regular showboating Atlas, then gently sets it back down on the overpass. Damn these heroes. The thin-blue-line-clad backhoe operator looks about ready to whip his pants off. The rest of the construction crew applauds; a news van is already on the scene. A mewl escapes my thin lips. The prize remains mine.

All I want in life, besides synthesizer wizardry, is a moderately severe injury—a crushed hand, a shattered femur, a concussion—that will allow me to receive disability benefits. The prize is not my prize. I never decided to desire it. I was enrolled in the contest against my will. I despise work with the entirety of my decaying walrus heart. *Calvin and Hobbes's* dad would look down upon me, but I'd whip him silly with limp arms and gnarled fingers until he relented.

Unfortunately, the luck that my grotesque body was denied ended up being channeled into my health and safety. I never get sick, despite always looking sick. My constant attempts to injure myself fail in increasingly unlikely ways. A few months back, I walked out in front of a car as it charged through the tail end of a yellow light. The sound of the horn hit like an archangel's trumpet blast. Sweet salvation, until the manhole cover under my feet popped like a champagne cork, launching me up and over the oncoming car, whose windshield and driver were both crushed by the airborne metal disk.

Apparently, brothers at a nearby fraternity had forced their pledges to flush massive quantities of diet cola down the house toilet, followed by pack after pack of mints, causing sewage geysers to erupt up and down the street at the very moment I seized my opening. Now, in the name of vengeance, manchildren bearing Greek letters receive showers of vomit when they pass me on the street.

My one handsome part is my teeth. I floss whenever I have the chance. Back and forth I saw, looping the ends of the waxed twine around my fingers until their tips bulge purple. There's something thrilling about holding the used strand close to my face as blood rushes back into my extremities, seeing the clinging clods of plaque, breathing in the stench that my mouth has birthed, baring my teeth at my own reflection and vice versa. On special occasions, I use a straightened paper clip to scrape the fissures clean. Today, the promise of a violent floss motivates me to continue the journey toward my prize.

When I walk—late—up the stairs to my office, I picture the scene from my coworkers' point of view. It's a horror movie trailer. Beige walls, bubbling water cooler, inbox pings, mild flirtation, washed out colors. Then, a low, ominous tone. Cut to a close-up of my feet staggering upward, muck dripping from an unseen source. Back to the office. Several people have noticed the low, ominous tone, and don't worried glances. Dissonant strings arrive. A brief, queasy tracking shot of me from behind, revealing my ragged hair and bindle. Upstairs, the strings grate, the office lights flicker, and the color printer spits out pages splattered with blotches of red ink. The camera finds its way to the door that leads in from the staircase and rests there, expectant. The music peaks and then stops. Lens swings to a blonde woman—Swusan—her jaw pried open by fear. Finally, a pivot back to the door, but instead we see my leering face in close-up, accompanied by a jarring violin stab. Strobing scenes of general chaos and carnage. “Directed by James Wan.” When I actually open the door, though, Swusan just

smiles and says good morning: “Did you get a haircut?” Spluttering, I shake my head and scuttle to my cubicle.

I’ve never known the touch of a woman. I’ve known the touch of Krathleen, but she’s a woman in the same way that I’m a man, which is barely. I met Krathleen in the abandoned quarry—I thrashing in the throes of a salvia vertigo, she breaking into empty pickup trucks looking for spare change. I’d finished my cigarillo too quickly, eager to dismount my perch atop a cracked plinth whose jagged edges cut into my thighs, and the dizziness and rainbow scotoma overwhelmed me. Looming rock walls that stretched up into the thermosphere. Green the shade of death: creeping shoots, menacing leaves, ferns curled and beckoning. The frenzied squeaking of rats. The quarry, conspiring. I took refuge in the passenger seat of an abandoned Toyota Tundra, dribbling cool wine onto my face from a stone jug to break the fever. My aim was compromised, and jammy blooms spread across the interior fabric. The driver side door rattled open, and there was Krathleen, her scowl multicolored and resplendent, her sandy hair floating around her head like a rare jellyfish, her shoulders and back locked permanently mid-shrug. “Quarters? Bills?” she guttered. Within minutes, to the drifting strains of Ashra’s “Ocean of Tenderness,” we were sucking pools of wine out of the truck’s backseat fabric, limbs tangled and grasping. I’m not sure if what we had was sex, but it’s possible. We repeated this routine several times over the following months. After a while, Krathleen stopped scrounging around the trucks, and I rolled in the Tundra alone, the quarry peering in through the windows, mocking. The last words she said to me were, “Again maybe.” A while later, I saw Krathleen’s face on a billboard touting the transformative benefits of skincare. She was the “before” picture, and “after” was clearly Charlotte Johanssen. I snuck back that night and spraypainted the phrase, “These are two separate people. The board lies, and so does Krathleen (the person on the left). Do not listen to advertising or Krathleen.”

I sit down at my corner cubicle desk and extract supplies from my bindle. Laptop, opened to wretched.xxx.flesh. Mead thermos and coffee flask. (This drink arrangement exists so that if anyone asks why I have a flask, I can show them that it contains coffee. Nobody would then think to ask about the thermos. My coworkers have not mentioned either receptacle.) Week-old sandwich. I've been eating rancid unrefrigerated lunches, trying to score food poisoning, but the mead has formed a protective layer around my insides. Cigarillos go in the desk drawer until I'm ready for my noontide smoke. I light them up in my cubicle and blow the salvia clouds into the vent next to my chair. This habit also goes unmentioned.

My boss, an oversized homunculus named Chaxbon Prazleton, pops his head into my cubicle. "Morning! Looking fresh and inspired today. Did you get a haircut? I just had Swusan send around an email to our team; the Rarbardbard project is due Friday, so we've really got to execute." Chaxbon adjusts his glasses, bow tie, and suspenders. My macabre appearance makes him uneasy, but he's wary of violating certain HR guidelines—the jury is out on whether my looks put me in a protected class—so he's friendly, even lenient. Sometimes, when he invades my area too early in the afternoon, I slurp at him until he leaves, chuckling nervously as he heads over to commit mild harassment against the receptionist. Today, I just shimmy my sloped shoulders and nod. Chaxbon seems satisfied, and heads over to reception.

I minimize wretched.xxx.flesh and open my company email. The sight of our logo, sickly brown and imperious purple, causes my muscles to involuntarily clench, sending zips of agony up and down my body. I howl softly, the air escaping my throat in eerie polyphonic overtones. Knass, who sits on the opposite side of my cubicle, exclaims, "That's so cool! How do you do that?" Peering over the top of the divider, I hiss, "I can only DREAM of modulating my vocal tone in the style of the Mongolian masters of *Chylandyk*. That was merely a howl of

anguish triggered by our company's horrendous image." Knass responds, "Nice!" Glowering, I take a swig from my thermos and click on Swusan's email.

Krathleen's billboard betrayal stung even more harshly because I think I work in advertising. I Liaison between the Production and Workshopping Departments, which means I receive emails from people and pass them on to other people. Swusan's communication lays out the workflow for the week: Production will provide me with three drafted slogans for the Rarbardbard account, and I will send the slogans along to Workshopping, who will conduct focus groups to determine the most effective. The slogans are: "Rarbardbard. It's not just Rar, but also Bardbard," "Rarbardbard. Buy us with money," and "Rarbardbard backward is Drab-drab-rar, like two boring dinosaurs, but that's not the fun and current us." I don't know what Rarbardbard does, but I do know I'd rather jam rusty screws under my thumbnails than give them a cent from my bindle.

Emails are pure poison. They bleep and beep and ding and ping like rude synthesizers, telling you things that you don't want to hear and asking you to do things that you don't want to do. It's disputed as to whether email was invented by computer engineer Ray Tomlinson or by huckster Shiva Ayyadurai; if I had my way, they'd fight to the death in crab-infested waters, even though Tomlinson is already dead.

I'm mead-wasted at my desk. I teeter, facilitating email forwards through the smash of claw on trackpad. I've already flossed twice in the bathroom; drawing blood with my erratic, booze-fueled movements. I wolfed down my putrid sandwich thirty minutes ago, groaning as musty meat particles showered my digestive cavity. Once again, potent mead has protected me from serious illness. The prize necessitates drinking, but drinking means that I cannot escape the prize. I race around a moebius fashioned from dollar store bologna. "I did not enter

this contest! I desire no prize!” I roar. Knass laughs, “Those darn telemarketers, right?” I must have salvia. Out comes a cigarillo from my desk drawer. Into my lungs, into the vent wafts a puff of acrid smoke. I feel myself become eagle. Salvia Eagle. Only when I perfectly balance the ratio of caffeine to mead to salvia do I experience Salvia Eagle. Fierce, proud, I rise, floating above the desk on golden wings. Warm, spearlike feathers blanket my salamander flesh. All is aw whirl, atwirl; the printer, glowing, prismatic, conjuring physical bodies—adorned with cuneiform, hieroglyph—from cyberspace, water cooler frothing with crystalline elixir, fluorescents strobing alien messages. I screech the screech of my flock, a *skreeeeee* that encompasses both time and time beyond time.

Some crusty recess of my brain understands that I’m just stumbling around the cubicles and moaning, but Salvia Eagle’s shining allure conquers all reservation. Chaxbon approaches, his fidgeting Adam’s apple belying the horror that his frozen grimace attempts to obscure. His voice, pitched at a mosquito’s whine, ushers me to his office; his words unspool into the air in Menlo font. I flap slowly across the threshold, careful not to brush my golden wings against any of Chaxbon’s sports memorabilia. Menlo crawls before my eyes like a *Star Wars* intro:

“Great work on Rarbardbard today!

We really appreciate the unique vibes you contribute to the team, and think you’re a special, er, person. We’d like to expand the purview of your role to include the Incorporated Solutions account; your new position would be called Liaison Specialist.

How does that sound?”

My gizzard drops. The many eyes of a photographed Deion Slanders bore into my soul. Chaxbon’s face skin slithers down his skull. A hulking, dripping apparition—the Liaison Specialist Position given form by salvia—rises from the carpeted floor in front of me, reaching out with dozens of tentacles. I gather myself, inhale, and unleash a furious caw:

“The Sisyphean tasks undertaken in this office suite blanch the vibrancy from all existence. The titles assigned to the poor, broken inhabitants of this office suite serve to render language itself hollow. As Godspeed! You Black Emperor once wrote, ‘We’re trapped in the belly of this horrible office suite/And the office suite is bleeding to death.’ The faceless Rarbardbard represents the creeping demise of all that is pure in this burning computer crash of a world, and Incorporated Solutions may be worse. Crushing decay. Vast, flattened surface. Wings of salvia, carry me from this hell!”

“Well, just think about it,” Chaxbon responds. The Liaison Specialist Position giggles mockingly, wagging its appendages like a frustrated orchestra conductor.

My favorite piece that I’ve composed on the synthesizer is entitled “Requiem For A Crusted Being: Part 8.” It’s a wendigo wail that builds from a tremulous whisper to a chintzy dirge, all detuned notes and dissonant intervals. It captures the feeling of being the recipient of a prize that you never wanted, a prize that leads to mead, salvia, and noxious lunchmeat. I conjure the piece in my head on my drive home; its dolorous blocks of sound, even imagined, draw muddy tears from my spiraling eyes.

Drastic action is needed to escape the Liaison Specialist Position, which has followed me home and now roosts, cackling, on my sagging asbestos roof while I cower in my synthesizer den. “Per my last email!” “See above thread!”

“Please advise!” I shove the neck of a cold IPA bottle into my oversized right nostril and snuff its frothy contents. The effervescent chill of the beer bubbles inside my nasal cavity snaps my head upright and clears the remnants of the salvia fog from my mind. Taking a gulp of the dirty mildew mead that I’ve been aging in my shower, I grab my beloved Korg synthesizer and bring it down to the kitchen, where a pot of bacon grease boils on the stove. Tilting my head upward, I announce, in the direction of the Liaison Specialist Position, “You’ve made me do this, you beast!” and drop the machine into the pot.

I wolf down crispy keys and burnt knobs. The Korg’s LED display screen has melted, and I drizzle it atop the scalding shards like a toxic bechamel sauce. A plate would minimize the probability of ingesting bacteria, so I eat directly from a smoking pile dumped on the floor. I can feel the assault of the synthesizer components on my stomach’s mead barrier; a dirty guerilla war waged inside of my body.

I’m ruined. I’ve eaten my beloved synthesizer, and my stomach is only mildly queasy. Disability benefits will never be mine. The taste of molten plastic lingers in my mouth. Morose, I whip my greasy head back and forth, smacking myself in the face with my own seaweed hair. My emanations are largely unrecognizable. I feel only the churn of desperation, deep down at bowel level. The salvia cigarillo that I ate to wash down the Korg has caused specter of the Liaison Specialist Position to congeal into an actual mass, which wallops my asbestos roof with hammerlike fins. My eyes roll, equine, in mortal terror. Salvia Eagle will not save me. I stagger out the front door. Turkeys approach from my left. Liaison Specialist Position hoots in ecstasy. I take off toward a scraggle of trees, only to find myself suspended in midair like a Loony Toon off the edge of a cliff. I neglected the sinkhole, which must see me as just another mossplot or air conditioner. Into the reeking depths I plummet.

I wake up to a tickle in my throat and a mechanical chirp in the damp air. I can see in the dark; my eyes must contain a trace of frog pigment. My lost mossspots sit next to me in full sprout, their growth evidently buoyed by the sinkhole's self-contained climate. I give the nearest creeper an affectionate flap of the arm. How I missed those slimy green molds. Air conditioner chunks litter the muddy ground around me. The cries of the Liaison Specialist Position barely reach down here. I open my mouth to taunt the promotional demon, but my words come out as a series of enticing fleedles and swooping tones. Is it true? Has the synthesizer reconstructed itself in my stomach and replaced my own spluttering voice with a beautiful, digital one? Still lying on my back, I find that I can compose entire experimental concertos by belching, sneezing, coughing, screeching. Within minutes, I've far surpassed even "Requiem For A Crusted Being: Part 8." The sinkhole burbles. I rest a gnarled hand on its wall, and am surprised to find that it pulses warmly. At my touch, cold and amphibian as it may be, the sinkhole shivers with excitement. Feelings well up that I haven't experienced since my truck times with Krathleen.

The sinkhole has freed me from my cursed prize. My opening turned out to be an actual, physical opening. I don't know how long I've been down here, or if anyone from work is looking for me. If so, let them look, weighed down by their ties and pressed shirts, their normally spaced eyes and their straight backs. And *Calvin and Hobbes's* dad can take his pro-work exhortations straight to rhinoceros hell, along with Rarbardbard and Incorporated Solutions. I have no need for clothes anymore; nutrients soak directly into my skin from the sinkhole's walls and floor, which means that I also have no need for food or housing money. I serenade my protector and provider with fantastical synthesizer odysseys produced directly from my crooked jaw; the sinkhole is both stage and

audience enough. I floss whenever I want, using the hanging root systems of surrounding plants. I miss my mead and salvia binges, but the bacteria cultivated within the sinkhole wafts a mildly hallucinogenic mist into my face, which, combined with the removal of my prize, keeps me content. My sex life with the sinkhole is wondrous; its huffing belches mingle with my mechanical howls late into the night. I never thought that there could exist something better than disability benefits, but I've found it. The sinkhole continues to expand and consume. Soon, this dank, sublime existence will be everyone's prize.

Ben Gibbons

Ben Gibbons is a Pittsburgh-based writer; his blog, Bored In Pittsburgh, covers the local music community. He has recently branched into fiction that explores the surreal and the absurd, with pieces published by Pinky Thinker Press and Unlikely Stories.

Her Love In a List

by Aaron Sholar

When I watched too many scary YouTube videos and couldn't sleep at night *don't worry, Jesus will take care of you.* When a friend's dad died, and I didn't know how to help *would you like to send her family card?* When I tell mom that I want to watch my first horror movie *I'll be in the kitchen if you need me.* When I tell her I want to wear my brother's hand-me-down cargo pants *sure, that's fine.* When self-made cuts appear on my wrists *let me put some Neosporin on that.* When I stop shaving my legs like the other girls *you can't go out in those legs.* When I ask mom to join me at the first endocrinologist appointment *no, it's just sad.* When I ask her to call me by this new name *I'm never going to call you that.* When I wake up in the morning to empty the drains protruding from my armpits *let's go in the bathroom, grab a solo cup.* When I tell her that my old name breaks me *why didn't you just tell me?* When I show her a picture of the love of my life *he's cute! Can't wait to meet him!* When I tell her we want to adopt, like her and my dad did in 1999 *That's lovely! Will you go international or domestic?* When you tell your mom how much you love this man you now plan to marry When you tell her that you want to have a baby with him When you tell her you want a baby to have lip freckles like his *Do you know if it's even possible? What about the drugs you are taking? Will you have to stop them? Pregnancy affects your body in ways you don't expect and it's not the same after. Are you getting married? Marriage gives you legal benefits. Is AJ willing to support you for a while? It's a lot to think about!*

Aarron Sholar

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Kashmir

by Dara Higgins

The old man swam out of his death and broke the surface of consciousness. It would be the last time. I was on the bedside vigil, so he fixed his look on me. The eyes had this yellow, porcelain quality, veined like the cistern of an old jacks in a rundown pub, but there was a clarity that was missing this last while. We'd been expecting him to cop it for a couple of days, but he was a stubborn bollocks, not easily given to expectation.

“I killed a woman,” he said. “And a child.”

I was ill prepared for this valediction, and with scant regard for my discomfort he continued.

“A wedding, up by the border. Sligo it was. Barney Culloty's wedding. Good man, Barney, fine head of hair. And the girl? Mary, probably. Sure up in Sligo they were all Marys. Fine calves. Good strong breasts. You could hang a wet duffel off them. Here's me remembering it like it was yesterday. 1970 maybe. I was driving home after. That's when it happened. Fell asleep at the wheel. What can you do?

“My nose was mush. I told youse all it was a hurl to the face. A small lie in the grand scheme of my fibbing. No, no hurl. Not the strong arm of some Kerryman on a boggy pitch in the autumn rain. It was the hard reality of the steering wheel broke it. No such thing as airbags. Them days we agreed you either died or you didn't. No cheating death with your seatbelts and SUVs and ambulances. You took the risk. Sometimes you paid the price.

