

GOD'S CRUEL JOKE

ISSUE ONE

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A very special thank you to the extremely talented and charming Lacey McKay, who made the amazing cover for this issue. Please extend your patronage her way.

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The Trout's Revenge

by Alex Silberstein

At 3 AM a rumbling discomfort nudged the walls of my stomach and acrid fumes ascended to my throat. The soft puffs of Elayne's breath signaled her descent into slumbry depths while I lay awake in the dark. Something stirred inside me, a protest rising up from my gut, an undulating presence haunting my intestines: it was that fish I ate for dinner, a rainbow trout.

Emerging from my interior into the darkened gloom of the bedroom, the silver-finned specter hovered before me. The trout's cloudy grey eyes glared, and its mouth gaped in a horrible grimace.

"*J'accuse...!*" he shouted, much to my surprise. I didn't expect the fish to speak French. He continued in English with his thick, slimy accent.

"Murderer! I was alive once, just like you. Everyday swimming with my friends, I took such pleasure in the fluid movements that propelled my sleek body through the sun-dappled water. But my happy fish-hood came to an untimely end because of you!"

It seemed silly to defend myself against this indictment by a dead fish, but the illogic of his argument compelled me to respond. “Murder? That’s absurd! You died at the hand of a fisherman long before we met last night.”

“But you were complicit. You were all too happy to have me plucked from the water, bludgeoned and decapitated, the bones ripped from my flesh, then packaged in plastic and Styrofoam, laid out naked on a bed of ice, waiting for your wife to toss me into her cart amongst the tomatoes and English muffins. You had no qualms about her bringing me back to your kitchen to be doused with lemon juice and sautéed over a searing flame. Imagine enduring such torture!”

I found it hard to empathize with the trout. He seemed to harbor pretensions about some grander purpose in his life, clearly having no appreciation for his place in the food chain. “Look, I’m sorry for your pain, but you have to face the fact that you are food, brought into this world to feed a more advanced species.”

The trout leapt on my words. “*Exactement!* You admit to my execution just to gratify your selfish appetites!”

“I admit to having relished each bite, with compliments to my wife Elayne for her artful embellishment of garlic, wine and Italian seasonings that highlighted your delicate flavor!”

“And are you satisfied? Are you happy with your distended belly and the sour taste in your mouth? You justify my torment for the sake of your pleasure, but look at you! You feel like crap!”

The fish had a point there. It’s a shame when a good meal leads to indigestion. Still, it was getting late. This conversation was growing tiresome. I had an early morning meeting and a major project to wrap up tomorrow. “Look, *Monsieur* Trout, what do you want from me? I can’t bring you back to life. I can’t compensate you for your loss and suffering.”

“You can, and you will! You will pay dearly!” As the wraith faded away, his ominous words floated in the air like a corpse gone belly-up in the canal.

The next morning, when I told Elayne about my encounter with the trout, she felt sorry for the damn thing. Lying next to me in a pale blue nightgown, her curly blond hair draped across the pillow, she actually started to cry. “That’s so sad,” she sniffled. “I never thought about the suffering we caused.”

“Oh, come on! You’re the one that cooked that self-righteous son-of-a... fish.”

Elayne’s eyes flared up. “Well, you’re the one that insists on eating meat every night: fried chicken, scallapinied veal, grilled salmon, roasted rack of lamb... it’s like you have to establish your dominance over the animal kingdom at every dinner. I’m sick of it!”

“Since when did you become an animal-rights activist?” I scoffed.

She turned her back to me and a frosty silence descended over the morning as I got ready for work.

When I came home that evening, the dinner table was set for three. Sure enough, come dinnertime, the trout appeared at the table with a condescending sneer.

“Your wife was kind enough to ask me to join you. I hope you don’t mind.”

Did I mind that the meal I consumed last night had returned to confront me for eating it? I was appalled! Elayne

might perpetrate this charade, as if entertaining an honored guest, but I would have none of it.

“You’re a FISH, for Christ sake! And you’re not even alive!”

“But it appears,” countered the trout, “that my death and subsequent dissolution in the crucible of your stomach has occasioned a remarkable, alchemical transformation. And voila! I am reborn!”

“That’s ridiculous! There’s no rational, scientific basis for that!”

“And yet,” the trout shrugged, “here I am, plain as day.”

When Elayne brought in our dishes, I stared at my plate in horror. It was covered with dead bugs. “What in God’s name is this?”

Elayne smiled. “Oh, just a little something I cooked up for Monsieur Truite: Roasted Grasshoppers *Provençal* with Grubs and Mayfly Nymphs.”

The trout came as close to grinning as was possible for a fish. “Oh, how I do love fresh insect! All they ever fed us on the fish farm were those awful tasting green pellets.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to eat this!”

“*Au contraire, mon ami!*” the trout replied. “Insects are an excellent source of nutrition, high in protein, low in cholesterol. Raising farm animals for consumption is a significant contributor to global warming. Humans will have to abandon this practice if they choose to survive. Insects are the food of the future. *Bon appetit!*”

Over dinner Elayne encouraged the trout to tell us about himself. Using a grasshopper antenna as a toothpick, he let out a foul-smelling burp and proceeded to relate the following account:

“I once was a gelatinous, mucousy orb: a fish egg. I never met my parents, and they probably never met each other. Most likely my father’s milt was squeezed from his testes by some college student working at the hatchery as a summer job, just as my mother’s roe was removed from her womb. These fish-o-genic elements were combined in a hygienic vat. From this dispassionate union, I sprouted as a tiny troutling along with thousands of my siblings to make our way through the troughs and spillways.

“Perhaps to the calculating eyes of the technicians who monitored the fiberglass tanks I was indistinguishable from the hordes of other little fries. But I ask, from whence came the conviction that I harbored in my soul that I was somehow different, that I was destined for greatness? There’s no explanation, and perhaps all my fellow fish share the same delusion. And yet, against all reason, I have risen above my station, beyond the pond.

“I believe the French influence came from my mother’s side. Pure fiction, you might complain. Yet what option have I but to imagine my ancestry? Genetically assembled on a farm factory like some widget, I must re-invent myself for my life to have meaning. Don’t we all fabricate our histories, choosing salient details to create a flattering narrative?