“I followed the tyre tracks, burned into the road with the braking. Through a ditch, down an embankment, and there was the other car, its rear sticking out from the water still, being sucked under slowly, the hazard lights blinking like a buoy. I took off my boots and socks and waded in. The water was a cold hand making a fist around me bollocks. Murky in the water, but lit by the headlights, greenish, dreamlike. The woman was looking at me. Her hair was a strange dance about her head. Slow motion. Blonde she was. There was a bruise on her forehead and her eyes were open, this look of surprise. She was dead, alright. Probably the head got her before the water.

“The child. Strapped into its little seat in the back. The child had no chance. The little round face on her.”

The sick was in my mouth. I heaved and threw a hand to my face to stop it. I was choking on it. Puking with shame and pain. It ended up in the old man’s bin, along with the tissues and pill wrappers and the detritus of dying. The pain blossomed in me, bright and glowing. I felt as if I was being deconstructed. Here we were at the old man’s deathbed and I’m stealing the show. Look at me, writhing in agony.

“And after, sure what was there to do? There was no saving them. So I drove, on a banjaxed axle and a flat tyre, in the dark with no lights. Four, five miles. Until I found an abandoned farm. I drove into the barn and I hid the car, and I walked. I walked to a town. Cloon or Clone or Clam or Crone or.”

And he was out of it again, spit bubbling the corners of his mouth, breath short and ragged. The smell off him, like he was rotten already.

At the funeral I wondered if people were interchangeable. All of them could be anyone else. Uncle Neville, dyed black hair blue in its tint, his pale skin a papery map of broken veins. Any jovial alcoholic could take his place and mumble incoherently into my ear, flecking my shirt collar with spittle. Aunt Jean, her prissy dissatisfaction carved into the hard earth of her face. “Would you not have gotten up and said a few words for your father,” she said. I would in my fuck, Jean, I said. My entire life there’s been a Jean in the background, hovering like silent fart. We’d conversed maybe 30 times. And not one utterance was memorable. Any sour faced old one in M and S black could fit the bill.

My kids could be any kids. Anthony outside the church with his newly shaved neck, his puffy jacket. He wore his best tracksuit to the funeral. I’ve seen him and his cohort outside the shops and I failed to pick him out of the throng. Adele, seventeen now, was a stranger to me. She moved diffidently about our house, communicated in sighs. She dwelt in the bathroom, examining the mirror, imagining for herself a different face, or new hair, or skinnier clavicles. She deigned to talk only to admonish me for cavorting on the wrong side of history, as if history was a railway line, linear and sensible, cutting through the vast expanse of human achievement and stupidity. At the funeral she took a picture of her streaked mascara to send to her friends. The children’s presence is felt in its absences – a lack of conversation, or an empty plate by the television, food missing from the fridge, money missing from my wallet, doors left open, draughts funnelling in.

My wife, Sarah, ensured glasses remain charged, sandwiches did not go uneaten. When I first brought her home, two decades ago, my mother said, “she’s the one,” which appeared prescient, but she’d said it three times prior and the other times it proved false. Would have made any discernable difference to my life if I married one of the other three? Miriam. Or June. Or what’s-her-name with the legs. We’d split up for

solid reasons. Career, booze, incompatible libidos. Miriam needed the ride twice a night. Unsustainable.

My sister, over from England, where she worked for the NHS. She chided me on my posture. Damn you, Audrey, can you not see I'm eviscerated by worry. It has me worn. Her husband was an English man, skinny and beige, his accent vague, his manner apologetic. After his commiserations, he'd moved on, and I'd be hard pressed to remember a single discernable trait of his. Why Audrey married him, I couldn't tell you. I hardly knew the woman.

I watched Sarah as she passed around a plate of sausages. Everyone agreed they were excellent sausages. A good looking woman, still, but years since we'd fucked each other. I blamed the pills the doctor had me on. They're fierce for the cock-blocking. Not that Sarah complained, on the other side of the bed, a continental quilt away, glad of the peace. There was a smattering of other mourners, oldsters, in stasticky black polyester and stained shirts. My father didn't have many friends left. They were all dead, like himself, like my mother. Like a mother and child in a car in a river in 1970.

3.

In my youth, I rebelled. In college I was stoned for a year. Needed to repeat a few exams. Himself wasn't best pleased. I told him to get fucked, because this was my life. Ideally there was somewhere between his austerity and my dissolution. I worked in the kitchen of a hotel for a while, which had me onto the cocaine, and a period of penury in a cold bedsit got me off it again. There's only one drug for living in the secularity of squalid cold; booze.

The booze was the end of a few relationships. June and I had a co-dependency thing. "She's the one," said my mother when I brought her over for Sunday dinner. June, slumped over

her plate of spuds and peas, halfway through the second bottle of Chilean Cabernet. She wasn't the one. The break-up brought sobriety, and I returned to college. Audrey was off on her travels, bright eyed and blonde haired, the careless swagger of a youngest. "Would you not give Australia a try," the Mother asked me. Jesus, it sounds like hell on fucking earth, Ma, I replied and Himself laughed. "We agree on something," he said. "It only took a quarter of a century." I received a H Dip. I became a teacher. I taught bored teens history, both the right and wrong sides. I met Sarah in the staff room on my first day. She taught English. Religion sometimes. I took the odd P.E. class. Once a child died on the cross country, but I was exonerated. He'd an undiagnosed heart condition already. "Matter of time," said the principal, a hand on my shoulder. Sarah consoled me by showing me her tits. A breakthrough in our relationship. We fucked for the first time in the supply cupboard, dislodged some paperclips, scattered some copybooks in our ardour. This was an evening, the school emptied and quiet. We weren't mental, looking to be found by a scandalised fifth year and fired. Sensible head on us. "She's the one," said the mother when I brought her over, like a stopped clock who speaks truth the odd time. I was respectable, I wore a jumper. I no longer bought from the New World, 7.99 shelves. I'd a penchant for Amarone. We were married, sure why not. As thirty approached I bate down the door of suburban numbness, begged to be let in. Quiet desperation was all I was after, a life unexamined. The respect you garner as a teacher in the local secondary is nil, or close to, but the summers were indolent. My father ceased to be a presence until the children were born, and the Mother and Himself would coo over them and feed them soft cakes. I watched him, sitting in his garden, shouting matey advice as the two kids played football on the lawn. "Use the elbow. Dig it in there. Good girl. Ah, would you stop the tears. Tears won't win you the All-Ireland." How he'd laugh, the joy it gave him. So unlike his manner with me. I understand it now. He was burdened, and he needed me to be

strong, because in time, he would pass the burden to me, and like a bushel-laden mule, I'd carry it on for him.

4.

I was having these dreams. Nightmares involving a car in a river. I'd find myself walking into the water, where the light was green and the weeds were willowy, and I'd swim down to the car and there she was, this woman with blonde hair. She'd scream at me, bang her balled up fists on the windscreen. I'd try and rescue her, and I'd feel the ache in my lungs and the vision would go on me and I'd wake up in a sweat. Sleep was a prick like that. My eyes were red and bulged out of my head. I was on the whiskey regular.

5.

I'm on a mission, I told Sarah, and it may take some time. My father gave it to me, on his death bed. "And when will you be back," she asked and I didn't know, was the truth. "Would there be a sense that maybe you didn't come back at all?" she asked, and I agreed. That could be a notion. "Probably for the best." We hugged, desperately, like they were filling lifeboats next to us, women and children first, history teachers dead last. Her heart beating hard, reminding me of Bonham kicking a drum. The power in it. I'd say I was excited a bit too, starting a journey, like Bilbo fucking Baggins or one of them fellas.

6.

I spent a lot of time and a few quid researching old newspapers looking for news of a fatal crash. I searched marriage records to find out when Barney Culloty was married. I scoured in vain for a Bernard Culloty, or a Brendan Culloty but Barney's real

name was John. Whereof he acquired the moniker Barney I'll never know. Barney checked out himself over twenty year ago. A brief, overeager cancer in the pancreas. I found his obituary without much bother. No mention of a car in a river, a baby still strapped to its seat.

All Irish newspapers did in the seventies was report death, as if nothing else ever occurred in the country. Death was an industry, death was entertainment. Pages and pages of obituaries. The local butcher, Jimi Hendrix, De Gaul, some lad who fell in a slurry pit, thousands of poor souls in an earthquake on the other side of the planet, good Christians all. Pages of death. No mention of a car pulled from a river, a drowned baby within, blue and bloated and dead.

Was this a final, cruel joke? Father wasn't renowned for his humour, not a man for the spirit of Christmas. "I'm not into that kind of thing, Adele," he'd say to my mother, her standing there holding one end of a flaccid cracker. And would you see him with a silly paper crown on his bonce? You would not. Maybe I had him wrong. Maybe his entire life was a joke, and he'd played us all. Perhaps, knowing me as he did, he expected my mind to unravel with the gnaw of this unscratched mystery. He was right.

I drove north. There was one CD in the car. Physical Graffiti, disk one. On a loop. Loud. You'd feel the marrow in your bones vibrate, and thoughts were obliterated. In this manner we ate up road, the car and I. I found the church in which John "Barney" Culloty wed Mary "Mary" MacBride in August 1970. I stood in the aisle that she walked down, the worn and polished stone beneath my feet. I pictured her proud father, fat and redoubtable, beaming with pride. A mother mopping a tear. A clutch of young men to one side, supping from bottles of Guinness. My father among them. His suit unkempt, his hair awry, his eye on the wobbling arse of a bridesmaid. Voluptuous she may be, he'd not be swayed from

his drinking that night. The hotel where my father had taken a clatter of pints was gone, a supermarket car park in its place, half full of anxious mothers stacking up nappies and fizzy pop.

I stayed in a B and B and I pored over a map. An old one, paper and ink, the kind we used to have in the car for when we got lost on excursions to the old country. “The roads here are temperamental,” Himself used to say. “They’re moody, they move around. They’re sneaky.” He was forewarning me, telling me nothing can be trusted, not history, nor memory, nor roads, nor even that which is in front of your face. I examined the lines on the map. I made notes. I drove. I stopped by rivers, looking for clues. In the intervening decades roads were widened and fixed, barriers built. Houses popped up here and there. The map was a tapestry of mistruths, which would disappoint the boys and girls in Ordinance Survey. A life hunched over a desk drawing wavy lines on paper and for what? For some local politician to dig it all up, to redirect, to bypass. Nowadays we look at our phones. A satellite above us takes a picture, in real time. In the golden days of mapmaking the OS lads would put a deliberate mistake on their drawings as a kind of trademark. A ghost farm, or a tiny hillock that wasn’t there. Google Maps shows us every human mistake created in marvellous, vertiginous detail.

Nothing was the way it was fifty years ago. Debate the merits of that all you want, but it didn’t help me uncover the truth. I stopped in small towns and stayed in neglected guesthouses, slept under damp blankets that smelled of the past. Sausages, rounds of toast, bad coffee. During the day I walked the fields, examining the grey bones of skeletal farmhouses, abandoned decades before. The gaping skulls of cottages. The tangled mystery of ditches. My beard grew out. The school phoned. They’d reasonable enquiries about whether I’d return any time soon, term having kicked off with its usual gusto, halls filling with pubescent vigour. I threw the phone into a pond. They’d replace me and the pupils wouldn’t notice.

I drove to the next county. The colour of the flags attached to the telegraph poles changed from red to yellow. I'd been on the road a couple of weeks.

I stopped in a town with a castle at its centre. The castle drew in the odd tourist, and all local industry pointed towards it. A small hotel called The Castle Inn. The Castle Newsagents. A Polish shop. A youngfella selling grass outside the Centra, a fistfight by the grotto. A veritable metropolis by recent standards. I was ready for it. Isolation wrote new lines across my brow and I was talking to myself more than usual. I entered the closest boozier. An old, panelled bar, authentically seventies, unchanged in fifty years. The carpet threadbare and the walls yellow. An open fire crackled, there was no television. Cosy, I'd say that for it. And quiet. I ordered a whiskey and a toasted sandwich. The woman who served me looked sick of my shit already. Her hair long and chalk white, her jumper smelling of turf. Her face round and pale, skin soft. I said, did you ever hear of a crash near here, a woman and child. Into a river. They'd have not survived, now.

“Why on earth would you want to know about a thing like that?”

I'm on a mission from my dead father.

“Does he communicate from beyond the grave?”

Don't all our parents, once they're gone.

She thought about it, then went about her business, serving the afternoon alcoholics. There was a reverent quietude amongst us drinkers, a respect for the hours wasted, like being graveside at your own funeral, listening to your own eulogy.

7.

I dozed off. When I opened my eyes she sat on the other side of the table to me, and a bottle of Paddy between us. She poured.

“Catherine,” she said. “Everyone calls me Cat. You might as well too. This is my pub. What knowledge are you after?”

It spilled out of me, like she’d struck it lucky on a miserable fruit machine. Clink, clink the useless currency of my words, my father, his deed, my life having no meaning, or its architecture comprised of a cod. Once talking, I couldn’t shut myself up. Glad to share the burden. I expected nothing from her in return for this deluge of self-regard, but she listened.

She took time to have a drink while she considered my tale. Then she spoke.

“There’s a story, a farmer who lived on the hill. A few head of cattle and a field of sheep. The usual. You wouldn’t be growing much on this ground. And he with a young wife and child gone missing. The local understanding was she’d travelled north, gotten the ferry, disappeared to the mainland. Or he’d killed her and the child both, and had them hid somewhere. The point being, they were never seen again.”

And is there a body of water nearby?

“The lake,” she said.

I felt Marlowesque, Spadian. Can you show me? I asked

8.

In the morning she left the running of the pub to a moon faced youth called Barry who owned strapping arms the size of Doric columns and I drove us out to the lake. It wasn’t a short drive, slow and trembling, on tracks comprised of bad ideas and craters. As I drove we were silent, each within their own head.

The lake was grey, surrounded by stunted trees. Illness in the air. Cat told me they built a factory on the far side in the eighties and it spent a decade poisoning the water until going out of business and over the next decade crumbled into a pile of bricks. We saw its shapeless outline against the low sun on the far bank. There were no fish left, there were no birds. There were no rabbits, no rats. Eerily silent, as if the breeze was also killed off. I asked, what were they manufacturing?

“There’s the irony,” she said. “Fertilizer.”

There might as well be a fleet of cars buried in the lake’s silt, a Spanish galleon, a brigade of Napoleonic Frenchmen. The surface was mute to us. A squad of frogmen would find nothing down there but disappointment and my pockets were full enough with that.

We got into the car and I drove slowly along the road, watching out for old farm houses. The sky reddened and the cold drew in. I turned down the driveway of one last ruined farm. On our day driving over these roads we’d not seen another living being. No humans, no animals, nary a bird in the sky. I wondered if there were worms in the sods beneath my feet.

I stood in the courtyard of the old farm. The house to one side, pane-less windows blackened by fire, gawping. The roof collapsed years back. The house’s rooms piled with rubbish, old barrels and black sacks. Brambles had taken the barn. We walked as close as we could. Farm equipment, rusted and as red as the sky. Grass five feet tall. Well, Cat, I said. I have enjoyed today, but I’ve wasted our time in terms of answers.

She grabbed hold of my arm and pointed. “What’s that?” she said. Enough light slanted in to see a bit of a car under some rotten tarp. Worth a look, I said. I wouldn’t hold out on the hope.

In order to check out this car-shaped lump under the tarp I first negotiated with the thorny branches. I hadn't brought a machete so they held the upper hand. They reckoned not with my brute obstinacy. Gouging thorns tore at me. They stung. They caught on the fibres of my clothing. I walked through them as if they were mist. I felt tendrils reach for me, grab at my face. I didn't care.

I saw the tyres on this yoke, rubber eaten by time. The rust having its fill. I pulled at the tarp but it was a heavy sleeper, unwilling to leave its bed. Yet again, my ignorant want won out. I reefed it from the car. And there she was, this relic, this artefact, some manner of ancient Ford. Fifty years old? Possibly. I moved to the front and examined. The headlamps were smashed. Time and children could have done that, you say. The dents suggested a crash of some sort, but have you seen the fellas and the way they drive here. A dentless car is some kind of foppish affectation. The windows were opaque with filth, the handles rusted shut. I picked up some implement and swung at the glass, shattering it. Tutankhamen's seal broken. Carter on the verge of enlightenment, the culmination of a life's work. What treasures within? What evidence there? What questions answered?

9.

Later, in bed, we made love. I don't know what else to call it. We didn't fuck, there was no percussion, no rock and roll, it was diaphanous and soundless. It wasn't the act of love passing from one person to another, rather a parcel of kindness to oneself. We were propelled together by tangible loneliness, this matchmaker between us both, saying, *well why not*, and *who else will there ever be*. We'd returned to the pub, late, the place closed and the embers in the hearth glowing still. We'd ascended the stairs wordlessly, slowly, gently undressed each other, careful not to leave a bruise. Between the sheets we

melled, joined, passed through each other, almost without effort, our essences sieved and reconstituted. A kind of melting. I don't remember the physical sensation of the release, instead a spreading warmth, ripples across some inner sea within myself. Just this communication with our flesh, reaching out, saying, this is me. This is all of me. There is no more of me. I begin and end here. We were breathing harder, because we're old, she and I. Our bodies had no angles, no sharp edges, our bones brittle and soft within the sac of our skins.

She said,

“So your father never killed those two on the flit, the ma and the child.”

And I asked how she knew this with such certainty but I already suspected. The child in the car was her. You could have said that earlier, I said, and saved us a journey.

“I'd not stop you making the journey,” she said.

Finish the story. What happened to the farmer? I said.

“He lived with the stigma of an absent wife. Either there were the accusations he'd done away with her, dropped her down a well or fed her to the pigs, or else the ignominy of letting her escape. It didn't sit well with him and he threw a rope over one of the rafters in the barn and went for a swing. Only after he died did we return. The looks we got. Like we were ghosts. The shame of the neighbours who persecuted him with their gossip and the hate towards my mother for the temerity of her escape. What was left of the farm, we sold. Bought this place. My Ma sat on the wrong side of the bar and proceeded to drink herself to an end. Some piece of work to watch. The dedication she showed. The local sots appreciated it. The landlady, one of their own. No upbringing for a young teen as myself, but some education all the same.”

I contemplated this and watched the morning's light slide through curtains and illuminate the room. She asked me what was in the car. Nothing, I said. Not a thing. Fifty years of dust, of mould, of bird shit.

“And what were you hoping to find?” she asked.

10.

The old pub creaked as it rested. Lights blinked on and off at random. Subsidence was general. I fixed what I could for bed and board. Some days I'd sit behind the bar and serve the dipsos. I didn't learn their names, no point. One alcoholic is much like the next. The lads were still and quiet, and all time slowed to their pace. We sat in our quiescence, unwilling to disturb the calm of it. This was life, the waiting, the watching, the tally of minutes spent on this revolving earth and the sup followed by the sup til the sun goes down and up it comes again, and you're alive yet. Breathing still. And isn't that, in some small way, a triumph?

At night we'd lie in her bed, formless and warm. The days emanated a fantastic sameness, lucid, unhurried. I was off the pills, lean, bearded. There was a Warren Ellis quality to my gait. I sloped into rooms like I had some manner of talent.

A year or two passed before I headed in the direction of what used to be home. I'll be back in a few days, I said to Cat and she shrugged like it didn't matter, and maybe it didn't. Everything would be as I left it when I returned, if I returned. I drove the lanes and roads and finally the major artery of the motorway. The traffic was belligerent. The actions of driving returned to me mechanically, movements I knew by heart. I drove without thinking, without needing to involve myself in the process.

Sarah was a good woman, a good teacher. The kids respected her. She was principal material, the board agreed. We'd had a good life, I thought, with the trappings of moderate success; a reasonable mortgage on a reasonable house with a reasonable garden, reasonable holidays, reasonable children. It wasn't all gravy, but. She had an affair with the head of the Maths department. McDavitt. He was a louche fellow, elongated and angular, like one of his equations. I didn't see the attraction myself. After she came clean to me, we'd patched things up as best we could. I said, *I forgive you* and, *I can change*. I tried to make amends, appropriating the guilt and blame. I sensed her disappointment at me. I should have raged, or left, or fucked Allison from Home Ec, who'd occasionally flirted with me when we were on yard duty together. I did none of these things.

The truth of my forgiveness was indolence, fear of change. Leaving the house and getting somewhere new to live, rents what they are. Trying to work out some kind of system for the children. It seemed like such work. I was a soulless, heartless, a man without direction, without a spark. A shell. The kind who said "I don't mind" for fear of upsetting anyone with my opinion. My aversion to conflict ruined our family. I saw that now. I wasn't the flexible, easy going one after all. I was the obstinate, unmoving boulder of indifference at the heart of our home.

My limbs read the undulations of city traffic independently of me. My hand flicked the indicator before I knew where I was, my foot on the clutch before I realised I was stopping. I parked the car on my old street and watched my old house, the windows bright with lights, the evening about us now. I watched my wife dance with another man in the sitting room, under a new lampshade, the freedom of their movement, the happiness in their sways. She'd a new hairstyle, and it suited her. The man was leading, which was how she liked it.

He had the precise, stilted style of a mathematician, every step a formula, nothing left to chance. I watched my daughter, walking down the street holding hands with a young man. She'd grown into a woman, her hair long, a sensible adult coat on. I watched my son approach and exchange some complicated handshake with my daughter's man. They entered the house, laughing. I watched them through the window, in the sitting room, bathed in warm yellow light, laughing and smiling and talking, for hours, until I realised, this was not my house, this was not my family. I'd forgotten where I lived.

Dara Higgins

Dara Thomas Higgins is a writer and musician from Ireland's windy and old east coast. He writes television, radio, stories and endless lists of complaints. He's been published in theshortstory.co.uk, Storgy, the Bohemyth, Iota Magazine among others and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In collaboration with artist Eoin Whelahan, he placed second in Ireland's first Graphic Short Story contest, as chosen by Kevin Barry. They were robbed.

Tidal Disruption Event

by Katherine May

“Stop checking out my ass,” Miranda said as she climbed the ladder to the lighting booth, still in her Pink Lady costume.

“Shut up, Randy,” Lucy gritted out, wincing as she climbed behind Miranda in her show blacks. *But now that you mention it.*

Lucy shook her head quickly, wiping out the thought like an Etch a Sketch drawing. This kind of internal recognition of obvious female sensuality would have turned her into a shaking, sweaty bundle of raw nerves if it were any other girl. But the thought that Miranda clearly had a nice ass just made Lucy smile at the ridiculousness of it all. She might even have admitted it out loud if not for how much Miranda would have loved it.

The sophomore class had just finished its last performance of *Grease*, and Lucy and Miranda had decided to go to their favorite hiding spot to pregame before the party at Julia Everson’s house.

Lucy was already dreading it.

Her interactions with girls at school were always charged with a venomous discomfort. From an early age, the constant fraying of her expectations of herself from reality left her feeling raw and mean. She had quickly gained a reputation for being moody and unapproachable.

But things with Miranda were different. Miranda had no patience for pretense or pleasantries, and she had made it clear

from day one that she liked Lucy as is; she didn't give a shit about who Lucy thought she should be.

Lucy found the honesty refreshing and terrifying in equal measure.

"Alright, let's see it," Miranda said once they were both standing in the booth.

Lucy sighed and turned around, lifting her long-sleeved black Henley to reveal the fresh bruising between her shoulder blades. *Please don't. Please don't. Please don't.* As soon as she felt Miranda's fingers brushing the skin of her back, she pulled her shirt down and turned back around.

"No offense, Lu," Miranda sat and took a swig from the flask she kept in the inner pocket of her pink satin Rizzo jacket. "But your dad's a real son of a bitch."

"No shit." Lucy sat down across from her and grabbed the flask for herself. Expecting Miranda's usual tequila, Lucy's insides revolted at the first touch of scotch to her palate. It tasted of burned and bitter things in a way that reminded her too much of home.

Hal Stanton hadn't always been a violent man. Still, he was a miserable one, and lately, that misery was manifesting in his interactions with his daughter. That morning, he'd started drinking before eight. Lucy argued with him over something trivial and before she knew what was happening, Hal had shoved her—hard—into a dresser. For a moment, everything had been still. Lucy hadn't cried, and Hal hadn't apologized. Then it was over.

"Gimme your hand," Miranda said, although she was already grabbing at Lucy's fingers with her left hand. She pulled out a bottle of black nail polish with her right and shook it.

“Oh, Hal’s gonna love that.” Lucy groaned, then took another half-hearted gulp from the flask.

“Fuck him.” Miranda grabbed the flask and took a long swallow before tucking it away and resuming her work on Lucy’s nails.

There weren’t many things that could be considered “endearing” about Miranda, but this was one of them. She never tried to put makeup on Lucy or offer to lend her any clothes, but she always insisted on painting Lucy’s fingernails before going out.

And there was something almost tender about Miranda, human battering ram, taking the time to sit still and hold each of Lucy’s hands in hers, delicately adding a bit of color to the nails Lucy always kept clipped baby-short to keep from biting them. It was the most intimacy Lucy had ever experienced with anyone, and she suspected it might be for Miranda, too, despite her carousel of conquests.

When she finished with Lucy’s nails, Miranda started on her own, and Lucy got hold of the flask again. While the scotch still settled sourly in her gut, she was counting on it to burn away some of her anxiety about the party.

“Do we really have to go to this thing?”

“What? Worried about your fan club?” Miranda wiggled her eyebrows but kept her focus on her hands.

Julia Everson was the star of the Drama department (although Lucy was sure Miranda would dispute that). She was perky, pretty, and popular enough for their circle of theater geeks and band nerds. But for some unknown reason, she was constantly making a point of paying attention to Lucy—greeting her, questioning her, complimenting her.

Lucy, who had only become a stagehand to avoid going home after school, was pretty sure it was some kind of

elaborate prank. She bristled under Julia's microscopic focus. It was embarrassing and annoying and confusing, and Lucy was always complaining about it. Miranda, on the other hand, thought the whole thing was hilarious.

After a while, they climbed back down and went to change their clothes in the girls' dressing room. Miranda started stripping as soon as they passed behind the curtain that led backstage. *Typical*. Lucy swore it had to be the scotch more than anything else that made the heat suddenly blossom in her chest. She cast her eyes down and slid into the adjoining bathroom with her gym bag.

She'd bought a dress especially for this party, though she still couldn't quite articulate why. Fern green linen with tiny pink flowers embroidered on it. The hem barely brushed the tops of her kneecaps. It wasn't the sort of thing she'd normally wear. Most days, Lucy's style could best be described as "nondescript." And most days Lucy liked it that way, the anonymity of it. But every once in a while, she still aspired toward a certain effortless, carefree, Audrey Hepburn girliness; an archetype that had implanted itself in her psyche almost from birth.

It was never really in the cards for her, though. She'd suspected it as early as middle school but was certain by junior high. It wasn't just her body—boxy in places that should have been curved, round in places that should have been lean. There was also her utter inability to inhabit the role. She didn't understand a great many things that seemed to come so naturally to other girls, and not just in terms of the hair and the makeup and the clothes. Other girls just seemed to have a whole *modus operandi* that Lucy had somehow never been let in on, a way of knowing when and how certain things were supposed to be done.

Regardless, she still felt the need to try from time to time. And looking at herself in the mirror now wearing the dress, she

realized there was a certain anonymity in this, too. A certain protection. Sometimes it just made things easier on everyone—including Lucy—when things looked the way they were supposed to.

Then Lucy reached to brush a strand of hair out of her eyes and saw the black fingernail polish in her reflection. *Yep. That seems about right.* Any hope of achieving the illusion she was going for was shattered. So Lucy compromised with herself; decided to keep her black high tops on and get on with it.

Back in the dressing room, Miranda was waiting, arms folded across her chest, hip cocked against the makeup counter that ran the length of the room. She was all dark eyeliner, ripped jeans, and disaffection. A perfect boy-girl James Dean character, above all the rules Lucy was still trying to learn, much less play by. If she was surprised at all by Lucy's uncharacteristic look, she didn't say so. There was only the slightest upturn at one corner of her mouth that vanished as soon as it appeared. "Ready?"

As they walked out of the auditorium and into the school parking lot, the clear, crisp night air overpowered Lucy. She breathed it in with slow, deep breaths, praying it would cut through the scotch fire burning through her. Face turned skyward, she spun slowly, shins twisting and sneakers stumbling over each other as she worked to locate and trace the contours of Orion.

Meissa. Betelgeuse. Bellatrix.

This kind of cosmic daze was not uncommon. It came over Lucy almost every time she exited the auditorium or a movie theater or a house party at night. Any time indoor shared experience gave way to outdoor, nocturnal introspection.

Alnitak. Alnilam. Mintaka.

She was pulled out of her celestial prayer-mantra by the sound of Miranda honking her car horn. “Come on, baby doll. Don’t tell me you’re getting star-goofy on me already.”

Star-goofy. Lucy smiled at Miranda’s use of the invented compound adjective, coined last summer when Lucy had fallen over backwards and hit her head trying to spot Saturn in the night sky over Miranda’s parents’ lake house. *But wait—*

“Baby doll?” *That’s definitely a new one.*

“Just get in the damn car already.”

She gave one last, quick look at the sky: *Saiph. Rigel. Amen.*

On the ride to Julia Everson’s house, the atmosphere shifted again. Lucy made Miranda play “Crazy on You” at full blast on repeat over the car stereo. The words *hurtling toward certain doom* kept popping up in her mind beneath the song’s lyrics. Not knowing what else to do to protect herself, she folded into a tight knot of limbs and pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the passenger window, drinking from the flask in sharp, poisonous sips.

It wasn’t that she hated Julia; it was just so exhausting to be around her. Julia was composed, but delicately so, as if just beneath the calm, porcelain surface of her skin lay something beautiful and awful. A swirling, raging storm that—were it to be released—would raze all of Lucy’s defenses and swallow her whole.

She knew it didn’t make sense, but this inexplicable quality about Julia made Lucy’s throat constrict whenever they were together. Her skin would prickle, and tears would well in her eyes. It was something akin to the worst allergic reaction imaginable, like she was drowning inside her own head. And yet, there Julia would be, just smiling and laughing as if nothing were at all the matter.

What made it even more infuriating was that Lucy didn't know if Julia was oblivious to the effect she had. Sometimes it was easy to imagine her being purposefully obtuse about it, flaunting it—but never acknowledging it—just to watch Lucy squirm.

Like a white hole.

“What?”

Lucy hadn't realized she'd said anything out loud, but Miranda was already turning the radio down to hear better. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to rerun this absurd train of thought with an audience.

Screw it. It's definitely not the weirdest thing Randy's ever heard me say. “Have you ever heard of a white hole?”

Lucy watched as Miranda's pupils slid sidelong in her direction, her right eyebrow cresting into a perfectly sculpted arc.

“It's not... it's not a euphemism for anything.” Lucy sighed in frustration and started again. “It's a hypothetical. It's like a black hole but inside out, and you can't... All of this light, and everything, a whole universe is pouring out of it... but there's no way to get inside and find out what's at the heart.”

“Ok. I'm cutting you off.” Miranda plucked the flask from Lucy's sagging fist. Lucy groaned but didn't argue. They were pulling off the highway and onto the road to Julia's house anyway.

When Lucy found herself in Julia Everson's living room, the place already felt too crowded. *Awesome. Maybe she'll never even notice—*

“Lucy!” Julia was bounding toward her, her blonde ponytail swinging chaotically in her wake. Her smile was so

wide and so high that it made her cheeks balloon out from her typically angular face, which was flush with, *well, vodka*, if Lucy had to guess, based on the smell of the fluorescent liquid sloshing out of the plastic cup in Julia's left hand.

"Oh, fuck me," Lucy muttered, but Miranda just smirked and nudged her forward before wandering away.

Before Lucy knew what was happening, Julia was wrapped around her right arm, looking up at her with her giant saucer eyes like some kind of demented koala. Lucy wondered where Julia's drink had gone and whether she'd be able to get her hands on one for herself with Julia holding on so tightly.

Julia smiled as though savoring something. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

Lucy felt her throat tightening, the heat rising steadily from her chest to her neck to her cheeks. The scotch sat stagnant in her stomach, unbothered and unhelpful. She tugged at the collar of her dress, then promptly regretted it, realizing it had only drawn more unwanted attention. "Well, Randy didn't really give me much choice."

An almost imperceptible frown flitted across Julia's mouth before she pursed her lips, squashing it. "Ah, Miranda," she said slowly, craning her neck to search the dark recesses of the living room. "I'll have to thank her." She reset her heavily-dilated focus on Lucy, and the rest came out in a tumble of highs and lows. "But then, I don't see where she escaped to. Oh, well. You can thank her for me. You two are like your own little secret society. It's fascinating."

Lucy knew no one understood why Miranda gave her the time of day. She'd never really understood it herself. *But when one of the hottest, richest, scariest girls in school deems you worthy of her free time, you don't ask questions. And you sure as shit don't have to answer any.*

Lucy growled out a terse, “We’re just friends.” It came out angrier and more defensive than intended, but—

Screw it. Let her think there’s something there. Maybe it’ll scare her off.

“Well, of course you are.” It sounded matter-of-fact and not at all laced with sarcasm. In fact, the tone of Julia’s immediate response was so jarring that Lucy had to jerk her head to the side to check for any sign she was being patronized. But Julia wasn’t even looking at her anymore; she was looking in the opposite direction, having jumped conversational tracks to enter some ludicrous debate over what the theme for the Winter Showcase should be. And yet her grip on Lucy’s arm remained steadfast.

Lucy—puzzled, thirsty, and mildly offended—was left to stare blankly at a sloping expanse of skin that ran from behind Julia’s ear, down her neck, to just above her collar bone. *A clean, perfect canvas where constellations could be mapped out in infinite, exquisite bruises.*

Wait, what?

The realization of what Lucy had just imagined herself doing, the violence of it, set off a low boil of nausea in her belly. She looked away, looked anywhere. At her unshaven knees, her stupid shoes, Kevin Findley playing his guitar in the den, a framed photo on the wall of Julia’s family at Center Lake Beach. Then she felt it.

Please don’t. Please don’t. Please don’t.

Julia was brushing the fingers of her right hand down Lucy’s forearm and back up again. Killing her, really, and still not even having the decency to look at her while doing it. On the third pass, a fingertip strayed to what should have been an innocuous spot near Lucy’s wrist, but the sensation made Lucy shiver and let loose a groan she tried to cover with a cough.

Finally, Julia looked back at her, but where Lucy was expecting smugness or seduction, she saw only innocent concern. “Are you alright?”

Down. Up.

“I just need a drink.” *And a sledgehammer.*

“Sure.”

Down. Up.

They were in the kitchen then, though Lucy didn’t remember moving. She shifted her weight from foot to foot just to make sure her legs were still underneath her. Julia handed her a glass of clear liquid. An actual glass and not a plastic cup like everyone else. But the liquid turned out to be water. Lucy was just about to lodge a complaint when that god-awful *down, up* started again.

There were fewer people in the kitchen than anywhere else in the house, and Julia and Lucy stood at the sink with their backs to them all. Lucy drained the glass and set it gently on the counter, though it wobbled momentarily upon its release from her trembling grip. She could feel her pulse in her throat, could feel Julia’s eyes all over her.

This is it. This is when she unzips my skin and obliterates whatever she finds inside. Any second now.

Lucy tried not to react. Through the window above the kitchen sink, she could see into the Everson’s back-yard where an elaborate swing set sat alone in the moonlight. Lucy wondered whether it had been there since Julia was a little girl, whether she ever still used it. Whether she ever swung as high as she could and jumped out of the seat, accepting the pain of slamming to the ground in exchange for the half-second exhilaration of flight.

But probably not. Julia was probably always a gentle, perfect thing, who knew how to French braid her own hair by the time she was seven years old and never skinned her shins once. Never broke a wrist in a failed attempt to learn how to roller skate. Never had to leave a birthday party in an ambulance because her appendix was about to rupture, and no one had even noticed she'd been sick for days until she was vomiting turquoise icing on Matt Sharpe's patio.

She probably didn't have any scars anywhere. Or nightmares. Or things she couldn't think about without feeling like she was having a heart attack.

Lucy was sweating now, her jaw clenched tight. She wanted to break something. To slam her hand in a drawer. Anything to burst the sudden bubble of anger in her chest.

"... pretty." Julia had said something, but in her rage spiral, Lucy had only caught the end of it.

"What?"

"Your dress is so pretty."

Oh, for fuck's sake. She's making fun of me now? Can't she just kill me already?

"Yeah. It was until I ruined it, right?" Lucy scoffed and tried to pull her arm free, but Julia gripped it even harder and frowned sadly.