“I imagine I come from a long line of *truite amandine* and *meuniere*. Perhaps French royalty dined on my great-great-great-great-great *grand-père*. When the citizens of Paris stormed the Bastille, cheers went up from all the fish in the Seine. Unfortunately, the Revolution did little to improve our lot, and we realized we would eventually need to take matters into our own hands.

“My early existence was monotonous. We circled our container again and again. Always the same direction, the water kept at a constant temperature to maintain optimal growth. We received fish feed from mechanical distributors at regularly timed intervals.

“But then, one glorious day, we were released into an outdoor pool. Never mind that this was an artificial pond, a concrete hole filled with water. I could see blue sky and the air was alive with flying things I had never imagined existed. I remember the first time a gnat skimmed the water’s surface and I instinctively lunged for it, swallowing the beast whole. Oh, the joy, the thrill!

“However, my carefree life ended one fateful day when a feathery green fly dangled before me. Like a fool I gobbled her up, along with the hook she concealed. And that is how I came to be here at your dinner table.”

Bringing this fish tale to a conclusion, the trout had clearly hooked Elayne. Her eyes glistened.

I went to bed hungry.

I tried to ignore the trout’s presence in our household where he’d appeared to have taken up residence. But coming home from work, I’d find the fish and Elayne huddled over coffee in the kitchen. They engaged in lengthy, animated conversations about poetry, politics, and metaphysics. Or they’d be gone until late in the evening, when they would noisily stumble into the house, obviously inebriated. “*Pardonnez-moi!*” the trout slurred insincerely.

Elayne began to refer to him as “Trooty”, which irritated me no end. She became distant. Dishes piled up in the sink, the laundry went undone. There was something fishy going on.

Finally, I confronted the two of them as they whispered together in a corner of the living room.

Elayne was unapologetic. “If you must know, we’ve become lovers.”

“Yes,” said the trout, “We have a deep, inter-species connection. You probably wouldn’t understand.”

But I understood all too well. They moved out and got an apartment downtown. Sitting home alone, I’d shudder as I imagined the trout wriggling over her body, Elayne writhing with pleasure. I tried not to picture him entering her, but having conjured up the image, I couldn’t banish it from my mind. I became obsessed, torturing myself as I envisioned my piscine rival slithering between her legs.

I began to frequent the neighborhood watering hole. I dove in deep. The bartender, a lanky young fellow with an over-zealous mustache, tried to keep up a friendly banter as he refilled my glass. I didn’t engage, just downed the liquid oblivion and asked for another one.

Then one night, a few months later, Elayne showed up, begging me to take her back. The trout had dumped her. She moved back home, but she could never lose that smell and I couldn’t stand being near her.

I had hoped I would never hear of that damned fish again, but he refused to go away. He began appearing on late night television as a motivational speaker. He exhorted his audience to live audaciously. “Follow my example,” he urged, “You will overcome any obstacle!” People loved him.

His made a fortune with his line of frozen insect cuisine. He married a supermodel, their stormy relationship constantly flaunted on social media. He started gracing the covers of tabloid magazines with celebrities who sported bulging

muscles and deep cleavages. Adoring fans wore fish-head hats as they lined up outside in the cold to get his autograph.

The trout glided through the halls of power, currying favor, forming alliances. Inevitably, there were calls for him to run for office. Despite rumors of financial and sexual improprieties (or maybe because of them), his popularity grew. Even claims that the trout was a fraud, that he wasn't really a trout at all but actually a Brazilian catfish, couldn't stop his meteoric rise to the top. To those who challenged his suitability he defiantly replied: "Show me where it's written in the Constitution that a dead fish can't be president!"

Once elected, the trout pushed aggressively to grant equal rights to fish and eliminate any obstacles to their full participation in society. Soon fish were everywhere, slipping and sliding down the sidewalk, sipping lattes at cafes, filling up the pews at church. You couldn't go to the theater without having to sit next to a flounder or a mackerel. Sturgeon took over the finance industry, while tropical fish dominated fashion.

People complain about being marginalized. I don't speak up much, feeling somewhat responsible for the way things have gone. At least Elayne had a head start learning to cook bugs. After I lost my job to a moray eel, she opened up a fast-food joint selling fried fruit flies. You know, they really aren't all that bad once you get used to them.

Alex Silberstein

San Francisco psychotherapist Alex Silberstein writes around the corner from reality, on the edge of dreams, seeking inspiration from the idle chatter of trees. His flash fiction has appeared in *Writer's Egg Magazine*, received a **“Close-but-no-cigar shout-out”** for The Molotov Cocktail Flash Contest Series, and is scheduled to appear in the upcoming issue of *Beechwood Review*.

Apocalypse

by Jenna Dirksen

there is no fire in the fireplace. there is no water in the brita filter. we are alone in a house that loathes us, stinking and filthy, with every beam of its walls. two cats fuck outside in the forest and they are screaming. my lips are dry cracked bloody brown. dried blood is brown and it spiders into lace patterns across my mouth, between my legs. the sun is out but I have put sheets over the windows. light is foul, light is heavy. it is too frightening to leave the dark. we have become like deep cavern creatures, giant fanged worms with no eyes. there is no morning or night, only breath and heartbeat. a man walks outside in the street but he will be dead soon, this is known. the black road sticks to his shoes like tar, pulls his feet deep into itself, he is being swallowed. turns his face up to the sun, merciful. when he falls it is quiet, a hollow noise eaten by the starved earth. a cat walks past his body. dips its orange head, sniffs, then continues on. I move my hand and the sheet falls back over the window. there is nothing to see, no life in the planet's stomach. no fire in the fireplace no water in the brita filter. soon there will be no air, only leather-hard flesh and a pair of calcified lungs. I had a dog a long time ago, soft fur sad eyes. a moment of lucid thought, a bright yellow star. we were all alive once and it was so beautiful. no one will ever feel that way again.

Masc. for Mask

by J Thomas Meador

Before leaving the apartment I donned my disguise. Chose the most flattering jeans. Tucked my shirt. Slid my bangs every which way to camouflage the waning hairline. Finally, I was ready for my date with destiny. Ready to meet this “really great friend” of yours – the one you promised I'd “really get a kick out of.”

It took less than thirty seconds for me to figure out that we have nothing in common.

No. Not true. The only thing he and I have in common is that we're both wearing the same shoes. Perry Ellis'. Black. Dark red stripe on the sides.

When he saw this he squealed, covering his mouth. “Oh my God. It's fate. We were *supposed* to go out tonight!”

I feigned interest. Nodded. Sipped my beer to avoid responding. I've been doing this since the date started. Since we met at the bar.

In the comic books you and I read there's a certainty when new characters are introduced. Superpowers tell you everything you need to know. Who's good. Who's bad. Who's hiding a secret. Meanwhile, Your Friend hides nothing.

It's not that I'm picky. Far from it. It's as simple as this: nothing is good enough for him. If anything, *that* is his superpower. The atmosphere isn't fun enough, isn't gay enough. The drinks are watered. The guys are just *okay*. He's been to better bars in Mississippi, he claims.

From my count, he's been complaining, non-stop, for three re-mixes.

“Oh, Jeez,” Your Friend says suddenly, covering his face. He rests his elbow on a knockoff Greek god statue. “That guy over there. See him? In the corner.” He nods towards a hottie with a body perched on a stool by the pool tables. He's a bit older, handsome, and fills his shirt well.

“What about him?” I ask, making eye contact with the guy.

“I saw him at Old Navy, today,” he says in a loud, don't-you-know-what-I'm-saying tone.

I shrug, peeling the label off my beer. “He's cute.”

“Oh, please. He got that shirt off the clearance rack.” Your Friend leans in close. Hermes cologne with a grapefruit chaser. “But,” he goes on, whispering the juicy gossip, “Clearance Boy didn't buy it. His Sugar Daddy paid for *everything*. It was so weird.”

“Why's that weird? It's a nice shirt.”

Your Friend rolls his eyes. Slurps the tail end of his Salty Dog. “Trust me. you can't wear anything clearance at a club in this town.”

“Oh.” I try not to think that my Perry Ellis' were half off at the discount shoe store. I have a lot to learn about social etiquette. Maybe this is why I'm single.

Suddenly, Your Friend gasps. Grabs my arm. Digs his buffed nails into my skin. “Oh. My. God. There he is. It's Sugar

Daddy!” He doesn't casually point. He doesn't gesture. He lunges. Makes sure I see the barrel-chested guy approaching the hottie. Black-blue hair. Trimmed beard. Tight jeans. Leather chest harness.

“I thought he'd be older, the way you made it sound.”

“What?” Your Friend squeaks. “He is. He's gotta be, like, forty.”

I shrug, wondering if my gym membership is still valid. “He's got a nice chest.”

“Oh no,” Your Friend warns, moving his claw-hand over my heart. “You do *not* want to get mixed up with that. You'll end up on a rack in Sugar Daddy's basement. He'll probably spank you with a leather paddle while Clearance Boy films the whole thing. But,” he winks flirtatiously, “if that's your thing...” His voice trails off, as if I'm supposed to laugh. The music segues into an eletronica anthem, and Your Friend starts clapping. “Oh, hell yeah, I love this song!” And, of course, he starts dancing.

I watch the guys from across the room. Sugar Daddy. Clearance Boy. Your Friend talks about them as if these were their names. As if they were superheroes hiding their true identities. I hope that they are. Maybe they dress in discount leather costumes and go out on the weekends to monitor the community in Gaytropolis. Maybe they thwart gay-bashings, hand out condoms and flavored lube, and maybe they drive drunk bar patrons home, and of course, call to check on them in the morning.

It makes me wonder about Your Friend. What's his super-name? The Talker? The Exaggerator? The Couture Crusader? Or maybe he's a villain. Either way, Your Friend is a terrible sidekick, and you're the worst commissioner Gaytropolis has ever had. I hope Sugar Daddy and Clearance Boy have an opening on their team. With our combined forces we could

fight off Your Friend's super-sonic hips and protect humanity against his spaghetti-noodle arms.

“Don't look now,” he says, suddenly motionless. “They're staring at us. I'll be right back.” He runs to the bar.

I'm already living on the edge tonight. I make eye contact.

Sugar Daddy tips a Newcastle to his lips and winks at me. I lean against the wall and arch my back. Show off my body. I hope they have x-ray vision and can see my ass in these jeans. The duo whisper to each other and nod in agreement. Sugar Daddy adjusts himself. Walks to the bar. He takes the spot next to Your Friend and uses mind control to strike up a conversation. Your Friend looks shocked, but plays it off with his power of snark and defensive body language.

“How you doin'?” I turn to see Clearance Boy standing next to me. My heart twists. Pounds. My breath shortens. He smiles. Nice teeth. This must be how Lois Lane felt the first time.

“I'm good. How're you?”

He looks me up and down, then smiles and says, “Having a good night?”

Before I answer, Your Friend peels around the bar wearing a stressed, exaggerated smile. Sugar Daddy follows close on his heels.

“Hey, boys,” Sugar Daddy says, pulling out a metal cigarette case. Menthols and two expertly rolled joints. He lights a cigarette. “What're you up to, tonight?”

I hesitate, nodding at Your Friend. “We're on a date.” I hope there was an audible cry for help, or that Sugar Daddy can read between the lines.

Instead of showing pity, he raises his eyebrows. Pursing his lips, he says, “Oh, aren't you the lucky guys.” He exhales a smoke screen. Maybe it's enough for me vanish.

Your Friend grabs my arm before I have a chance to escape. “Oh-Em-Gee!” he says, pointing at Clearance Boy's feet. “Look!”

Black Perry Ellis'. Dark red stripe on the sides.

Clearance Boy angles his feet as if he were modeling. “I love these shoes. They're so comfy.”

“We should start a shoe club,” I say with all the sarcasm I can muster.

“Where'd you get 'em?” Your Friend asks, baiting, stirring his fresh cocktail.

Clearance Boy smooths a hand over his gelled hair. “You won't believe me, but I got 'em at the discount shoe place. Twenty bucks. Retail value's, like, seventy-five.” He looks at his feet, in awe of his financial prowess. “I'm the master of markdowns and sale racks.”

I can't blame his excitement. I'm proud of my shoes, too. But, I feel Your Friend's eyes on me. He gives me a quick look that says, 'discount shoe place' with a disgusted eye roll. He turns to our new friends and relates a dissimilar story. “I got mine in New York. Went on a shopping spree and spent two *thousand* on shoes, clothes, and a new messenger bag.” For effect, he wipes his brow as if it was hard work for him.