The bubble did not burst, but it deflated some, and Lucy wanted to apologize but had no idea where to start. In time, though, her breathing slowed, and muscles she hadn't realized were tensed began to loosen. Perhaps sensing the change, Julia leaned her head on Lucy's shoulder. The contact, which should have been explosive, only felt to Lucy to sizzle distantly.

And it was so soft. And Lucy felt so tired.

She was just about to let herself ask if they could sneak outside and sit on the swings when Julia spoke up again. “I think this last performance was my best one, don’t you?”

A bark of laughter escaped her mouth before Lucy could help it. *Of course, she’s only worried about her performance. Giving a better one right now, if you ask me.*

Julia furrowed her eyebrows and asked, “What?”

Lucy wiggled the fingers of her right hand, which were going numb from lack of circulation. *Jesus, how long have we been like this?* “I didn’t really watch the play.”

From the ever-deepening crease between Julia’s eyebrows, it was evident she couldn’t fathom such an atrocity. “Why not?”

“Honestly?” Lucy swiped at a bead of sweat running down the back of her neck. “I think it’s pretty tacky.”

Julia laughed in a way so genuine, yet so light and feminine, that Lucy had to begrudgingly admit to herself it was *fucking delightful*. “Well, of course, you’re right. You see? That’s what I like about you. You don’t lie to spare anyone’s feelings.”

“Only my own, apparently,” Lucy mumbled.

It made Julia laugh again. “You’re so funny. Really. I bet no one even realizes.” The last bit came out as the softest whisper, punctuated by a sudden, single kiss to Lucy’s cheek.

That’s it.

It stung worse than a shot at the doctor. Worse than accidentally stepping in a pile of fire ants. And, of course, Julia had waited to deliver it until Lucy had relaxed enough to allow for the possibility that maybe tonight wasn’t her last night on Earth.

But alright. So be it. Let's go.

She used Julia's iron grip on her arm to pull her into the first unlocked bedroom she could find. From the looks of it, maybe it was Julia's younger brother's room. There was a model of the solar system made from painted Styrofoam balls hanging from the ceiling. Julia's ivory skin glowed greenish-blue in the light cast by dozens of glow-in-the-dark stars.

Lucy couldn't help but laugh. *Well played, universe. Well played.*

"What's wrong?" Julia sounded nervous for the first time, *maybe ever.*

Lucy tried to compose herself but was still chuckling when she turned around to give Julia's shoulders what was supposed to be a reassuring squeeze. "Not a damn thing. In fact, it's almost too perfect." Julia stared at her the way you might look at a madman you were trying to placate, so Lucy tried again. "I'm just star-goofy, baby doll."

Julia opened her mouth, but Lucy couldn't bear to hear another word.

She pushed Julia back against the closed door. Julia gasped and reached behind herself to turn the lock. That small gesture set off a switch that had been lurking somewhere in the back of Lucy's mind. She took a deep breath, and then they were kissing roughly—an indelicate mess of lips and teeth, of fingers tangling in increasingly unkempt hair. Lucy's dress became irrevocably wrinkled where Julia gripped it in her fists.

A star traveling too close to a supermassive black hole will be ripped to shreds, producing a stream of stellar debris, half of which is consumed by the black hole, and the other half of which is expelled, never to return to the clutches of the black hole's gravitational pull.

Lucy suddenly recalled having read that once, though she couldn't remember where.

So maybe not a white hole after all.

She had never kissed anyone before this moment, and it wasn't anything like what she'd imagined. Nothing at all like it was made out to be in all those black and white movies she used to while away her loneliest afternoons. No fireworks. No symphonic overtures. She wondered what it was like for Julia. If there were pyrotechnics and violins anywhere on her end of the deal. Julia was the kind of girl who probably craved those sorts of things, and Lucy was pretty sure she wasn't delivering.

Her hands hung lifeless at her sides, unsure of where or how to touch—or whether she could ask without sounding like a complete idiot. She thought she might cry from the frustration of it all, but then Julia's knees buckled and banged into her legs, and relief washed over her like summer rain. Lucy knew all too well that nothing about this could ever be perfect, but now at least it could perhaps be real.

Her hands found their way. One made its home against a protruding hip bone; the other busied itself with the hem of Julia's faded *Les Mis* T-shirt. It was a start. And when Julia's fingers skimmed the tops of Lucy's shoulders, Lucy could feel that the fingertips on Julia's left hand were calloused. That rough imperfection was the best thing Lucy had ever felt until a moment later, when Julia's blunt fingernails were pressing between Lucy's shoulder blades, unknowingly digging into the line of bruises beneath. The pain of it was delicious in a way that made Lucy happier to be present and awake and alive than she'd been in the longest time.

She buried her face into the crook of Julia's neck and pressed her mouth against the skin there, skin that smelled sugary and damp, like a fresh, white petit four left out in the

heat. All her earlier annoyance and anger, fear and disappointment, melted off, leaving her dizzy with elation.

Suddenly, there was something slick beneath her fingertips, and then a loud moan. Lucy wasn't sure who it had come from. Maybe both of them at once. It was enough to snap her back into reality, enough to make her realize that she had unceremoniously jammed her hand down the front of Julia's jeans.

Everything stopped, and Julia looked up at her, blinking. They both panted hard. Lucy pulled her hand back as if scalded. She tugged at the door, fumbling with the knob until Julia turned around and unlocked it for her, offering an escape.

Lucy scanned the living room for Miranda but couldn't find her. She stomped back down the hall, pounding her fist against every closed door she encountered.

"Let's go!"

"Hold your water, Lu. Jesus!" Miranda appeared in the doorway of the room opposite where Lucy had been. She was pulling her tank top back on. Behind her, Lucy could see a shirtless senior whose name she didn't know sitting on the bed, looking annoyed.

"We have to leave, Randy." Lucy barely recognized the sound of her own voice. *Am I crying?* She wasn't sure. But Miranda seemed sobered by whatever Lucy's face was doing. They walked out of the house without a word to anyone and were in the car heading toward Miranda's house within seconds.

Lucy's right hand was affixed, palm up, to the top of her right thigh. Stiff and unmoving, as if all the bones had shattered. Two fingertips in particular held her captive. They felt sticky and heavy, tainted in a way that at least some part of her knew existed only in her imagination.

I am Lady MacBeth. I am become death.

“Can you at least tell me if you’re okay? Did someone hurt you?” Miranda’s muted voice startled her. She’d forgotten she was in a car, or that Miranda was driving, or that Miranda even existed.

“Huh?” It was like struggling back to a sunlit surface from thirty feet underwater to get back to the moment at hand. “Hurt?” The word sounded foreign.

Spaghettification. That’s what they call the shredding of a star.

Lucy didn’t feel “hurt.” She felt strung out, shredded. Like the black hole that was Julia Everson had finally had its way with her. Could a person really go on living after a thing like that? Or did they just scatter into the heavens like regurgitated stardust?

“Please say something, Lu.” There was no James Dean cool about Miranda now. Perhaps that had somehow been destroyed too. Collateral damage. Now she was just a sharp, blue-white incisor digging into a worried lip, white knuckles at ten and two.

Eventually, Lucy found herself sputtering it out. Fragmented phrases of what had happened from the time they arrived at the party up until those few moments in that starry, locked bedroom. She told it in a straight line, not shying away from the shocking conclusion, but leaving out the parts that truly made her stomach twist—some of them only just remembered in the retelling of it: the fantasized bruising of Julia’s pretty neck, the look of horror and humiliation on Julia’s glowing face in that second before she’d escaped the room, the fact that she thought she heard Julia sobbing behind that still-closed door as they left the house.

Less than twenty-four hours earlier, when Hal had bruised her, Lucy had walked away confident that she owned the moral high ground. But now, thinking of all she'd done, all she'd wanted to do, it suddenly came to her—

She's not the black hole. I am.

At last, in the driveway, Miranda tipped her head back and let out a short breath. "I can't believe you fucking almost fingered Sandra Dee."

Lucy reached for the door handle, enraged, but Miranda grabbed her other wrist, stopping her from bolting.

"Hey, Lu," she said, tugging gently. "It'll be okay. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want. And I'm not gonna tell anybody."

Lucy leaned over and vomited out of the partially opened passenger door.

Katherine May

Katherine May writes about awkward interactions, ambiguous connections, and in-between moments. She lives in New Orleans with her vast collection of increasingly outdated media. Her creative non-fiction piece, "Cut Here," was recently published by Mud Season Review.

Morning Wood Radio

by Xavier Zane Wherley

Shamanistic tendencies evoke
carnal frequencies in the radio
pornography I consume at meals
of off-white and on-white semen.

Sacrosanct microwave crosstreams
distort my consumption of media
with blasphemic orgasm denial
and absurd questions such as:

Has Truthland told a White lie?
Are there peasants in your teeth?
Did you want to finish in or on me?
Was and were, where are they,

and why can I find no trace of them
amongst the gurgling populations
of the present? I am alive with words,
yet I am all alone with them.

I turn off the station and suck in
the static atmosphere forbidding
America from bending back its spine
and fucking itself. “Go ahead” I insist

to it, and the nation bends back as
cautious as a cat stepping into a new
room for the first time. It sticks its head
up its own ass, and I do not retrieve it.

Plastic bags and anal cavities
have similar properties for suffocation;
I stalk the wake held by Mother Britain
from a sedan — my radio blaring.

Xavier Zane Wherley

Xavier Zane Wherley (They/Them) is an emerging author & poet with a Bachelors of Arts in Creative Writing from Capital University. Poetry has been a passion of theirs since high school, and they often write about the topics of gender identity, sexual orientation, & mental illness. Their work has appeared in *Recap*, the literary magazine of their alma mater and will soon appear in an anthology of queer works by *Beyond Words* and in an issue of *Free Spirit* magazine.

The Monument Sweepers

by Kurt Newton

The phone rang just after midnight. Sam Gifford answered the call with his usual equanimity. "Yup. Uh-huh. Got it."

Sam laid his head back on the pillow. He then turned to look at his wife. She slept like a bear in winter. Snored like one, too.

Good for her, thought Sam. No need for the both of them to be up at this ungodly hour.

Sam left the bedroom and quietly closed the door. His work clothes were in the laundry room resting on top of the dryer, neatly folded. He made a quick pot of coffee and filled his thermos before firing up the truck. It was going to be a long night.

Sam met his assistant, Beau Markley, at the scene. Beau was big and strong, and politically indifferent, which made him perfect for the job.

"How goes it?" said Beau.

"Same old, same old," said Sam.

"I hear you. I'll start over there." Beau pointed toward Independence Hall.

Sam nodded. He looked across the plaza. The lights showed a beautiful public park littered with trampled banners and chunks of granite. *They really made a mess of it this time*, he thought.

Sam got in his flatbed and backed it up to the largest of the pieces. He was sliding his gloves on when security pulled up in its trademark black SUV. A thirty-something ex-military stepped out.

"Dropping like flies," said the guard, surveying the damage. He held out his hand. "Jake Piscotti, Triple A Securities. You guys are the sweepers?"

"That would be us." Sam shook the man's hand with equal force. "Sam Gifford. That man over there is Beau Markley. We should have the place cleaned up in a couple hours."

"That fast, huh? Wow, you guys are good."

"Hours suck."

The security guard laughed. "I hear you."

Sam released the winch brake. "Excuse me."

"Sure thing. Don't let me get in the way." The guard stepped back just enough to let Sam squeeze by. Sam walked the winch cable out until he had enough slack. He looped it around the jagged piece of stone laying on the ground and hooked it just below center.

"Yeah, I've been here since it began," said the guard. "They marched in around sunset, bullhorns blazing. There was a small group on the other side who tried to stop it, of course. A couple punches were thrown. Most were just balling their eyes out like it was the end of the world."

"Any arrests?" said Sam, knowing full well that private security cops were nothing more than glorified babysitters. He stood at the flatbed's controls and let the winch slowly pick up the cable's slack.

"Yeah, well, the word from on high was hands off. I know it's destruction of property, but who can blame them? They're just trying set things right again."

Sam nodded. The chunk of granite slid up to the edge of the flatbed's ramp. "This might get a little noisy," said Sam. The security guard winced as the quarter-ton piece of stone crawled up the metal flatbed with an ear-piercing grind.

"You guys don't need anything from me, right?" the guard shouted above the din. "We're good?"

Sam gave him the thumbs up.

Before walking away, the guard added. "Hey, just think. Pretty soon they'll all be down and you guys will be out of a job." He laughed.

Sam laughed right along with him.

"God bless America! And God bless our leader!" The security guard made a gesture of solidarity before getting back into the SUV.

Sam gestured in kind as he watched the guard drive away into the Philadelphia night. Sam refocused his attention on the piece of granite. When the plaza's spotlights hit the stone face just right he could make out what remained of the words chiseled into it:

NO LAW respect
prohibiting the free
freedom of speech
the people peace
the government for

Sam glanced across the plaza. Beau was sweeping up the bits and pieces of glass that was once the Liberty Bell Pavilion. The bell had long since been removed and mothballed in some government warehouse to avoid further vandalism.

Out of a job? thought Sam. He shook his head. *As long as somebody's building something up, there will always be someone to come along and try to tear it down.*

Sam thought of better times as the winch performed its magic. He sipped his coffee. When the piece of granite was dragged as far as it would go, he moved on to the next piece, then the next, until they were small enough to load by hand.

Soon, it was as if the monument had never existed.

He and Beau parted company. It was time to go home, get some sleep. A job well done.

Kurt Newton

Kurt has always been enamored with the short, sharp shock. Before it was called flash fiction, it was referred to as a short-short. Kurt's had many a short-short published over the years. Some are still floating upon the internet in places such as *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Dream of Shadows*, *Radon Journal*, and *Cafe Irreal*. His collection of short stories, *The Music of Murder*, was published by Unnerving Books in 2021. A new collection, *Bruises*, is scheduled to appear this summer from Lycan Valley Press.

Periods

by Emilia LS

I am plagued the memory of you
Pulling your fingers off my waistband
Like they were snakes

Ever since I have imagined us
Having sex against the same wall
Until I come in real life.

Remembering
Is the smallest part of desire
I only want
To go deeper.

Your body pushing back at me
Hungry and I
Wanting to devour all of you

In a place where we have time
Permission. This

Will never happen.

The feel of you on my dripping red body

Curious

For the other battles

You've won.

Emilia LS

Emilia Lehvonen-Shawki is a queer, polyamorous writer from London, UK. She is all about circus arts, liquorice and outdoor swimming. Socially anxious. Sometimes found writing about things she wishes had never happened, and often about things she wishes her mother will never read. Most recently been published by the Wingless Dreamer, Walled Women, and the Travesties Press. She lives with her wife and their demon cat. No such thing as too many notebooks.

Hath No Fury

by Riley Bennett

The motel air conditioning unit came to life and hummed softly, almost drowning out the cicadas' song just beyond the dusty windows. Nora Jane traced the water stains on the ceiling with her eyes, trying to find rorschach shapes in the marks while she was lost in thought. Her feet shifted in the cheap sheets, brushing up against her lover's leg. She sighed happily to herself, content with the premarital act they had just committed.

They met the summer before last. Nora Jane was shelling peas on the side porch overlooking the dirt road while her father chopped wood by the long drive. In the June heat, she had almost thought that he was a mirage wandering down the way. He carried a trunk in each hand, seemingly confused about where he ought to have been going. Nora Jane's father noticed this as well— it wasn't every day that someone came on foot through the tobacco fields.

“You lost ‘er somethin’?” her father called to the stranger. The young man's head snapped towards the voice and nodded, coming closer to their property's fence. Nora Jane put the bucket of peas aside, leaning forward against the wooden railing to get a better look at the newcomer. He had a good, full head of dark hair. She squinted, trying to make out any other features she could. He was taller than her pa, not nearly as strong, though. Given his age and stature, and the way he was completely out of his element, she decided he must've been from a little up north.

Her father spoke in a voice too low for her to hear, before pointing a finger slightly to the right and slapping a friendly hand on the young gentleman's back. Just as quickly as he had appeared, he was back on his way to the east. Nora Jane squealed in protest, her nosiness getting the better of her. She propped herself up onto the porch banister, swinging her feet over, and dropped down onto the grass with a muted *thud*. Her long dress billowed behind her as she ran to her father, demanding to know who the man was and what he was doing around there.

“Oh he's harmless,” he spoke, misinterpreting her fascination for fear. “He's a nephew of the Crawfords, y'know, the folks over yonder?”

“Well of course I know 'em, I only 'bout raised their youngest with all the babysitting they asked me to do three years ago.” Nora Jane's eyes wandered towards the dirt road again, the stranger now completely out of sight. “Did you catch his name, pa?”

“Ambrose,” he started. “I reckon his parents are made of money with a name like that.” His daughter was already lost in thought, however, as she decided that Ambrose was the most beautiful name she had ever heard.

That season she found every excuse to wander to the Crawfords', wanting to get close to Ambrose. She'd spend hours in the kitchen alongside her ma, making peach and blackberry cobblers, casseroles in tinny trays, and the occasional pitcher of fresh lemonade. Each and every time, she'd stroll between the plowed rows of tobacco plants and give a holler over the property fence to Mrs. Crawford to come collect her offerings. It wasn't necessarily a secret that Nora

Jane had her eye on their nephew, and following her first couple visits, it seemed that she caught his attention as well.

They courted ardently, often going into town for coke floats and strolling down main street arm in arm. In the shadows of the southern dusks, they hid in alleyways, kissing and whispering sweet nothings to one another. She found happiness in knotting her slender fingers through his hair and placing gentle pecks on his cheeks. In return, Ambrose often told her stories of his past while running his hands over her exposed arms, always complimenting the soft nature of her skin. Nora Jane learned that he had studied law in Maryland. He had been fortunate enough to land a job at some big firm before he received notice of something happening within his family (what that was, he wouldn't divulge into) that had brought him down to Georgia.

By the end of that first perfect summer, Ambrose asked Nora Jane to marry him with his teeth grazing her neck down some secluded backroad, and she said yes. It wasn't until late into the fall that he had actually asked her father's permission for her hand, but nonetheless, he approved of the union. She was aflutter with excitement, spending the idle moments of her days practicing signing *Mrs. Nora Jane Crawford*.

From where she lied in bed, she could see a glimpse of her wedding dress hanging in the cracked motel closet. Nora Jane slipped out of the blankets and padded over, walking gently on her toes to ensure as little noise was made as possible. She pulled the white frock from its place before tucking herself into the small bathroom and holding the fabric up to herself. In the low, yellow-hued light, she glowed against the mixed tile and wood paneled walls. She slid her nightgown from her narrow shoulders, letting the silk negligee fall to the floor. Slowly, she put the garment on, letting her hands run over the fabric and

exploring the bunches in the skirt. The slight lettuce hem in the bottom brushed the tops of her feet, sending shivers through her limbs at the tickle. She smiled at the reflection in the mirror, gingerly fingering the lace details on her bodice. She had never felt more elegant in her young life.

She stayed there for a long while, watching the faux-satin material move as she swayed back and forth. She pictured herself on her wedding day, Ambrose stood at the end of the aisle, waiting to receive her as his bride. Now, in the early hours of the morning, her attention shifted away from the dress to her own face, flushed with emotions.

She hadn't seen it coming, Ambrose abruptly leaving to attend to a legal matter in Tennessee. He had gotten a call in the winter of that first year from a friend of a friend's firm, and the next evening he was on the train headed north. The image of his dark scarf fluttering behind him resurfaced in Nora Jane's memory, just after he pressed a firm kiss to her temple. She watched him walk out of her life on that same dirt road he walked into it.

Things were fairly normal in his absence, initially. He contacted her from his hotel phone three times a week at first, detailing the case of insurance fraud he was working on. She would hover around her family's landline between four and eight o'clock, practically carving a trench in the wooden floors from her pacing. When she wasn't anticipating his phone calls, she was wedding planning with her ma and Mrs. Crawford, spending long hours at the florist in town trying to decide what flowers to have at the union and tasting cakes from Miss Laurie's little bakery.

Even after about six months, she was so wrapped up in the preparations, she didn't realize that the calls from Ambrose steadily grew shorter, and eventually, less frequent. It wasn't until a thunderstorm kept her idle at home one afternoon that she even noticed the unusual hush from her betrothed. Sitting

and counting the time since their last exchange, she found that she had not heard from Ambrose in nine days.

Her ma assured her that he was just busy with his case, and not to fret; though she knew saying so was futile, as Nora Jane was exceptional at fretting. She spent nights wiping her daughter's tears away when Ambrose would fail to contact, and tucking loose strands of Nora Jane's golden hair back behind her ears. Her pa would watch his wife's attempts from the corner of the room, mouth pressed into a straight line of stress. He knew how young men behaved, and could not bring himself to instill false hope in his only daughter.

Her weeping quickly subsided when the shrill ring would sound in the kitchen. She would rush to her feet and nearly trip over herself to answer. A few times, Nora Jane raised concerns with the stretches between their talks, and Ambrose would assure her that she was being silly, paranoid, and worrying herself sick over nothing. He was simply wrapped up in a mountain of paperwork and meetings, and she should trust him more than that if they were to be married. Following the conclusion of the phone calls, she would feel ridiculous for ever doubting his virtue and love for her. When he would take too long to reach out again, of course, the cycle would start again.

“What's ‘er name?” She demanded into the receiver as soon as he picked up.

“Whoa,” he started, “No hello for your future husband?”

“What is her damn name, Ambrose?”

“I have no idea what you're going on about,” he denied. “You're really doing this again? Can we not have one conversation where you aren't throwing accusations at me?”

“I just-” she started, “I don’t understand why you can’t make time to call me more. There’s somethin’ up. I can feel it.”

“Now darling... why would there be anything wrong? You know I love you, right?”

“Right...” she replied hesitantly.

“And you love me, *right?*”

“Right.”

“So there’s nothing to fuss about. Jesus, Nora Jane, you’re gonna give me a migraine with all of the accusing you’ve been doing lately. Calm down, okay?”

She actually felt a bit better that time, deciding to put all of the worries and jealousy behind her once and for all. Ambrose was going to be her husband, and if she wanted to be a good wife and have a sound home, she needed to start acting accordingly.

She pushed herself to put her mind back onto wedding planning, allowing herself to finally find a gown she found suitable. She, Mrs. Crawford, and her ma cried happy tears together in the boutique, fawning over the young woman in pure white.

It was approximately three weeks after her ma and pa had paid for the dress that an envelope came in the mail from Tennessee. It was addressed to Nora Jane, from Ambrose. She grabbed her personal letter opener, silver with a golden lily of the valley embedded into it, and ripped into the paper out on the side porch, overwhelmed with a mix of excitement and anxiety. He hadn’t said he was sending her anything, and he was due to come back in about two months.

Her sobs echoed across the tobacco fields as she fell to her knees. She clung onto the same banister she had leapt over a year before to support her shaking body. Her pa’s head jerked

up from the farm work he was attending to at the sound of her, dropping everything to rush to his daughter.

Nora Jane,

I hate to write to you like this, but I couldn't bear to say it out loud. I'm not coming back to marry you. On a trip to Louisiana a few months back, I met Charlotte. I brought her back to Tennessee with me and I've been seeing her ever since. I had to tell you because I asked Charlotte to marry me, and she said yes. Don't write back. Don't call. I don't want to see you anymore.

I'm sorry.

Ambrose

It was easy getting him into bed, really. After a couple of seasons passed, Nora Jane began to find some happiness in the day-to-day once more. She spent time reading by the hearth of the fireplace with her ma when the winds turned cold. Her pa was happy to receive her help caring for the animals once more, and Nora Jane got back to baking, never forgetting to walk to the fence to call Mrs. Crawford; an olive branch to show no hard feelings towards her for her nephew's actions.

She would eavesdrop, admittedly, when Mrs. Crawford and her ma sat at the kitchen table and indulged in sweetened iced tea and gossip. They talked about the escapades of young women in the town, their anxieties for Nora Jane's wellbeing, and sometimes, about Ambrose.

Mrs. Crawford rambled on about the details of his union to Charlotte, and Nora Jane's ma was always too polite to badmouth the other woman on her daughter's behalf. According to the neighbor, Charlotte and her nephew were to

be married in the late of July, and that she was to go to Tennessee two weeks before the date to help with preparations.

She praised herself for listening so intently. It was that conversation that solidified her plan of getting him back from Charlotte. When Mrs. Crawford left early in the morning for Tennessee, Nora Jane followed behind her. She tucked her long hair into one of her fathers hats and kept her face cast downward. Just as Mrs. Crawford purchased a train ticket at the station, so did she. Just as Mrs. Crawford got off at Memphis Central, so did she. And just as Mrs. Crawford took a taxi to Columbia, so did she.

She followed her neighbor to a house in the suburbs, which she presumed to be Ambrose's new residence. She was careful to get out of the cab a street over from where she had seen Mrs. Crawford get out of her own, so as to not get caught. She crouched in the bushes across the road, watching the aunt and nephew hug before Charlotte emerged from the house to greet the newcomer as well.

She looked similar enough to Nora Jane to indicate that Ambrose had a type. She had perfectly groomed blonde hair, though Charlotte had beautifully wide hips and a full bosom. Nora Jane ran her hands over her own silhouette and noticed the difference. Thinness and muscle from the fields made up her shape where her competitor had curves.

For hours she sat out of sight, knowing eventually Charlotte would have to leave. It simply wasn't becoming of a young lady to stay over at a gentleman's house before they wed. Mrs. Crawford, on the other hand, was something of concern to Nora Jane. She would either take up temporary residence with her ex fiancé, or, if she was lucky, would check into a hotel that night. While she waited, Nora Jane pulled her knees to her chest and repeated to herself all of the flattery she had once been told by him, wishing for nothing more than to hear those words again. Soft tears washed down her cheeks as

she suddenly questioned what in the hell she was doing. Her parents were probably worried sick with no way to get into contact with her. Her face grew hot with guilt and she began to panic, realizing she hadn't thought this through nearly enough.

Her anguish was interrupted by Ambrose's front door opening, and him bidding a goodbye to both Charlotte *and* his aunt. Nora Jane's heart hammered in her ribs and she pulled herself together, knowing that this would be her chance to take back what was hers. She watched him kiss his new bride-to-be goodbye and hug his aunt once more. The two women climbed into Charlotte's car before turning out of the driveway, and off of his street.

After that, it was simple. Nora Jane knocked on his door, and after the initial shock of his, he actually seemed quite happy to see her. She wouldn't let this moment pass, as it would surely never come again. She moved close to his body, letting her hands linger a little too long to be appropriate. She made sure to flutter her lashes and gaze at him longingly as they sat and made small talk about his work the past year and a half. She repeatedly reminded herself that if he truly did not wish to see her again, he would have asked her to leave— and there he was, seeming to want nothing more than for her to stay.

With each carefully calculated step, she felt him yearning for her. He grew flustered and fidgety, itching to have his hands on her as she played her game, showing him what he let go of through means of flirtation. By the end of the evening, he was practically begging to see her again the following night.

In just one day, the fever between the two had grown so greatly, they barely made it through the threshold. The two fumbled with the room key clumsily while trying to not undress one another in the public eye. Once the door was shut securely behind them, Ambrose unfastened her skirt with such fervor, a few buttons scattered across the floor. He lifted her from her feet, planting her back against the peeling papered walls. Her

foot knocked the room phone from its place on the side table as she moaned in lust for her lost love.

With every heated movement they made, the pain of all of those months throbbed in her belly. She had spent endless hours crying in her ma's arms over him, telling herself she would never love again. Each gasp that escaped from her lips was one of pleasure and relief, as the time spent in agonizing misery was expelled from her.

Nora Jane slowly let her head fall to one side, looking at the way her hair brushed the breast of her gown. She turned off the bathroom light and drifted back into the bedroom. Her pearl dress swished quietly as it rubbed against her thighs, and she combated the sound by taking longer, albeit hushed, strides. Over on the dingy bureau, there was a merlot she had not yet gotten to and a vase of yellow carnations, specially picked from the florist. While she intended to share the wine before they tore into each other, she had no complaints about how the evening turned. She ran her index finger over the edges of a few flowers before she uncorked the bottle, and poured herself a generous glass. She washed the red over her tongue while the events of the previous hours made her cheeks flush. She felt dizzy, mildly intoxicated from just a few sips. A slight giggle bubbled from behind her lips and she clasped a hand over her mouth to silence herself. She started spinning joyfully, watching her skirt twirl with incredible volume around her. It was an indescribable urge she felt to dance, and she indulged herself willingly, pleased with her victory of getting what she had so desperately wanted.

She flitted about the room, her laughter growing more boisterous by the moment. Her bare feet grew warm, rubbing dark spirals into the light carpet. They were growing wetter as she floated around Ambrose's figure in bed. Nora Jane found

it poetic. His blood, the paint, and the floor becoming the canvas on which she made her art.

It was his fault, after all. It showed where her love's real feelings were when he called out Charlotte's name in his climax. That moment, buzzing with fury, it was the only thing she could do to ease the wound his betrayal had carved. She reached to the nightstand for her letter opener, and drove it between his ribs multiple times. He died almost as instantly as he had broken her heart.

Wistfully pouring herself another glass of wine, Nora Jane continued her waltz as the sun rose in through the fogged panes. The lily of the valley on her stained blade caught the rays coming in, scattering flecks of the rusted petals that once were pure.

Riley Bennett

As a 2021 Magna Cum Laude graduate from Appalachian State University, Riley Bennett is working to build a solid portfolio of her own creative works. As a child, Riley was always passionate about writing, which led to her receiving her BA in Creative Writing. In the spring of 2021, she tackled her thesis project at the university, which led to her first major writing project. The thesis contained fictionalized personal accounts of people living in Boone, North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis was published through the University on Google Books, UNCG Library, and NC Docks. In addition to her thesis, she has also had a few poetry publications in the Appalachian State Literary Journal “The Peel.”

Reaping

by Bill Diamond

Sloane Vidar didn't start Friday evening feeling murderous, just skin-crawling bored. Her father taught her that Hell isn't a *particular* place, it's anyplace you don't want to be. Sloane had reached that point in Goodland, Kansas.

A hard run usually purged her darkness. As she stretched, she looked East toward the dusk closing in an irresistible wave. For Sloane, Goodland was corn, flat and tiresome. Small and tight-knit, it was good for the locals. The world here had a black and white simplicity that her young life did not. It was the geographic and cultural opposite of her East Coast home city. She'd been in this alien land four months supervising a number of road construction jobs. Each summer, her company sent their junior engineers to manage small projects around the country. The assignments were developmental training and a form of dues paying.

Restless and craving action, Sloane knew there was little chance for excitement in West Kansas. Goodland's main attraction is a large reproduction of Van Gogh's sunflowers painting. The thirty-two feet tall artwork is mounted on the 'World's Tallest Easel'. It faces Interstate 70 to attract travelers racing through the state. Few stop. The reproduction had a folksy charm, but, like Goodland, seeing it once is enough.

The town was two hundred miles across the empty plains from Denver. Many weekends she'd drive to the city, but the distance was tedious. Tonight, she decided to stay in town. As the season neared it's end, she could catch up on paperwork.

She mumbled to herself, “It’s time to get the hell out of Dodge.” Running combatted mental atrophy and broke the dulling sameness of the land and the job.

After six, the parking lot of her motel home since May was near empty. In September, there were few cross-country tourists spending the night. The business travelers were gone for the weekend.

She jogged North on Highway 27 to warm up. The Western sky was dappled with scattered clouds that held the potential for another fiery sunset display. If they flamed, it was the most enjoyable part of the day. Sloane knew she was in the outback when a fickle sky was her best hope for relief and entertainment. It wasn’t lost on her that even the clouds were racing to be elsewhere. Tonight the sky’s palette was trending blood red.

At Renner Municipal Airport, there was a sharp break between small town and open country. Almost different territories. Sloane ran faster. She turned West at a bullet-riddled sign down a gun barrel straight dirt track. A dusty, working class farm road.

In her mid-twenties, Sloane felt too young to be this world-weary. She knew part of it was being an outsider. She shared little in common with her work crew or the other locals. Here, farming, football and church were priorities. None resonated with Sloane. She was lonely. The empty landscape made it worse. There were only so many motel movies you could watch. Ephemeral social media contacts and brief phone calls with family and friends couldn’t fill the missing person-to-person connection. She looked forward to getting home in a couple of weeks.

A turkey vulture lifted from the adjacent field. It drew her eyes to the bleeding clouds. The sunset made their jagged tops a color-tinged mountain range impersonating the invisible

Rockies. Night crept behind her. Sloane's wheat colored hair was in a low ponytail. It danced with the rhythm of her pace. She wore a white jacket over her grey jersey, and black running tights with reflective stripes. The combination made her visible on the unlit roads. It was hardly necessary as traffic was nonexistent. Houses were scattered. Occasional fields were already harvested.

Ahead, she saw one of her construction sites. Sloane increased her pace to a sprint to work her lungs. She stopped next to the ditch and placed her hands on her knees while catching her breath. She looked around the darkening work site. The excavation to replace a large pipe for a stream crossing was approximately fifteen feet deep. It narrowed in a V from a dozen feet wide to around six to seven feet at the bottom. In the ground level murk, the trench slanted halfway across the road. It was marked by orange cones and diamond-shaped fluorescent warning signs. Heavy equipment and large corrugated pipes rested on the shoulder. If the good weather held, they would be finished here in a couple days. With an uplifting sense that the end was in sight, Sloane continued her run. Tall corn lined the road.

She turned North to complete a large loop back to town. Enveloping twilight descended. The West edge of the clouds burst red and somber purple. The physical effort and the infinity sky display washed away the week's tension.

The sound of a vehicle approaching from behind interrupted Sloane's immersion. She glanced and saw the outline of a pick-up moving slowly. She was visible in the headlights so she continued her pace.

When the truck was almost on her, Sloane waved it past with her left arm.

Instead of moving wide, the pickup blared its horn and swerved toward her.

Startled, Sloane jumped right and stumbled on the gravel twisting her left leg.

As the truck rolled by, the passenger threw an empty beer can at her. He shouted, "Get a horse." followed by a loud and drunken laugh.

Her shock and pain turned to anger. Even for a Friday night, it was early to be smashed. Sloane didn't succeed in supervising a bunch of roughneck construction workers by being a shrinking violet. She gave them the finger and yelled, "I've got your license number, assholes." Her voice carried in the emptiness. She hadn't actually seen the plate, but it might make them think twice before they did this again.

The truck stopped about forty yards down the dirt road. The inside light came on. She could see the silhouettes of three heads apparently conferring.

Good. Let them worry. She began to hobble back the way she came for the now slow return trip to town. Sloane heard the truck. It was backing towards her.

"Shit." Her anger switched to concern. Sloane felt a punch of fear. Her bravado disappeared. She wasn't eager to confront drunken morons in the middle of nowhere. The fading sky increased her isolation. Sloane's head swiveled. No houses. No lights. No sanctuary. Vulnerable.

Primal fears always near the surface for women raced to her consciousness. Her mind conjured thoughts of a brutish attack by violent men. Predators come out at night. Visions of dark horrors flooded Sloane's mind: assault, rape, death. More personal were memories of a traumatic campus attack. With her father's help, her shattered confidence had been repaired. But the dread was never far away.

Adrenalin overcame her ankle pain and drove action. Sloane hobbled down the shoulder. As she did, her foot kicked

a rock. She scooped up the baseball-sized stone. It wasn't much, but was better than nothing. Sloane entered the cornfield. As fast as her injury allowed, she moved between the high rows. The stalks hit her and the leaves slashed. She stumbled on the uneven furrows.

With the sun almost down, the field was dark and disorienting. Sloane hoped she would disappear in the gloom and the stalkers would lose interest. If lucky, they would move on to continue their drinking. She reversed her white jacket exposing the dark interior to make herself less visible.

The truck stopped where she had left the road. A slurred voice yelled, "Who's the asshole now, lady?" When the driver exited, the cab light illuminated him as he moved to the back of the truck. Sloane didn't recognize the stranger. A flashlight beam played across the field and lit the stalks above her head.

"Come out and take your medicine. We'll show you how we deal with uppity women. Just like we taught Becky." His friend emitted a lewd cackle. "If you make it difficult, you'll regret it."

Sloane stifled the urge to yell 'fuck off'. Alarm choked her throat. Outnumbered and hurt, she didn't want to give away her location.

After a moment, the two guys standing outside the truck leaned into each other. The deep-voiced passenger shouted in her direction, "You asked for it." He twisted to the cab and yelled, "Go get her, Blade!"