Sugar Daddy yawns smoke, unimpressed, seeing through the bull shit. “So what'd you guys do for your date, tonight?”

“We're doing it,” Your Friend says, wrapping his arm around my waist. I'm being held hostage. A damsel in distressing conversation. Soon I'll be tied to railroad tracks.

“Didn't I see you here the other day?” Clearance Boy asks, looking Your Friend up and down.

Your Friend's arm squeezes tighter. He's quick to set the record straight. “No. Not me. I don't come here much.”

“You sure? I mean, met a guy last Tuesday, looked like you. We talked about Mariah Carey. He was pretty drunk.”

Your Friend feverishly shakes his head. “I'm *sure* it wasn't me. I don't go out on Tuesdays.”

The super-hunks exchange a glance and a smirk. Are they planning my rescue?

“You guys want a shot?” Clearance Boy asks with an impish grin.

“I probably shouldn't,” I say.

Sugar Daddy wiggles his chest. His nipples dance. “Oh, come on, cutie.”

“I'm buying,” Clearance Boy adds, borrowing the menthol for a drag.

At the sound of free alcohol Your Friend releases his vice grip on me. “That would be divine,” he says.

I rub my bruised ribs. “Okay. But just one. I have to drive.”

“We'll be right back,” Your Friend says as he skips away with Clearance Boy. Just as he leaves ear shot, I hear him say, “By the way, I love your shirt. Where'd you get it?”

It's me and Sugar Daddy. I can't help but stare at his patriotic eyes. Marijuana red, white and blue. I feel frozen in place. How many super powers does he have? “You horny?” he asks.

“Excuse me?”

He leans close; his whiskers tickle my ear. “Are? You? Horny?”

“I’m... I mean... Why do you ask?” I hate myself for being too pale to hide embarrassment.

“Been horny all day. Worked a whole shift with a boner under my apron.” I don’t look directly at Sugar Daddy’s hands, but I can see him rub his crotch. “You guys wanna party at our place?” The hand traces his denim bulge.

Suddenly, the shots arrive.

“We’re back!” Your Friend announces. For a split second, I’m happy to see him. Thrilled. Grateful, actually. “I want to make a toast,” he says, lifting his plastic cup into the air with an extended pinky. “Here’s to the men who we love. Though the men who we love may not love us, so screw the men we love, and here’s to us.”

We down our lemondrops in a single gulp.

Sugar Daddy wipes his furry lips and stares at me. “You didn’t answer my question.”

My face turns red. Vodka and glass cleaner burns in my throat.

Clearance Boy crumples the plastic shot glass with super-strength, and looks at us, confused.

“What was the question?”

Sugar Daddy winks at his sidekick. “We were just makin’ small talk.”

Clearance Boy winks back. Smiles. The disco ball twinkles off his perfect teeth.

“Thanks, but I’m okay,” I finally tell them.

I see Sugar Daddy's ego shatter. I've shot a laser torpedo through the forcefield and caused damage. "I wasn't hitting on you," he says. "It's just, a lot of guys come here for sex, but we don't do that. I swear. We're just wondering what you guys are looking for."

Just as I'm about to answer, Your Friend cares enough to make his own thoughts known. "Well, I want another shot," he says into his empty cup. There's still plenty of salty dog in his other hand.

Suddenly, thankfully, my left pocket vibrates.

A text message. From you. I excuse myself and go outside to respond.

How's it going? Having fun?

I type with lightning speed. *We're at the bar doing shots with strangers.*

Awesome, you respond. He sent me a text. He really likes you.

Now I'm silent. This isn't what I wanted to know. You're probably sitting on the couch, smiling, feeling proud of yourself.

I respond with a frown face.

Give him time. Everybody warms up, after a while. Call me later.

I stare at your message. The phone glows blue against my face. I want to aim it at the sky like a spotlight. Splash pride colors all over the clouds. Nearby homosexual heroes will come to my aid. I will be rescued. There will be an off-season parade.

Your Friend and the Super men are nowhere to be found when I step back inside. How long was I gone? The club is

barely big enough for people to get lost, but there's more than enough room to hide from people if you don't want to be seen. I'm not particularly eager to re-join my teammates just yet, so I head to the bathroom – a sanctuary of solitude – where I can regain my inner strength and empty my bladder.

A line of urinals runs the length of the wall opposite the door. Above the urinals are mirrors. I stand there, junk in one hand, fixing my hair with the other. Relief. I fight with my bangs, and, in the mirror, I see the bathroom door open. A gust of electronica follows Sugar Daddy as he walks in. I quickly go back to my business.

“Oh yeah,” he says. His mustache twitches and his eyes widen. Not a normal look of recognition.

I watch in the mirror. He bends at the waste. Stares under the opening of the stall beside me. I turn, still peeing. A pair of black Perry Ellis shoes with dark red stripes poke out from under the divider. Another pair of shoes – same make and model – stand facing the first person. Sugar Daddy gives me a knowing smile. Nods his head to the stall door, inviting me to the inner sanctum.

I shrug, scrunching my face with a thanks-but-no-thanks. I'm barely comfortable *walking* on floors like this – don't ask me to get on my knees.

Sugar Daddy raises his arms. Shrugs back. *Suit yourself*. Without knocking, he pushes the stall door open and steps inside. The lock clicks.

I flush the toilet and wash my hands. A lot. Turning to leave, I glance one last time at the bottom of the stall.

In the muted light of a bathroom it's impossible to tell whose shoes are discounted. That's a job for professionals. Sugar Daddy and Clearance Boy are on the case. My work here is done.

After paying my bar tab I walk through the crowd, towards the front door, and glance at the figurative masks that everyone wears. Think about the secret identities populating Gaytropolis this evening. For a Saturday night it's not too busy. It shouldn't be difficult. Could that be the UPS guy dancing shirtless on a go-go block? Has he traded in the brown uniform for a thick sheen of spray glitter? Could that one be a waiter from the restaurant around the corner? Instead of a pressed white shirt and name tag he wears a tank top with the words "I kiss boys" written across the chest. I wade through the leather, the make-up, expertly coifed hair, the brume of cigarette smoke and colognes that linger long after last call. There are plenty of masks, yes, but nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone puts on a disguise when they go out, because everyone wants to be noticed, but no one wants to stand out.

I step outside, into the night, and breathe easy. Tomorrow, at brunch, I'll tell you all about it. And I'll tell you not to worry about me. After all, somebody has to be a private citizen in a world full of Saturday night superheroes.

J Thomas Meador

J Thomas Meador (he/him) has had stories appear across the internet or in print journals such as Dirty Chai, Gravel, Flash Fiction Magazine, The Sheepshead Review, Harpur Palate, and New Plains Review. Instead of pursuing a MFA in Creative Writing from a prestigious university, he chose to study filmmaking in the lion's den of Southern California. He currently lives in Raleigh, NC, and can also be found at www.jthomasmeador.com.

and at 7:00

by Aaron Barry

Hollywood pedo adrenochrome dome boipussy fanatic
arrested in connection with child-trafficking ring
a bell? yes this is the same bloated oleaginous geriatric
implicated seven years ago in the suicide deaths of
three minors a team of data-miners working in the San
Fernando valley
found connections between the accused and young stars
stars coming out now showing their programmed sex-slave-
Stockholm-syndrome
singular disavowal of these charges vouching for studio
blackmail overlord #n
more to come tonight as the story emerges emerging justice
we hope for the victims pending this just in the charges
have now been dropped.

Aaron Barry

Aaron Barry (IG: @aaronmbarry, @ zennialhaiku) is a haiku and free verse poet and teacher from Vancouver, Canada. His work has been featured in over forty different publications, including Modern Haiku Magazine, Cathexis, and Defunct Magazine, and he was recently shortlisted for the Haiku Foundation's 2021 Touchstone Award for Individual Poems. His debut poetry collection, *eggplants & teardrops: a haiku collection*, was released earlier this year.

burnout

by Raina Allen

burnt like a metal spoon.

like the residue in the syringe she plunged into ready veins, rubbing, scratching sandpaper, cascading blood fountains onto one another, candy blue coating, red chickenpox and bruises in constellations on waxy malnourished limbs. gangly as a newborn foal.

there is a bridge over a volcano and i'm standing on the middle while it burns the wick at both ends. it stays standing and i'm watching the flames lick along dry rotten wood while the lava bubbles beneath and the smog is thick and the smoke is bitter in my throat, gagging, choking, i'm spluttering and the spit dissolves midair in the heat, evaporates like my every breath.

disease. her back is open from infection and we pack the gauze inside her like stuffing from a chewed up teddy bear and she's wincing and popping pills like tic tacs but her breath is rancid from the sickness on the bed that is drying up like clay. the sheets are stained yellow and they smell like death and bile and the boy is standing in the corner crying while her mom dresses her as she did

when she was a baby, but her wrists are thin and her face is sallow and sunken in with the craters of emptiness from the youth that's been eaten out of her as termites would.

but i'm fighting the man in my bed who thinks no means yes and yes means yes and everything in between means yes because his knee is separating mine and he's thrice my size and his forehead bangs my headboard while he forces himself inside me, ripping the skin, popping it like buttons on a sunday blouse, tearing up christmas wrapping paper with the satisfying yelps of a child in his ears. but the yelps are mine and the pain feels like fingernails in my eyeballs and poison ivy on my tongue and i'm hung to dry as laundry on the line, and he stinks and there's ogre's breath in my mouth and spoiled smelling sweat all over me like i'm bathing in his oils.

who is hurting here? dominoes on kiddie carpets and they click, clack, click, knocking each other down, pushing around like cattle led off to slaughter, to be milked for every last drop of sweet secretion. do you hear the cries of the calves with hungry bellies and dripping snouts, and does the wolf in you wish to feed?

because i'm falling, down, into bubbles and boils of flame and i'm hungry to eat my own charred flesh and suck on the bones and lick my sticky fingers and somehow have nothing left to burn.

i have gotten old enough to know that Jesus did not die for us. he died for himself, to spare the years of being tied to two trucks and slowly pulled apart until the skin of the torso tears and the spine cracks with wet pops and intestines pour along the concrete and the hogs eat your entrails and their bloody snouts and hoofs leave the stain of your existence tattooed upon the earth. it's not the hellfire to be afraid of.

it's the burning out.

Raina Allen

Raina Allen is a young aspiring poet, born and raised in rural Pennsylvania. She is a strong advocate for women's rights and mental health, and often uses her poetry as a vehicle to discuss her own experiences with these issues. Her work is also set to appear in Black Spot Books' upcoming Women in Horror poetry collection "Under Her Eye" in November of 2023.

The King's Oldest Son

by Douglas Robinson

I Restore Order

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they chastise him, will not give heed to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, "This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Deuteronomy 21:18 – 21

"Close your eyes or I'll close em for you," I say to the peasants alongside the road.

"Close your eyes," the crows perched on their shoulders echo. "I'll close em."

They're all bandits, every damn one of em, I can see that right there in their eyes, which are yellow. Yellow-eyed bandits with hairy pouches and long rat-like tails.

I wave my arm and my soldiers leap into action. Blood and guts by the side of the road. My men fall to the cutting off of foreskins.

"I'll call this place," I declare, looking about in a steely fashion as if daring anyone to defy my authority, "Blood-n-Guts, for here today many a brave man lost his life."

I Am Invited to Dinner

You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to the alien who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a people holy to Yahweh your God.

Deuteronomy 14:21

“Dinner, sir.”

“What?”

“Won’t you honor us by sitting at our table?”

Honor them! Honor the sheep they would slaughter.
Honor is a rack of mutton bubbling with hot fat.

I Fuck a Duck

If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her; he may not put her away all his days.

Deuteronomy 22:28

“I want that girl there as my wife.”

“But she’s only eight.”

“All right then! I won’t marry her, I’ll just fuck her. Here’s your fifty shekels.”

Eight! She’s thirteen if she’s a day. The fools are lying, trying to protect her from the predator. The king’s son! Give him whatever he wants. But try to talk him out of wanting the impossible.

My entourage and I move to a grassy hillock, where I brutally deflower the girl. She moans with pleasure, bites her lip. Her eyes squinched tight, a tear popping through one lid. So happy is this peasant girl to receive the prince’s seed. So obedient that she refrains from gushing over me, clinging to me. Not wanting to ruin *my* pleasure.

She is a duckling. Yellow feathers and yellow beak. When I’m done I tell my men to toss her back in the pond. As she swims about happily I think that she looks a bit like my brother’s sister Tamar.

Quack quack!