A shadow jumped from the pickup. The dog let out a savage bark as it entered the cornfield. Her assailants laughed and howled the beast on.

Sloane tore through the corn. Hard stalks hammered her body. Her feet pounded ragged dirt. The dog chased her like she was a rabbit. Sloane had a head start, but it was closing fast.

When the loud growls were almost on her, she spun to her attacker. The dog was mid-sized, yet a vicious fever added violence to its assault. Without hesitation, it leaped. Sloane twisted away and the dog missed her body, but its teeth slashed at her arm. She screamed and staggered. Her jacket tore and her arm burned.

Blade's momentum carried it past her. It tumbled and leveled several stalks. Thrilled by her air-piercing scream, the drunks shouted from the road, "Get her, boy."

The four-legged weapon recovered and charged again. With the shorter distance, it was slower, but as determined and brutal.

As the dog jumped, she crouched and swung her hand with the rock in a full arc. It connected to the mongrel's skull with a loud crack. The dog's impetus knocked Sloane to the ground and trapped her under its limp weight. The jaws were slack and the savagery was gone. The wounded animal emitted a high-pitched and plaintive wail.

Sloane's mind reeled in terror. She rolled the panting beast off and scuttled backward.

From the road, the tone turned from glee to concern. "Blade? Here, boy."

The injured dog squirmed and tried to rise. Its legs shook and collapsed. It squealed in pain.

"Sonofabitch!" echoed from the road.

Sloane was also unsteady. Nonetheless, she had to move. She got to a knee. Light-headed, she gulped deep breaths then pulled herself up. She strained to peek at her attackers. They weren't men so much as silhouettes with vile intent. She ached, but there was no time to hesitate.

A light approached. Her pursuers made no effort to conceal themselves. She limped through the rows angling deeper into the field. Her bruised leg shot pain. Desperation forced her to ignore it.

Sloane stopped to collect herself. She was weak, sweaty and nauseous. She tried to be silent, but her breathing seemed a roar. Her muscles clenched. The corn smelled sweet. Too sweet and wholesome for her crisis.

The field engulfing her was scientifically cultivated and controlled by man. Almost manicured. The polar opposite of wild. Yet, in this moment, her imagination magnified and animated its threats. Untamed and black. Concealing all sorts of lurking evils. She sensed the land was working in concert with the hoodlums. Fear breeds fear. Sloane bit her lip hard to distract her mind. She tried to slow her breathing and purge the encroaching panic. Reality was bad enough without making it worse. *It's just damn vegetables*, she told herself.

When the men reached the dog, they saw the extent of Blade's injuries. An enraged scream cut the prairie silence, "You hurt my dog. I'll kill you." The alcoholic slur was replaced with a crazed fury, "I swear, I'll kill ya." A gun blast shattered the air.

Sloane staggered in fright. Her eyes went wide and the heartbeat pounding in her ears echoed the gunshot. She bolted. Bent low, Sloane tried not to attract attention by disturbing the crop. It was difficult in the thick vegetation.

Stay calm. Stay calm. They didn't know her precise location. Sloane hoped they would tend the dog before chasing her. She damned herself for not carrying her phone. She left it behind on her runs to disconnect and clear her mind. She'd been lulled by the deceptive farmland tranquility. Dad would be disappointed. He taught her to always prepare.

The night breeze evaporated sweat and chilled her body. She needed to get out of the field. It concealed her, but the shock might set in. Combined with the cold of the clear night, it could be a deadly combination. The town would provide refuge. If those madmen caught her here, it would be over. They knew which direction she'd likely go. Time mattered if they were serious about chasing her. After the gun blast, there was no doubt they would be serious.

The road could orient her. Also, it was level. The furrowed soil was slowing her escape. If she got another injury and went down, she might not get up. Sloane figured there were a few minutes while they carried the dog back to the truck. She moved in what she hoped was the right direction.

It helped to have a plan. As panic ebbed, it mixed with anger. Indignation that she had to worry about such things as assaults and assholes. Outrage seethed and strengthened her resolve.

Sloane reached the road. Standing in the protective shadow of the corn, she searched the distance. No sight nor sound of any vehicle. To the South, the lights of Goodland beckoned and offered hope. It was important to get back to town to nurse her wounds and phone in the attack.

The dirt road was less menacing than the confusing fields. Still, there was no civilized noise. Only a silence marred by low, natural background murmurs. She made better time and soon reaped fields opened.

Sloane approached the construction site again. There might be something useful as a weapon. A quick search revealed nothing. Her insistence the crew secure all equipment each night was meticulously followed. She sighed and returned to the road.

In the distance, lights moved down the side road where she was attacked. Fear grabbed her soul again.

It might not be them, but they were the only people she'd encountered on this lonely patch. Swinging around, Sloane searched for hiding spots. Behind the supply truck or under the large front end loader were possibilities, but even a cursory search would find her. The town was too far away and the harvested field offered little cover.

The headlights reached the intersection with the road she was on and didn't slow. The vehicle skidded and moved toward her. A bouncing spotlight scanned the fields and the ditches. It was them.

She turned to run into the field. Then an idea struck. No more flight, time to fight. They would be here soon. Sloane dashed.

A minute later, she hid behind a bright orange sign warning of the road work. When the truck was thirty yards away, she stepped from behind the sign into the headlights.

Blinded by a fury intense as a Kansas heat wave, the driver maintained his speed. He aimed directly at her.

Sloane dove past the warning marker like a matador dodging a mad bull. The driver swerved the truck right to avoid the sign and the construction.

He turned his head toward Sloane just as his passenger yelled, "Look out!" The driver jerked back to see the exposed culvert ditch. He slammed the brakes and twisted the wheel. Gravel flew.

It was too late.

But for braking, the truck might have had enough speed to clear the hole. Instead, the hood dipped and the left front bumper caught the far edge. The truck slammed into the cut with the scream of crunching metal. Momentum forced the back end into the air while the chassis twisted. Sloane watched the slow motion pirouette. A percussive soundtrack

accompanied the violent ballet. The truck hesitated for a second, then rolled to the right and tumbled into the ditch with a jolting crack.

She rose and brushed her scraped and bleeding hands. Cautiously, Sloane approached the trench and peeked over the edge. One skewed headlight was still working and gave a dull luminescence to the pit. The truck was wedged on its side tight between the walls. The engine ticked with heat and steam hissed from broken hoses. The impact had crumpled metal and spiderly cracks laced the glass. A shot of relief made Sloane giddy that her ruse of moving the safety markings worked. The success was empowering.

Sloane tensed as she saw movement in the truck. The driver was closest to the top of the tilted chassis. He strained and looked up. His left eye was swollen and a dark streak marred his face. His voice was tight with pain. “Get help. We’re hurt bad. Butch isn’t moving.”

Imbeciles through and through, thought Sloane. Too macho to wear seatbelts. Their predicament had a hint of natural selection. “Why the hell should I help you? You tried to kill me.”

The voice hesitated for a long moment. “We didn’t mean anything by it.” He gave a liquid cough then gurgled, “Just having some fun. Please, you can’t leave us here.” He moaned with the effort of moving.

Fun!? She wanted him to experience the same fear she’d felt. “I should let you suffer.”

Her father’s voice echoed in her mind, counseling her what to do. She spoke into the hole. “You’re right. I can’t leave you here like that. I’ll be back to take care of you.”

Sloane replaced the cones and warning signs that she’d moved to trick them toward the hole. She returned them to their

proper locations. With the low traffic, it was unlikely anyone else would stumble on the accident, but Sloane didn't want any innocents to get hurt.

With the site secure, she started back to the motel. She replayed the multiple attacks and her luck at surviving. Even tired, she made it in fifteen minutes. Sloane cleaned and tended the dog wound on her arm. It stung and the bruise was ugly, but wasn't as bad as she feared. She gulped Advil, grabbed her gear along with her pocketbook and phone and headed to her truck. She confirmed it contained the required supplies.

The moon rose over the horizon. It brightened the night, but not her spirits.

She returned to the accident. No one had arrived. Sloane parked away from the trench. It was quiet beneath the dispassionate stars. Even with the gibbous moon, the landscape was obscure. She was far from the civilized lights of Goodland.

A weak yell broke the dark silence. Turning on her flashlight, Sloane limped toward the excavation.

When the light hit the truck, the driver perked up. "Help. We're trapped." Pain edged his voice. "Call the police. A bitch tried to kill us." Visceral hate tinged his words. "She set us up with this ditch. My cousin's on the force. They'll track her down and give her what she deserves."

The outburst enflamed her. Sloane shone the light into the driver's bloodstained face. "It's the bitch, asshole. I told you I'd be back."

Sloane didn't bother to hear if he said anything. A rage engulfed her. Fury at never feeling safe. The bone-weary tiredness of having to be ever-vigilant. Of always, always being at risk. She went to her truck and pulled out the two gallon jug of gasoline. At the trench, she opened the cap and spread the gas.

There was confusion. “What ... what are you doing?” Then fuel splashed inside. Panic. “NO!!” He banged on the door in desperation. It didn’t budge. He pleaded, “Don’t do this. I’m sorry. I swear to god we won’t say anything. PLEASE!”

Sloane didn’t smile, yet felt a charge of satisfaction he was tasting the terror he’d inflicted. She walked the empty jug to the truck and let him stew in the gas fumes and fear. Sloane made the necessary phone call.

On her way back to the motel, she’d been torn. Maybe their alcohol stupor and some remorse might excuse their behavior, but the new threats showed she wasn’t out of danger. These men were a continuing menace: to her security, her peace of mind, the rest of her life. And to others. She would not be victimized as an outsider facing local justice. Most of the people here were good. Yet, like people everywhere, they were tribal and protective of their own. They might know these trolls were bastards, but they were *their* bastards. Local boys, local police, local jury. Placing her in another ‘he said, she said’ situation. Not this time. When you step beyond the bounds of humanity, you forfeit your right to due process.

Sloane braced herself. With her back to the hole, she stared into the distance. It was a moonlit still life of pastoral serenity. Sloane took deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

She knocked the warning sign off the road as if hit by the truck. Then, she tossed an orange safety cone into the hole for authenticity. Their skid marks were visible in the moonlight. From all appearances, it looked like a drunk-driving accident.

Sloane pulled matches from her pocket.

The driver was struggling for release.

Sloane lit a match and dropped it. The driver’s eyes bulged. The match went out.

There was a feral cry from the abyss, “Please, this ain’t right!”

In a knife-edged voice, Sloane said, “After the last attack, Dad taught me, it’s the Law of the Jungle. When a dog goes mad, there’s no coming back. The only thing to do is put him down.” She crouched next to the hole to block the breeze and struck a second match. This one stayed lit. When it hit the truck, the gas ignited and flames spread.

Burnt screams grew higher and wilder. Only the corn could hear.

Sloane rose and confirmed that it kept burning. She returned to her truck.

Black smoke and arms of fire danced from the pyre. Sloane turned on the engine and waited. She blinked when there was a loud WHUMP as the gas tank exploded. Orange flames from the cleansing blaze shot to the sky and cauterized the wound on her soul.

Sloane eased the truck into gear and headed West. She would access the Interstate a couple of exits away. On her phone call, Sloane had reserved a room at her usual Denver motel. In the unlikely case anyone asked, she’d have evidence she was two hundred miles away from the unfortunate crash.

Bill Diamond

Bill Diamond lives in Colorado where the Rocky Mountains are both an inspiration and distraction. His work has appeared in a number of journals including *The MacGuffin*, *The Eastern Iowa Review*, *Windmill* and *All Hallow's Eve Anthology*. He writes to try and figure it all out.

Crude Mockup of a Species Under Pressure

by Chris D'Errico

Afternoon light pouring out
From agave-shaped electronic window-treatments.
Magnetizing black holes, crumbling landmarks,
White columns of hermetic softwood talismans.
Self-appointed interstellar guardians,
Troupes of backstabbing, garden-variety riffraff
Smacking & tickling each other with cherub-like fingers.
Laced by mysteriously lazy & ethereal drops
Of beat-laden, infectious ear-candy, down in the valley,
Nerve-damaged sycophants proselytize
Salacious narratives designed to titillate the brutes &
Paint-by-numbers barbarians.
Angelic-mystical heretics sigh & dream up
Morose, ghost-track fugues & woe-is-me poetry.
Creatures born out of nowhere strut
Rococo feathers made of rare ore, wax, soap & honey.
Wings culled from Valhalla nightmares
Night-capped in pearl-colored & bodiless dance moves

Prostrate to an invisible godhead

Droning on in sepia-lit, counterfeit anterooms.
Percocet and lavender tea,
Discombobulated on a hilltop darkened by new grief,
Pictorials exquisitely decorated for timeless effect
By a contraption of metal flowers.
Weathered by rain & wind & politicized dry futures
Of predictable, catastrophic suns, all diasporic,
Buzzing & stained by heart-juice & courage,
Melting under pressure, expected to be reproduced &
Directed to surveil without fear of entrapment,
Without conscience, or any whiff
Of loss or abandonment.

Chris D'Errico

Publishing in print and online journals for 20+ years, Chris D'Errico is a visual artist, musician and writer who lives and works the nightshift as an exterminator in Las Vegas, Nevada. The social media he allows to rob his soul and twist his mind these days is Instagram: [@christopherlouisderrico](https://www.instagram.com/christopherlouisderrico)

A Riveting Tale

by JW Wood

to Wendy

Stephan Botibol likes things just so. Consider his lunchbox: a ham sandwich wrapped in cellophane. Sufficient mustard to taste, but not to put fire in the nostril. Accompanied by a large navel orange and a chocolate cream biscuit, such is Botibol's daily lunch.

Stephan works as a welding process engineer at Penn Industries in Spalding, Lincolnshire. The company makes rivets. Those tiny pieces of metal that keep other pieces of metal together. There are billions of them all over the world – in aircraft, buildings, cars and machines, but almost no-one knows what they are or how they work.

Stephan has been there twenty-five years, ever since old man Penn set up the business. Long enough to see Penn to be replaced by his son, Sebastian “Lofty” Penn. Every day, Botibol dons a pair of black trousers and a sensible shirt then drives ten miles to Penn Industries from his red-brick village home in his sensible, fuel-efficient car.

If Stephan Botibol's unadventurous dress sense and constant, irrational fear of poverty betray lower-middle-class roots, then his boss, Lofty Penn, is his Polaroid negative. Lofty rolls in testosterone-soaked rides, sports designer threads, and pays an attention to his diet that would shame a ballerina. Altogether, he smells like a lean, driven businessman. And that's how Lofty sees himself – incisive. Driven. Determined.

But Stephan's wise to it: Lofty knows as much about engineering as a cat does about thermodynamics – and cares less than a cat might if it were proven that said cat knew something about thermodynamics.

Chewing on his ham sandwich, Botibol recalls the arithmetical errors he's had to correct in Lofty's technical drawings. Drawings that Lofty then passes off as his own.

Well, no longer. Stephan has a new product idea, and he's sure Lofty will love it.

Lofty Penn's Audi Turbo pulls into the Penn Industries car park. A successful entrepreneur has every right to own a vehicle like this. Not to mention Audi being cheaper than Porsche or Mercedes. Best of all, Lofty managed to find his Audi at a police auction in Herefordshire. He'd got it cheaper than cheap – only forty grand. In fact, Lofty praises himself, he never pays full price for anything. Including his staff.

Yes, Lofty thinks as his car's doors pop open to his key-fob's command, there's no fooling me. I know the value of a pound. He considers himself equally shrewd in his marriage: Melanie had far more money and far less class than him – but then, he brings intellect and his good bloodline to the conjugal bed. And he'd had no complaints so far. Well, not many.

Lofty gets out and presses his fob again. The door locks slide shut obediently. Approaching the factory, he checks the reflected position of his fringe in the entrance door. He likes it to rest at a forty-five degree angle to his eyebrows to hide his growing bald patch. Before opening the door he pats his taut stomach with satisfaction. Not bad for forty-eight.

He opens the door and smirks at Receptionist Gail. Fresh from securing a massive deal with an aircraft manufacturer to

supply rivets, he feels like a six-year old stallion in heat. Even better, Botibol just sent some email about a revolutionary design set to make them shit-tons of cash.

Lofty winks at Gail as he pushes open the factory door. A huge country pile, two kids, fit wife and a high performance motor. Slice it how you want, he has life by the danglies all right.

Lofty hits SEND on an email telling his staff about the big win, taking all the credit in an underhand way. Then that boring weirdo, Botibol, knocks on his office door and opens it. Why knock if you're going to open anyway?

Lofty has no desire to bring sandwiches to work in a plastic box like Stephan Botibol – in fact, he never eats lunch (too many calories). Also there are no sensible shirts on his back (too cheap) and no dark trousers (too boring).

He does want people to take him seriously, though. Admire him as a thinker. And that's where Stephan has it over Lofty. Stephan may be the anti-Lofty: hard-working, trustworthy and intelligent. But Lofty owns the company – and gets what he wants. Materially, at least.

Lofty notices Stephan is clutching a brown paper bag. For a second Lofty wonders if this nerd has brought his lunch to their meeting.

“Is that lunch, or your latest invention?”

A smile plays across Stephan's lips, thick glasses sliding down his greasy nose. His voice quivers a little:

“The latter. I hope you'll like it.”

“Well, depends what it is, doesn't it? Come on then, let's be having you” –

Stephan tips out the contents of his paper bag out onto Lofty's desk. More worried about possible scratches on the desk than any invention, Lofty peers at what looks like a pile of screws.

"The hell's this? A pile of screws?"

"Mr. Penn, I give you – the exploding rivet!"

"The what?"

"The exploding rivet."

"What possible use is that to our customers?"

Stephan takes his glasses off, polishing them against his dark trousers.

"As an engineer, you know manufacturers employ teams of people and robots to plug rivets to bond metal sheets, right?"

"Of course I do. I have a degree in Mechanical Engineering, just like you."

Stephan wonders which Professor at Coventry University old man Penn had bribed to take Lofty (who famously couldn't add two three-digit numbers together) onto their engineering course. Or, great mystery of existence, how Lofty ever passed his final exams and got a degree.

"Right. So what I've invented is a rivet that fixes itself. You set up the two pieces of metal you need to join together. You pop these rivets in the holes. Then you press a button on a mobile app and KERPOW!"

"Kerpow?"

"Kerpow", Stephan nods. "The rivets explode and melt, solidifying the bond between the pieces of metal. No need for soldering. No teams of joiners or expensive robots. Just the Penn Industries exploding rivet – and you're done."