I Think About Foreskins Again

He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 23:1

Around the fire that night the men tell stories of my father. What a hero. Everybody's favorite. At my age he'd already severed the foreskins of a thousand Philistines. They were dead when he did it, of course. He killed them, then hauled up the skirts of their tunics and sliced off their foreskins. Kind of a strange way to prove your valor in battle, I always thought, cutting skin off of dead guys' dicks. Pinching the foreskin between thumb and forefinger and stretching it out just so, then *whack!* with your knife. My dad showed me how, once. Took me out onto the battlefield, made me watch while he yanked up all those skirts and circumcised all those dead guys. He might have done thirty or forty himself. His men were out there too, all of them hard at work with their knives and their thumbs and forefingers. "Gotta be careful, one little slip and you could slice a finger off." Those knives were *sharp*. No sawing back and forth. Just one clean swipe and the little squirmy piece of flesh was off, on its way into the special little foreskin pouch. Not much blood. I guess the new Jews had been dead for a few hours by then. The blood had settled already.

Coming off the battlefield Dad led us through town, where of course they'd killed every man, woman, child, and animal. God's orders. Wipe out the enemy, make more room for God's People. The town was already looted, so we moved through pretty fast, Dad stopping only two or three times to relieve some old dead guy or young boy of his foreskin; some of the men stopping to fuck some particularly sexy corpse they'd

found. They got really annoyed when Dad broke it up before everybody'd had his turn, but what were they going to do? He was the king. He was the mighty David. God was with him. Go against him and you could find yourself struck dead by lightning, like Uzzah, who just steadied the Ark of the Covenant a little with his hand, or Uriah, whose wife Dad wanted to do.

I was young, then, seven or eight. Too young to fight. Too young to line up for a turn on the dead woman. And by the time I got to be old enough to do those things, there was no more fighting to do. Dad had already taken over everywhere. King of Judah, king of Israel. I was born in Hebron after his first flush of victories against Saul, who was king back then. But God liked Dad more than Saul so he took the kingdom away from Saul and gave it to Dad. That made me a prince. Someday I'll be king. Then I'll go into battle and hew down brave soldiers by the thousand and cut off their foreskins just so and then fuck a dead sexy woman on my way home for dinner.

I Eat Dinner

And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten. All clean winged things you may eat.

Deuteronomy 14:19 – 20

“Yes, yes, I’m coming.”

Tamar looks golden in the candlelight. The fleece on her arms like the fleece on a big ripe golden fig. I imagine biting that fig and letting the juice run down my chin. To my surprise just then a servant hands me a ripe fig. I bite it and let the juice run down my chin. Tamar watches me do it.

I Take a Stroll

A man shall not take his father's wife, nor shall he uncover her who is his father's.

Deuteronomy 22:30

After dinner I take a stroll through the harem and reflect on the injustice that Dad has all these soft fleshy wives and concubines and I, his oldest son and heir apparent, have none. My father's an old goat with hairy horns. He is practically fifty. He has gray hairs on his balls but still fucks somebody every goddamned day. Some days two or three. I never get to fuck anybody. And I'll be twenty next birthday. Some of my dad's concubines are younger than me. He can't fuck them all. Why can't he bring me to the harem and throw his arms wide and say "Take your pick, boy," or "The world's your oyster, son, fuck away," or "Some day all this will be yours," or some grandiose shit like that?

Of course I'm exaggerating a little. I fuck the servant girls. And I grab me an occasional duckling by the side of the road. But I really fail to see how any of that counts next to having your own harem stocked with all the most beautiful women in Israel.

I See a Woman Buck Naked

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to Yahweh; and because of these abominable practices Yahweh your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before Yahweh your God.

Deuteronomy 18:10 – 13

I tell my men to take me to the Witch of Endor. She makes them wait outside. When we're alone she strips naked. This is pretty amazing to me. If I'd known this I would have come earlier. Of course she's a million years old or something, and has dog hairs sprouting out of her all over her body, and her cunt lips hang down like fingers, all yellow and tallowy, and I know I'd never want to stick my dick in *there*. But still.

Then she takes a deep draft of a magic potion, or gives me a cup of magic potion to drink, or something, and then she turns into Tamar, not really, but damn if it isn't a pretty uncanny likeness, her tits small and nubby, the dog hairs gone, the pussy small and black and compact, and all over her body a fine sheen of sweat as if from the effort.

She goes all coy and coquettish.

“Do you want me?”

“I do! When can I have you?”

“Any time you want. Just take me!”

“I want the *real* Tamar.”

“I am the real Tamar.”

“As soon as I am done with you you’ll turn back into a withered old hag with saggy tits and stretchy yellow cunt lips.”

She shrugs casually.

“This is your one chance, Amnon, to have me. Take me now and clasp your sister to your bosom as often as you like. Refuse me and you’ll never lick the sweat off the undersides of her tits.”

Bleah! Lick the sweat! I almost throw up. She sees this and instantly turns into my father.

I Defend My Dignity

And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, "What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest the heart of his fellows melt as his heart." And when the officers have made an end of speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.

Deuteronomy 20:8 – 9

"Dad!" I cry.

"By the tits of Meshe, boy," he splutters, "what are you doing here? Trying to find out when I'll die and you'll be king?"

"No, Dad, I—"

"It's girls, isn't it. You aren't getting laid enough. You want to fuck my concubines."

"Dad, how did you—"

"You think I don't know what's going on in my own house? You think I don't hear all about it every time you sneak in and jack off while the girls are taking a bath?"

I feel myself flush and hate myself for it.

"If you want me to treat you like a man you'd better start acting like one. Why, when I was your age I was out circumcising Philistines. I was a *general* by the time I turned twenty."

“I know, Dad. But you won’t let me join your army. You won’t even give me an entourage to march around the countryside with.”

“Oh, right, so you can stir up rebellion against me.”

“No, Dad, I swear, I’d never—“

“No, you’re right, you probably wouldn’t. Absalom, he’s the rebel, something tells me.”

“That’s right! He’s said things to me plenty of times!”

“You don’t need to rat out your brother, son. My spies have already told me every word he’s ever said to you. Or to anybody.”

“Then let me have an entourage, Dad! Please! Just ten men!”

“Ten men!”

“Five! It’s all I ask!”