“Interesting.”

Lofty wonders how much he can make out of this thing, and how to avoid giving Lord of the Nerds any form of pay rise. After all, Lofty needs the money – the Audi is nearly two years old. And his weekly tan and squash club membership don’t come for free.

“Excellent, Stephan. Now look – I’ve got a meeting. Let’s chat again tomorrow, yeah?”

Lofty keeps schtum that his next meeting is with a barber in Spalding for hair highlights. Botibol gets up and heads for the door, exploding rivets still on Lofty’s desk.

“Oh, and Stephan...”

Botibol turns round.

“Take these with you. I don’t want them to scratch the desk.”

Botibol scoops up the rivets and Lofty notices two filigree scratches on the wood. Definitely no bonus - bloody nerd.

Lofty waits until Botibol has gone, then hits up a speed-dial on his iPhone megapixel blah blah –

“Dennis? That you? Fancy squash and drinky-poops? Melanie’s taking the kids out for pizza...”

That night, Lofty sleeps the sleep of the just – or maybe it’s the sleep of those too unencumbered with intelligence to lie awake worrying. Meanwhile, Botibol writhes sleeplessly in the nine-by-eleven master bedroom of his three-bed semi until he can’t writhe no more. He squeezes himself into the tiny ensuite bathroom and sits on his throne to contemplate existence.

The thing about someone like Lofty, Botibol reflects as he stares at the grime accreting under his sink thanks to years of improper cleaning, was his hereditary rights. As thick as Lincolnshire sausage, Lofty owned Penn Industries by *primogeniture*. In other words, thank you Daddy. It has to be said that Lofty does leaven his stupidity with some charm and a healthy dollop of greed. A combination which keeps Lofty rich – and everyone else down.

Well, no longer. I'm about to launch a remake of "Revenge of the Nerds" with more gore than "Hellraiser" – and I'll get control of the intellectual property. Plus enough dough to never work again.

Thus resolved, Stephan flushes the loo and pads back to bed, rolling gently onto his side of the mattress in an effort not to wake his wife.

Six hours later, Stephan steadies himself before entering Lofty's office. Based on yesterday's response to his exploding rivets, Stephan is determined to ask Lofty for the partnership he'd long been promised.

"Come!" bellows a voice from within.

Hoping Lofty wasn't banging someone on his desk but secretly hoping that he might be, Stephan pushes open the door.

Lofty stifles a belch as he enters - last night's squash match became a couple of beers which, in their turn, became a curry. Raghu, the owner of Lofty's favourite local Indian, finally closed the door on the two inebriated chumrades around midnight. Which means Lofty is not at his best as Botibol approaches clutching his paper bag with the screws. I mean rivets.

“Morning Stephan. So are we going to see how these things work?”

Lofty farts silently, praying it doesn't stink.

“The thing is, Sebastian, I want to discuss my partnership prospects first.”

Lofty feels a little puke rising in his throat and swallows. Then he farts again, almost audibly this time. Those Indian brandies and that *kulfi* had definitely been a mistake.

“We can talk about that later. You know I want to give you a slice of the company, only I'm waiting for further investment.”

“I know. But Sebastian, you've been promising me equity for years. I want to protect my family and my future, same as everyone else.”

Lofty thinks briefly about Botibol's wife, who he's met once, years ago. She works in the collections department of some life insurance business in Spalding. To Lofty, she's as dull as a month-old dishcloth. He's never met Stephan's kids, but could just imagine – choir on Wednesdays, football on Saturdays and extended bedtime on Friday nights.

Lofty knows he has to say something fast. He's meeting a huge aviation customer this morning and if these rivet jobbies work, he wants to make his first sale PDQ.

He opens a drawer and shuffles around. Underneath some photos of him and Melanie at last year's golf club dinner he finds a mildewing insurance agreement for the building. He'd never bothered to sign it, or even look at it. This'll do.

“All right, Stephan”, he smiles. “Told you I was thinking about you. I'm officially making you co-signatory on the rights to this building as a partner in my business. Please take your time to review these papers, then sign. Congratulations!”

Lofty stuffs the agreement into a brown A4 envelope, slides it across his desk. He stretches out his hand for a shake, his crocodile-jaw grip melting Botibol's soap-soft palm.

"I'm sorry it took me so long – I was just waiting to have a decent chat with you. Now, can we see these rivets, ffs?"

Botibol peers inside the envelope. He can't believe it – partnership at last. He stands up, gesturing towards the workshop.

"Thank you Sebastian. Let's explode some rivets!"

"Lead on, Stephan my lad, lead on."

As they make their way down to the workshop, Stephan excuses himself and heads for the men's toilets. Once inside, he closes a cubicle door, sits down and opens his partnership papers. One brief glance and he's clued in. An unsigned insurance agreement, beneficiary name left blank. Stephan looks at the cubicle's formica wall. WASH HANDS TO PREVENT DISEASE. But there was no stopping the spread of bastarditis transmitted by pricks like Lofty Penn. Once again, Lofty thought he could fob him off with bullshit. Well not any more,

Stephan looks at the policy again. It's worth four million pounds. Right away, he knows how to win. How to get one over this bell-end who's been stiffing him for years.

Lofty Penn paces around the high-ceilinged workshop. It's ten-thirty, he's hung over, and their most important client is coming any minute. While waiting for Botibol to finish his dump, Lofty has visions of how he'd spend the cash from their new

exploding rivets. Double the size of his house, holiday in the Jamaica sun. Maybe a weekend nanny so the kids would bother them even less than they do being away at boarding school all week. If Botibol's gizmos work, then he'll make Jay-Z look like a tramp – and all for the price of an insurance policy that wasn't even valid.

Botibol finally comes out of the toilets, but Lofty hasn't heard a flush. Lofty thinks Botibol has stress-related hemorrhoids or something.

“Listen, Sebastian. You're a busy man so I'll be brief. I'm so sure these rivets work, I'm going to set up a demo for this client that's coming in, OK? They'll be so impressed they'll want to buy immediately.”

Lofty prides himself on his care. Never lets enthusiasm get in the way of profit. But the lure of blowing his client's brain and snagging loads of money is too much. So –

“Sounds good, Stephan”, he says. Then, like some Sargeant Major in World War Two: “Carry on, man.”

Botibol sets his envelope on a workbench and gets two of the guys to give him a hand. Lots of banging and movement follows, which Lofty doesn't like. So while they're working, he's in his office playing Candy Crush and surfing GIFs of women in lingerie.

Twenty minutes later, Botibol comes in to say the demonstration's ready – useful, because their client has arrived.

Lofty greets the clients and leads them straight to the workshop, Stephan Botibol following like a Spaniel hungry for a treat.

“We want to show you our latest innovation”, Lofty explains as he checks his reflection in the workshop’s reinforced window. “Our initial research suggests it will remove the need for riveting in airframes. And I must give credit to our Welding Process Lead, Stephan Botibol, who worked with me on this design. I’ll hand over to Stephan for the demo. Let her rip!”

Ignoring Lofty’s pseudo-praise, Stephan taps up an app on his phone. Inside, he’s seething. “Worked with me on this design” – bollocks.

Stephan looks at the clients in their sharp suits and ties.

“Welcome to Penn Industries. We’ve set up two metal plates with rivets inserted in the joins. Just tap the app - your rivets explode, melt and merge the metal sheets into one. Ready?”

The senior guy on the client side shuffles his feet. At the other end of the workshop, the two sheets of metal with Botibol’s rivets in them hang silently in the air like Gods about to pass judgement.

Botibol taps his phone. A massive bang – the roof and parts of two walls are blown into the next county – which happens to be Norfolk. Dust and smoke fill the room. Lofty’s clients back up against the wall. Lofty himself is floored by the blast.

Amid the heat and dust, Stephan Botibol grabs the insurance document Lofty tried to pass off as his partnership papers. He’d already named himself as the beneficiary and signed the document with Lofty’s signature stolen from their shared drive.

Before the smoke clears, he’s heading for the car park. He gets in his sensible Kia and sets off to join his wife and children who wait for him at Heathrow. He’ll be making a full claim

against Lofty's policy from Morocco. Vengeance is mine, he thinks as he turns onto the motorway. Vengeance is mine, and Lofty will pay.

JW Wood

J.W. Wood is a Brit currently living in Canada, but set to return home in 23. Short stories have appeared in *The Coffin Bell* (USA), *Black Cat Mystery Magazine* (USA), *Idle Ink* (UK), *Crimeucopia* (UK) and many others. The author of five books of poems and a pseudonymous novel all published in the UK, his satirical novella, *By Any Other Name*, will be published by Terror House Press in the USA this Spring. www.jwwoodwriter.net.

rewinding a daily walk

by Susan E Baer

i spend the rest of the day in
the ER.
a police officer charges
the man like
a lion.
the man's hair shines
black like
a raven. he earns a felony.
the police officer reaches
my house like
a snail. my face bleeds. she
takes a photo. an ambulance
arrives. the police tase
the man twice.
two neighbors pin the
man like wrestlers. the man lies
on the ground.
my neighbor hits
the man with his rake.

the man kicks
my neighbor's face like
a maestro. i dial 911.
i look in the hallway
mirror and
my nose
runs blood. fear.
i lock the door.
my black lab, bear
and i run
like gazelles to
our house. fear. i stand up
and grab bear's leash. bear
runs loose. blood
pours like a bucket down
my face. fear. pain.
the man runs to
a busy street and
throws rocks like
baseballs. they hit
cars. i come to. fear. fear.
i see the man running.
he knocks me out.
the man veers suddenly in

our direction. the man
wears khaki pants. he
looks like a
dove.

i see the man
run our way as
bear smells
a secret scent. i hear
a woman scream like a
crow. i take bear on
her daily walk.

Susan A Baer

Susan E. Baer holds a Ph.D. She lives in Hanover, Pennsylvania where she is an author and an educator. She has published poetry in *Literature Today* and has poetry forthcoming in *Wild Roof Journal* and in an anthology titled *Love in the Original Language*.

notes on a wrong body

by Carina Stopenski

1.) *tapeworm*

unwelcome guest in my gut,
parasite swallowing air and flakes
of dead, crusted skin, will you
ingest these granules and shrink
my stomach as you gnaw away?

i'd like to picture you a tapeworm,
slimy lover nestling in intestines,
entrails braided around you as you
make yourself part of my anatomy.

when i expel you from my system,
will i grow herculean, or will i
become sicker in your absence,
chunks of you stuck in my gullet?

2.) *throat*

i ask you to choke me, but your

hands are far too weak to give me
the pressure i crave on my windpipe.
i beg you to draw phlegm and
spit it in my face, stringy saliva,
but you fear that bringing up the
mucus will cause you to gag.

what if i implored you to usher
in a new tsunami of your insides,
projectile of your worst parts
licked clean from my chest?

you live like a lump of clot in my
throat, sore-laden and slippery,
drowning on the bile that rises up
and puffs inside my rosy cheeks.

emetophobe ex-lover,
let me swallow it all.

3.) *infection*

filthy, wet god kissing soles,
it's getting harder to bend over.

when i scrape the dried blood
out of my crevices, i bring my
brown-stained fingers to my lips,
devouring the remnants of a
pus-filled blister: pop open ulcers
and guzzle on the gore within.

discharge this muck from the
bowels of hell and i will lick up
whatever you retch in its wake.

4.) *ferment*

i want to stick you in a mason jar
and pickle you with my slobber,
render you sweet and take a bite
out of your crisp flesh, bursting
with the piss-and-vinegar flavor
of our unsavory sentimentality.

i'd crack open your skull and mix
the spinal fluid with the liquor
from your steeping, a cocktail
so strong that when it runs down
my jaw, it leaves red welts on my

pale, patchy skin from the acidity.

5.) *cardiac arrest*

meaty striations coat my insides,
a carcinogenic corpulence complicated
by binges and menthol cigarettes—
when they cut me open, they'll find
thick, black sludge like motor oil
seeping out of my bulging arteries.

bursting, i am but an intumescing vein,
arterioles strangling my capillaries like
strong, cold hands around my neck.

i wish to use this blubber as protection,
stick my side and drain the grease out:
instead, i am flammable, catching flame
as they butcher the lard, cutting down the
excess with each biting remark they make.

6.) *self-seeding*

artifice, orifice, you are a faulty cavity.
the soft foundation that lives within you
is not steady enough to build home upon.

while my body may be slick with ooze,
i have roots beneath my gooey surface.
i tether to the seed inside and blossom,
sulfuric rafflesia, beautiful and rancid.

if you tried to pluck my petals, i would
assault you with elaiosomes, let the ants
crawl in and out, confetti-cannon of
carrion flies exploding from my chest.

all that grows inside of you is fear,
no fledgling sprouts in your cracks.
that's fine—i'm monocarpic myself.
i'll never germinate again.

7.) *heifer*

my body is a beef tallow candle,
unctuous mother spilling milk and
fat, a swollen, overwrought udder.

as i melt, my wick splinters at its
center, ashy residue on your fingers.
i want to be the hardening beeswax

dripping on your sternum, heaving
as you burn yourself with my body.

mix our fluids as we evaporate and
the yellow gunk will all be the same.

8.) *shokushu goukan*

if i had a cock it'd be a tentacle,
sucker-lined appendage tensing
inside your viscous grip, fucking
you with a fervor that could only
be described as thalassic:

you may be the sodden gentleman,
but your grotto is deep enough to
take it all in, pulsing and waterlogged
when i tug my stiff limb, soaked
from the trench between your legs.

i'll oviposit our children in your ditch,
lay eggs in your innards, and hope
you don't miscarry the memory of
my most uncommon extremity.

clench your muscles tighter as
i dive into the wreck: let us be
mothers in the worst possible way.

9.) *chamber*

vacuous lover, i want live within
the tight walls of your flat abdomen,
a dike for the dyke who wishes to
crawl inside your desolate womb.

if i excavated the ridges of your
sternum, what would i find inside
all the nooks and crannies of you?
would i fall into the pit of your
stomach before i ever find footing?

10.) *ghost*

a phantom limb prods my cunt
and i pretend that it makes me full;

rather, i become translucent the further
i stretch myself out, accommodating
each inch until it ruptures within me,
shattering my fragile jaws until only

the spirit is left in the aftermath:

veiny, wet tendrils spindle out of me as
you become corporeal. i become fertilizer.

specter, blossom from my mouth.
let me taste your buds on my tongue
as you take root in my softest parts.

Carina Stopenski

Carina Stopenski (they/them) is a writer, teacher, and librarian based out of Pittsburgh, PA. Carina received their BFA in Creative Writing from Chatham University, their MSLS in Library Science from Clarion University of Pennsylvania, and their MA in Literary and Cultural Studies from Carnegie Mellon University. Their work is forthcoming or has been featured in Fauxmoir, Button Eye Review, Defunkt Magazine, and Cathexis Northwest Press, among others. Carina's writing centers around the queer experience, body studies, and transhumanist perspectives. You can follow their work at www.carinastopenskiwriter.com.

The Rites of Spring

by Gina M Angelone

I had a young and useless mother who had nothing to barter. She would use me to pry the good from people's worn hearts by shoving a hungry, dirty little girl in their faces. But everyone was already too battered by the constant assault of poverty for this to have any lasting effect. They'd mostly offer a pat on the head, a few musty peanuts, an apology. Mother would smile just enough, but I could read the hatred in her eyes. Her loathing was not just for these pathetic, tight-fisted people, but also for me because my efforts at pity could not elicit more than a dried-up nut.

One spring day, right before my seventh birthday, my mother's scheme of parading around her misfortune had a very different outcome. The town was called Tercero which was not its real name. But because it was a more miserable destination than the lost outpost of El Segundo, it earned its third-place title and was the only name people used.

Tercero was known for nothing and located in the middle of solid, impenetrable nowhere. Even for a nearly seven-year-old, Tercero was less interesting than an abandoned sandbox filled with busted bottles and smoked cigarettes. Danger was always more of a draw than emptiness. I could tell my mother felt the same by the way she kept looking at the parched horizon and spitting at the ground.

An old woman stood selling crates of fruit in the sad shade of a dying dogwood that wouldn't flower despite the seasonal pull. Weary people dragged into the streets with barren baskets waiting to fill them with vernal desires. Hearts were always a

little more open than usual, a little more sunlit in the spring, as if crawling out from under heavy veils of doubt. Everyone was looking for the warmth of thawed glances and human touch, even if only while exchanging a few rusted coins for unripe things.

The old woman offered me a strawberry, deep red and plump. The sweet flesh filled my mouth as juice dribbled out like glad words I didn't know how to speak. My mother pinched the back of my neck, prompting me to murmur a thank you. Then she and the strawberry seller proceeded with small talk: the beautiful day, the terrible winter. The old woman seemed pleased to speak to a stranger about things like air.

Mother bought a half a kilo of berries and then, feeling familiar, asked the woman for a favor. "Could you please watch my daughter for a moment while I run an errand across the road?"

The woman obliged, smiling at me so that I wouldn't be scared. It was a smile that faded as the hours passed.

"No, Lord. No! Not again. Please. Not again!" The old woman's pleas for mercy trickled through decayed teeth as her eyes scoured the street for signs of my mother.

But she was long gone. Selfishness and adventure always lured her away. I was clearly in the way of her acquiring her own deep red, plump, sweet things. I was in the way of everything.

Weeks passed. Years. I had turned fifteen and never celebrated a single birthday. I came to dread them the way I hated terrible winters that pushed people to do rash and fleeting things in the wake of early spring. I shut down. Barely spoke. "Thank you" had been my last involuntary sound and the phrase echoed in my head for a very long time. And though I had much to thank the old woman for, I could never bring myself to do it. After all, those words had been extracted from

me like a charm in the hopes of making a good impression. They had sealed my fate, and it was a fate I was not grateful for.

The old woman's name was Betsabel. And for a long time, armed with stale sweets and limp promises, she attempted to dig information out of me. She swore to find my mother, my family and return me to my proper owners. But she never came to know anything, including my name or that of the heartless young woman who had dropped me into her life. I didn't see the point in saying those particular words anymore. They could only scar. And so it was that I became Maria del Barrio. But everyone called me Cuca.