“When I think of the damage you could do with five men. You’d have them kill anybody who looked cross-eyed at you. You’d use them to protect you against angry villagers while you fucked their virgin daughters. I know you, future king of Israel.”

The scorn in his voice as he says this makes my blood run cold, until I remember that this isn’t really my dad, it’s the Witch of Endor in some kind of trance, and I open my eyes and find myself at home in bed, my dick and balls sucked up tight into my scrotum, the door to my room banging.

I Argue with Absalom Again

If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples that are round about you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him; but you shall kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and never again do any such wickedness as this among you.

Deuteronomy 13:6 – 11

I get tangled up for like the millionth time in a stupid argument with Absalom about Dad's past. He figures this whole business about God getting mad at Saul for not doing exactly what he told him to do is a crock of camel shit. We heard the story from our cousin Jehonadab. Jehonadab is ten years older than me, and kind of like Dad's right-hand man. If anybody knows this stuff, I figure, he does. I tell Absalom so.

"What," he snorts, "you think Jehonadab was there when God talked to Samuel? If God talked to Samuel."

"No, but he heard the story from his father Shimeah our uncle, our father's brother. Shimeah was there when Samuel anointed Dad, the youngest of Grandpa Jesse's eight sons.

Shimeah had the story straight from Samuel. This is a known fact.”

“A known fact. Grow up. Shimeah could have lied. Jehonadab could have made the whole thing up.”

“Lied! Made the whole thing up! Jehonadab would never do that! He’s an honorable man like his father before him!”

“You’re such a simp. Jehonadab is a fox like his father before him, and his uncle our father. Jehonadab will do anything to keep Dad in power, and himself close to the source of that power.”

“What could you possibly know about any of that? You’re but a child, a baby.”

“You’re two years older and twice the baby I am. You believe whatever fairy tales Dad or anyone tells you. You think that God really gave Dad the kingdom because Saul let King Agag live.”

“*And* kept out some sheep and cows, don’t forget!”

“Right. A king and some sheep and cows. So for that God snatches the whole kingdom away from Saul and hands it over to Dad.”

“Why not? God is all-powerful. He can choose whoever he wants to be king.”

“And it’s just coincidence that this story is the perfect justification of Dad’s revolt against Saul.”

“Dad didn’t revolt! Saul tried to kill him!”

“If I started a revolt, Dad would try to kill me too. And if I succeeded, you can bet I’d come up with a good story about Dad and God. Dad broke some commandment, committed adultery, ha ha, and God waxed wroth with him and decided to give the kingdom to me.”

“Why would he give it to you? You’re third in line, after me and then Kileab.”

“I didn’t say God would give me the kingdom for *real*, you dumb fuck. I said if I somehow managed to overthrow Dad, I’d *say* God gave me the kingdom because Dad nailed Bathsheba or whoever.”

“How can you talk about overthrowing Dad? This is treasonous talk! What if he hears about you talking this way?”

“I was speaking hypothetically, numbnuts. Don’t be so fucking literal all the time. People don’t always mean exactly what they say.”

“I do.”

“Yes, that’s true. And that’s why you’ll never be king.”

“Never be king! What are you saying!”

“Mark my words. Jehonadab will find a way to keep you off the throne.”

“Absalom, Absalom!” I cry. “You’re paranoid! That’s your problem.”

“No, I *think*. *That’s* my problem. I pay attention, and figure things out. I think to myself, for instance: how plausible is it that God picks the youngest of eight shepherd boys to be Saul’s successor, and *then* Saul just happens to pick this same shepherd boy to play the harp for him?”

“What’s so strange about that?”

“A bunch of nobodies in Bethlehem. The eighth son becomes God’s anointed, which is a stretch to start with, but forget about that. Nobody knows that God’s chosen Dad, except Samuel, and Samuel ain’t saying, because he’s afraid Saul will pour honey all over him and stake him to an anthill. So then God sends Saul an evil spirit to make him crazy,

because he's pissed off at Saul and loves to torment people he's pissed off at. Somebody says, 'Get a harpist.' Saul thinks, hey, good idea. There's this obscure eighth son of a sheep rancher in an obscure town called Bethlehem that I've just happened to hear plays the harp real swell. Get *him* to come play for me whenever God starts fucking with my head. And this obscure harpist just happens to be his successor, already chosen by God. Dad's a total unknown, a hick, a rube, but Saul knows all about him. Saul says 'Get me that youngest son of Jesse fella, he's the harpist for me.'"

"Surely if God wanted to make Dad king, he could put the idea in Saul's head to hire him as harpist. Is that such an outlandish idea to you, that Almighty God can do whatever he wants?"

"It isn't the *ability*, you peabrain. Of course God can do whatever he puts his mind to. It's *appearances*. It's how it looks. Actually it's the trade-off between how it looks and how it works. Presumably God chooses Samuel to do all this anointing stuff, and say has Saul just sort of come up with the idea of having Dad play the harp for him, to make it *look* good, right? To make it look *natural*. It's inefficient, but at least it looks like God ain't micromanaging Israel. But Saul hiring Dad as harpist fucks the look of it up. It fucks with *plausibility*. You see what I'm saying here? Plausibility. It just ain't plausible. I mean, if God isn't worried at all about plausibility, why didn't he just take Dad by the hand and march into Jerusalem, strike Saul dead, and say 'See this kid here? He's the new king'? Why all the rebellions, wars, murder attempts? We grew up in an armed camp because God decided to make Dad Saul's harpist instead of just marching in or appearing in the clouds or something and declaring him king."

"Harpist, then general," I say pedantically. I can't help myself.

“Yeah, there’s another masterstroke,” Absalom sneers. “How many harpists do you know of that become famous generals? The whole harpist part of it reeks to high heaven. Dad’s revolution is successful, gotta make it look like God’s will, lessee, how could we spin it so it looks good? I know: King David plays the harp! We’ll say King Saul brought him to court to play the harp! Uh huh. *There’s* a brainstorm that shoulda died in committee.”

There’s just no pleasing Absalom. He’s bitter about everything.

But then, his mom’s dad is king of Geshur. That’s why he’s got such an *attitude* about all this stuff, I bet.

I See What's Mine

You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your cloak with which you cover yourself.