Betsabel put me in the church school where I tried to stay pious and invisible. The nuns found my silence a blessing. Even so, they continued their reprimands as if responding to the thoughts in my head. My afternoons were spent working on the family farm, tending to the berry patches, and picking out picnic beetles and spittle bugs. My hours were long—full of schoolwork, fieldwork, and God. It was something to hold onto. Plus, Betsabel never beat me, and she fed me every day. For this, I kept quiet and did what I was told. I wanted this mother to keep me.

Betsabel had a grown son named Daniel who displayed great disgust whenever he saw me, like I had just taken the last piece of bread from his plate. He would urge our mother to drop me at the orphanage or sell me to another family in exchange for livestock. But Betsabel was a woman of God, and she would not consider such choices. She believed that God had left me with her for a reason, just like He had with Daniel, and that God always had a bigger plan. She spent her life waiting for the true nature of that plan to be revealed.

People from Tercero would speculate why two children had been abandoned there, and why Betsabel had such bad luck. Some thought it was a curse and would avoid looking me

in the eye. Others said it was because Betsabel never had family of her own, which was quite unnatural. And the few virtuous ones contended that we must be a gift from the Heavenly Father. But everyone agreed that Daniel and I, who had come from the dregs of humanity, were much better off with Betsabel than with our degenerate mothers.

The townspeople were so lowly that they enjoyed finding others to look down upon. Daniel and I were bottom feeders, except that Daniel thought I was a lot lower than he was. It didn't matter. I earned my keep and imagined my own bigger plan. Though I never had any faith in God—a fact that I hid from Betsabel—I went to church and always prayed for miracles. In my heart, I knew that praying for miracles was stupider than believing I was a gift from the Heavenly Father, but I did it anyway. It was a good use of the time.

Daniel's own dispatch, years earlier, had happened at the bus station.

"I need to run to the bathroom," his mother hurriedly announced to Betsabel who was on her way to market. "Can you hold the baby for just two minutes?"

Those two minutes turned into twenty-two years. Daniel never knew another mom. He only knew Betsabel, and so he claimed her as his own. She treated him like blood and cared for his every need, turning a blind eye to his weaknesses and revolting ways. I became one of those weaknesses. He'd creep over to the corner of the room where I slept and, sloppy and blurry faced, force himself on me, unable to control his filthy urges.

"You stupid little cock tease," he'd murmur as he pinned me down, sweat filling the gaps between us.

I'd close my eyes and slowly count to thirty, trying to block out the scrape of his vile touch and hoppy sweat. By my

tally, he had his way with me ninety-seven times. I swore I'd kill him at one hundred.

It was useless to tell Betsabel what was happening. It would only cause her pain and she would find a way to defend Daniel and get rid of me. After all, she had raised him from a bud. Daniel was hers, even though he'd turned out nothing like her. He was dark and cruel and good for nothing. He barely worked, swallowed his wages, and got stoned for days. When he was high, he'd stare at the ceiling and cough an unsettling laugh, full of grease and spite. Even Betsabel felt disturbed by it. She'd throw herself into housework to make her world of orphans tidy and clean.

"Pray for Daniel," Betsabel would implore me. And I did. I prayed that Daniel would get crushed by an oil truck. A big, eighteen-wheeler with a shiny mirrored back to better reflect his agony. I begged the Lord as hard as I could that Daniel would disappear in all manner of vicious and suitable ways. It was the only time I really enjoyed supplication and could spend hours on my knees in deep reflective thought. Vindication was my only true prayer.

In spite of my petitions, Daniel remained intact. I figured prayers didn't work for non-believers. But in those moments of appeal, I was a fervent disciple and would have sold my soul for his annihilation.

I lived in my head most of the time, weaving together an inner life better than the outer one I was given. Home was just a hot-cold place where I could fluctuate in silence, twist into submission, think vengeful thoughts, and tell myself beautifully, troubling tales of escape. The strawberry fields were the only place I felt heard or understood. And they always said the same thing to me: "Run."

Mine was not a totally passionless existence. There were desires. Some were fed while others starved. I found solace in

the night sky but didn't have much time in its company. There was too much interference. Housework kept me indoors. In tedium. While scrubbing the floors, I regularly found faces in the chipped tile that stared at me in proud defiance—people with sunbursts in their eyes, like Africans and protesters. I wanted to feel the power of a movement and my own porcelain purpose. I longed for a place of daring where I could leave a mark or wash away as I pleased.

Instead, the years smeared, and the days plodded like a sluggish army crawl through miles of muck. I kept my head down and survived. Every springtime, I sold strawberries on the very same corner where I had been abandoned—exchanged for a half-kilo and a smile. I peddled ripe, red fruit to people dreaming of big lives and juicy afternoons. I looked forward to market days when I could be outside and not bent over the fields or the floors. I'd guard my fruit stand and closely watch all the townspeople, questioning how anyone in Tercero could seem happy for no reason at all.

One such day, a worn-out face broke my reverie. A woman stood in front of me, holding out dirty money with one hand and supporting a pregnant belly with the other. "How much for a crate?"

"Sixty pesos." I pointed to the sign.

"Sixty? Would you take fifty?"

Betsabel had told me never to barter because, once you started, it never ended. "I'm not allowed."

"Isn't this your family's business? Can't you make deals?" The woman tried not to seem too annoyed, and an expectant grin plastered itself to her cracked skin hoping to seal the discount.

"I don't have a family." It slipped out. I had never really said it before, but it seemed quite true.

“Really?” Her hard-baked expression widened.

I looked at the ground.

“What’s your name, girl?” She lifted her voice to an almost friendly pitch. “What do they call you?”

I could feel her stare driving into me. “Cuca.” Barely a name, barely a sound.

She nodded, forcing a look of sincerity. “I’m sorry you don’t have a family, Cuca.”

I shrugged.

“Now, can you please bring the berries over to my car? I shouldn’t be carrying anything heavy right now.” Her eyes indicated her belly as she handed me the soiled pesos.

Having a baby was one way of getting a made-to-order family and probably the only way I’d ever know kin of my own. But unlike some girls, I did not plan on getting pregnant at fifteen. I did, however, know what to do if it happened: Eat papaya. The village women claimed it would make any baby go away. I could always tell when a girl thought she might be pregnant because Ignacio’s papayas would sell out in the first hour.

It wasn’t the fruit’s baby-killing powers that put me off. It was the undeniable smell of feet oozing from the papaya’s orange flesh which no amount of lime could conceal. I even shunned Ignacio’s attempts at friendship and small talk because he constantly sported the aroma of old sneakers.

I picked up the crate of strawberries and accompanied the woman to her vehicle.

“You have nice thick hair,” she said for no reason at all.

I knew I wasn’t ugly, but I wasn’t used to compliments.

The woman opened the passenger-side door to her beat-up, old sedan. It had so many dents and paint marks that it was hard to guess the original make or color. As I slid the crate across the tattered fabric, someone approached from behind and shoved me hard inside. Fruit spilled and I let out a feeble yelp, but it was too late. One needed to practice screaming in life and I simply didn't have the experience. Eight years of near silence had taken that away from me as well.

The figure piled in next to me, slamming the door and tightly cupping his calloused hand around my mouth. The woman hit the gas and drove away, satisfied. As we sped off, I could see Betsabel on the street corner in front of our fruit stand looking around and wondering where I'd gone. Someone pointed to the screeching car, which was making the sound I wished I could create. That's when Betsabel fell to her knees and pounded the pavement with tight, wrinkled fists. I couldn't tell if she was angry with me or if her tears meant something else. Certain emotions, I just could not recognize.

A few miles out of town, in the limbo between valley and desert, the man delivered a cigarette in the woman's mouth like a binky to an unsettled baby.

"Let go of her and give me a light," she demanded.

The man removed his acid hand from my face and searched his pocket. A propane flame ignited with a tiny blue flicker. I stared at it, wishing I could catch fire and burst into flames. But I was not built to burn. I was built to endure all manner of heat as if my skin was made of flame-retardant material.

I remained mute as the haggard pregnant woman smoked and drove, stealing glances at me from time to time in the cracked rearview mirror. Her speckled green-gray eyes had a mean and distant cast to them. A poison fungus glaze.

Sunlight and dusty air pummeled the windows as the car filled with the stink of tobacco, ripening fruit and sweat. The man also reeked of something pungent and familiar: He smelled like Daniel.

“Aren’t you going to ask where we’re going, *Cuca*?” The woman put extra emphasis on my name.

“She doesn’t care where she’s going, as long as it’s far from that shithole.” The man cackled, nodding at me, daring me to deny it.

I shrugged and they both laughed.

“You see? We saved her!” The woman coughed up a bad taste and spit onto the floor of the car.

I wanted to tear off a piece of wood from the fruit crate and stab them in the eyes. Two things stopped me, maybe three. It was the third that mattered: Tercero. It was true: I was somehow relieved to be out of that town for the first time and to be far from its daily doses of pain. The asshole in the backseat wasn’t wrong about that.

The woman turned to me, taking her eyes completely off the road and commanding my attention. “Your name is not *Cuca*. But you can keep it. It fits you. Your name is Gabriella. But I always called you Gabi. Do you remember?” She tried to act casual, but I could see her gripping the wheel hard, trying to keep steady.

I studied those disquieting eyes again. Could it be? After all these years? I’d worked so hard to erase them from memory. I had painted them kinder, younger, more caring. But these...these were the eyes of the devil.

“Look at me! Do you remember?” She slammed the brakes of the car, waiting for my answer. “I know you can talk.”

“Yeah, fucking say something, you stupid little bitch.” The man raised his palm and struck me across the cheek.

I looked down at my hands, not sure who to hate most, but I refused to give this woman the satisfaction of a memory, even a bitter one. “I don’t remember you.”

She seemed wounded by my response. Flustered. Unsure of her next move. The car started edging forward again.

“Good,” she muttered. “Then no hard feelings.”

Maybe I had just given her a free pass from the burden of guilt. I didn’t care. I had no plan of ever recognizing her as my mother or identifying myself as her little Gabi.

“Are you sure she’s the right kid?” The man looked at me suspiciously, my lack of emotion messing with his mean, small brain.

“Of course, I’m sure, you idiot. I know my own kid. I can prove it. There’s a birthmark on her back. It looks like a berry. Ha! I never thought of that before. Must be fate...” The woman laughed, seeming totally pleased with her plan, with destiny, with all the ugly narratives in her head.

“After we clean her up, we can make some real money off of this one.” The man eyed me up and down.

“I told you so.” She swatted him playfully with her free hand. “But no touching. Not yet...”

A foul stench filled my lungs. It wreaked of an uncertain future. I stared at the open road wondering if hell, like everything else, always came in threes. I prayed for my deliverance with all the meaningless, automatic words I’d ever learned. As dirt filtered through the vents and cracks in the window, my fears dissipated like particles in the wind. Thoughts carried me away from the bad blood that surrounded me and drew a picture of my revenge, exacted as easily as a

thank you from a child. This tattered man next to me would be blind or dead before he laid another hand on me, and my mother would be left by the side of the road to fill the ground with bile.

I pitied the poor infant she carried inside—her next victim, my half-sibling. Innocents were always sacrificed in a time of reckoning. Knowing this vexed me but did not deter my sudden faith. Retribution would certainly taste as sweet and treacherous as springtime—as alluring as the temptation for longed-for fruits.

Out the grimy window, I saw the patchwork of dying and ill-tended turf as it blurred into grit and sand. Again, the empty fields spoke to me. Again, they said “Run.” Running was the only prayer worth a damn as I inched my fingers toward the jagged shard of the shattered wooden crate. My life would soon be worthwhile. I only had to sit tight, ripen, and wait for my moment.

Gina M Angelone

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Gina became a global citizen at age seventeen and has lived, worked and traveled the world as a film director, producer and writer.

Gina's TV work is the recipient of two **Emmy** awards and multiple nominations. Her documentaries have garnered top festival prizes and notable grants from the **NEA, Philadelphia Foundation, William Penn Foundation, Graham Foundation, New York Women in Film**, among others. Credits include founding Producer of **Bravo's** "Inside the Actors Studio," Writer/Director of the original series, "Defining Beauty" (**Disney**), and Writer/Producer/Director of feature documentaries "Connections" (**PBS**), "René & I," (**NBC**), "It's Better to Jump," (theatrical release).

In addition to her filmmaking and screenwriting, Gina is a published, award-winning author whose cinematic viewpoint informs much of her fiction. In 2022, Gina Angelone's short story "Portrait of a Stranger" won 2nd prize in the Marguerite McGlenn Prize for Fiction, with a publication in Philadelphia Stories. Other recognitions include 2021 & 2018 fiction writing grants from Lincoln City Fellowship/Speranza Foundation, a 2020 Artist grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a 2015 Publication of her novel *Café Antoinette* (Blue-Eyed Editions/Amazon), a 2010 Semi-finalist in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award (Publishers Weekly review), a

2010 Semi-finalist in The Nimrod Literary Awards: Katherine Anne Porter Prize, the 2010 Winner of the “Do It Write” Literary Competition, a publication in the 1996 Doubleday Anthology “Angels of Darkness; Tales of Troubled and Troubling Women,” (featured by the Literary Guild of America), and a 1990 Finalist in worldwide competition for the World’s Fair Omnimax film script (Discoveries Pavilion) Seville, Spain. Gina is also the writer of 5 original screenplays (all optioned).

The Worst Sex Ever

by Nadia Arioli

We've all told or heard or overheard them—stories of the worst sex ever. Whiskey dick. Coke dick. Unnecessarily purple strap-on dick. Funky vag. Pretending to squirt when actually it was pee. (Incidentally, scientists have recently discovered that all squirting is peeing. How they tested that, I don't know.) Airline handlers and dildos. Someone in the next stall using a vibrator. Queer women who wonder if they've had bad sex, or just bad third base. Trying to go at it with your loving partner of three years on psychedelics, convinced you're a nymph and he a fawn, and he stops mid-thrust because he's concerned that consent might be an issue.

Ah, yes. Sex. The go-to plot device for cringe-worthy laughter. But what the fuck do you do when someone tells you about what they think was good sex, but it's actually terrible and sort of depressing? Not that it's not your fetish or preference, but that they genuinely think they did something beautiful and mutual, but they actually had unequivocally bad sex?

Let me set the scene. I am fifteen years old. I am sitting in the back of a half-empty fifteen-passenger van, still in my prep-school uniform, on my way to a speech and debate tournament. This might be redundant, but I am a virgin. Including kissing. I would have failed a standard biology test. I had to look up pictures of the Statue of David before I knew if the penis was behind the ball-sack or the other way around. I thought that the basic sex position wasn't missionary, but the man and woman lying splayed end-to-end bumping uglies.

And the astonishing thing was, I was not the most ignorant girl in the van. The other girls, Sandra, Kelsey, Dana, Karen, Erika, and Lacey, didn't know any more than I did. We called Lacey a slut behind her back, but that was only because she flirted with too many boys and stuffed her bra with toilet-paper.

I wish I had a concise explanation for our naiveté, but I don't. You would have thought we would have gone on some solo-missions by now. But Sandra, Kelsey, Karen, and Erika, were be-speckled, plump, quiet girls, who mostly asked about Aquinas and the quadratic formula and Milton Freidman. Lacey's parents and my parents were part of a charismatic, semi-Catholic cult. The elders prayed over boys whose parents had caught them masturbating. Our sex-ed was from a book called "Mother's Little Helper" written in the fifties that taught us that love-making between married people was natural, and we had nothing to be ashamed about, except for our bodies. And Dana, well, she was Canadian.

Except for Elizabeth. Elizabeth had had sex—recently, in fact. Elizabeth was one of the coaches and four years older than us. Just out of high-school and enrolled in community college, Elizabeth seemed very grown-up. She was loud, proud, and always spoke her mind. While generous and understanding, Elizabeth had no sense of delicacy, a skill absolutely essential when dealing with sheltered fifteen-year-old girls. She had told me off-hand once that I had "low-hanging boobs," which I still feel self-conscious about to this day.

Elizabeth, loud and strong, had had sex. She had brought her boyfriend, David, along with her to help judge the out-of-town tournament, and we met him briefly before going to lunch. David wore an expensive scarf. David giggled a lot. David was literally limp at the wrist.

On the ride over to the fast-food drive-through, Erika quietly asked Elizabeth if David might be gay. Homosexuals were fascinating to us, especially male homosexuals. How on earth did they manage to jam a fully erect penis into another man's urethra?

Elizabeth was aghast. “No,” she bellowed, “David is NOT gay. Do you see the way he holds me? Do you see how he dotes on me? And,” she paused, and half-shyly, half-proudly added, “And, we've had sex.”

Sandra, Kelsey, Erika, Dana, Karen, Lacey, and I perked up in our seats. I didn't know anyone who had sex. (I decided my parents were still virgins.) We bombarded her with questions, giggling, impatient, and chirping.

“Okay, you guys. Calm down. I'm trying to look for the Taco-Bell. I'll walk you through it. One thing you should know is that sex involves two orgasms—his and hers. The woman orgasms when the penis is inside her, obviously, but the man orgasms first. His happens when he sees the woman naked. That's why he has to get naked first. It's like a little sneeze for the penis.”

Everyone in the car said, “Oh.”

I said “But—”

Dana elbowed me sharply. I knew Elizabeth's story just wasn't adding up. The semen had to end up in the labia somehow, otherwise how would anyone ever get pregnant? Then again, Dana had reached across fat Karen to elbow me, so she must have known something I didn't, and probably didn't want me to make a fool out of myself in front of grown-up Elizabeth.

Years later, I told this story of Elizabeth's worst sex ever to my then-boyfriend, and he is completely convinced that Elizabeth was just fucking with us. He didn't know Elizabeth.

She had a wicked sense of humor, but she was incapable of lying. She thought she had great sex. We thought she had great sex too, because we thought any sex was great sex. We were wrong.

She's married now (not to David, David married Robert), and I sincerely hope she has mind-blowing, amazing sex, the kind that makes the neighbors complain. I know she remembers her first time—who doesn't?—but I wonder if she remembers telling the seven of us girls about it, wide-eyed, plaid-skirted, and so, so young.

Nadia Arioli

Nadia Arioli is the co-founder and editor in chief of Thimble Literary Magazine. A four-time nominee for Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee, their recent publications include Penn Review, Hunger Mountain, Cider Press Review, Permafrost, Kissing Dynamite, Heavy Feather Review, and San Pedro River Review. They have chapbooks from Cringe-Worthy Poetry Collective, Dancing Girl Press, and Spartan, a full-length from Luchador, and a full-length from Kelsay Books (forthcoming).