Deuteronomy 22:12

Returning from Absalom's mother's rooms I pass an open window and happen to see Tamar rising from her bath. As a servant wraps a cloth around her wet breasts, my sister looks up and catches my eye. She is a doorway, a portal. She is the gypsy standing in the doorway, painting her toenails yellow. She is the cunt of the sow that licks the gypsy's toes. She is a dead animal with no mouth or anus. She is mine. I burn with a wild yellow bat-like fire.

I Have a Vision

If there is among you any man who is not clean by reason of what chances to him by night, then he shall go outside the camp, he shall not come within the camp; but when evening comes on, he shall bathe himself in water, and when the sun is down, he may come within the camp.

Deuteronomy 23:10 – 11

I can't sleep that night. I toss and turn in my hot rusty bed. I think my leg is off and rotting on the floor. I can smell it like a bad fish. I kiss thirteen wild boars on the lips. Their whiskers are pieces of yellow straw.

Some time in the night I am visited by spirits of the dead. Samuel, Nabab, Saul, Abner, Ish-Bosheth, and all of the priests of Nob. They don't say a word. One by one they file up to my bed, lift my limp penis, and swat me hard, backhand, across the balls. Then they walk away, shaking their heads.

Then I fall asleep and dream that I am an ant.

I Remember a Little-Known Fact About My Father

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter husband dislikes her and writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before Yahweh, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which Yahweh your God gives you for an inheritance.

Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4

Dad's first wife Michal, King Saul's daughter, never had kids, because Dad cursed her. That's what you get to do when God's with you, you curse people and whatever you say happens. He cursed Michal because she bitched him out for dancing so that everybody could see his dick and balls. Dad never had much shame that way. Hey, he's a shepherd, a country boy! But Michal's the daughter of a king and figured that her husband the king ought to act more dignified. So she nagged at him one time too many and Dad cursed her and she became barren.

Or something. Maybe he just never fucked her again and that's why she never had kids.

Anyway, that's how to handle women.

I mean, either way.

I Get Some Good Advice

When men fight with one another, and the wife of the one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him, and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts, then you shall cut off her hand; your eye shall have no pity.

Deuteronomy 25:11 – 12

On my way to breakfast the next morning Jehonadab stops me, draws me aside. He looks worried. I mean he really looks concerned. His brows are beetled.

“My cousin, son of my father’s brother the king, something is troubling you. Tell me, that I might help.”

“No, no,” I say, “it’s nothing.”

“My friend, we *are* friends, aren’t we?”

“Of course.”

“Won’t you tell your friend what is stealing your peace of mind? Suppose it lay in my power to make the problem go away?”

“I didn’t sleep well last night. I dreamed I was an ant.”

“I feel for you, my brother. You don’t mind if I call you brother, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“I know that ant dreams can be vexing. They presage incontinence, did you know?”

I do not reply.

“But I sense that there is more troubling you than a bad dream of pissants. Tell me, my brother. Unburden your heart.”

“I was visited in the night by the dead. Samuel, Saul, and many more men who walk with Abraham came to my bed and rapped me sharply upon the genitals.”

“It is a vision from God.”

“You think?”

“Of course. It is a warning that conceals a great encouragement, a goad to action.”

“Really? What action?”

“The vision means you must be prepared to take bold and decisive steps.”

“But I’m always prepared for that! I am the heir apparent!”

“Exactly. I know this about you. Something else I’ve noticed: you cast a longing eye at your sister Tamar.”

“Half-sister.”

“Precisely. Half-sister. It’s true, though, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“That you’re in love with Tamar?”

“Maybe.”

“And maybe would do just about anything to get a little piece of that action?”

“Maybe.”

“She’s a lovely girl.”

“She’s a yellow-banded dove.”

“She is all that, yes. And she torments you day and night, am I right? Because she is inaccessible.”

“Because she is a virgin!”

“Yes. If only she were a shameless slut like the serving girls, you could sneak up behind her and pull up her robe and bare her luscious round bottom and bend her over and slide your dick up into her slowly, and she would wiggle her tail with delight. But because she’s pure and innocent—”

“— I have no chance with her,” I finish sadly.

“I think I may have a plan,” he says.

I Put Jehonadab's Plan into Action, Boldly

There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog, into the house of Yahweh your God in payment for any vow; for both of these are an abomination to Yahweh your God.

Deuteronomy 23:17 – 18

“First,” he says, “you pretend to fall ill.” *Check.*

“Then,” he says, “when your father comes to see you, you ask for your sister Tamar to come bake you a loaf of bread.” *Check.*

“Then,” he says, “when she comes you send the servants away and ask her to serve you the bread in bed.” *Check.*

He pauses. I wait. He gives me a significant look.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?”

“Then what do I do?”

“Then you do whatever comes natural. You gotta ask me what to do then, maybe you’d better forget the whole thing.”

I nod. I know what to do. I do it. I take bold steps.

I Put Some Spunk into Her

When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, to be happy with his wife whom he has taken.

Deuteronomy 24:5

Tamar turns out to be a whiner. I'd taken her for a girl with some spirit. The only spunk she has is what I put in her.

“Don't do this,” she snivels, and “What will I do with my disgrace,” and “How will you be able to look the other members of your family in the eye if you force yourself on me, your sister?”

And: “Why don't you just talk to Dad? If you want to marry me, he won't stand in your way.”

Marry her! By the time I get going it's all I can do to fuck her. I have to close my eyes and pretend not to hear her whimpering. I picture her just coming out of the bath. That helps a lot.

When I'm done I throw her out. I've had just about all I can take of her pissing and moaning. She doesn't go willingly. I have to have the servants push her out.

I Trudge On

When you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your vessel.

Deuteronomy 23:24

My sister is a road washed away by hot yellow rains. She is hip-deep in mud. I never see her again. She goes into her brother's house and doesn't come out. I scrape the mud off my long handsome legs and trudge on wearily, but not unexpectantly.

I Am the King's Oldest Son

No bastard shall enter the assembly of Yahweh; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 23:2

Absalom is a stiff thorned animal with light brown eyes and a straight mouth. Not a word about my tryst with his sister. He doesn't know. Or else he doesn't care.

Maybe he's had her himself.

He is a large snake. His body ripples when he moves. His eyes follow me like a snake. I am the king's oldest son.

I Bite It

If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns which is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place which Yahweh your God will choose, and coming to the Levitical priests, and to the judge who is in office in those days, you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place which Yahweh will choose; and you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you; according to the instructions which they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the verdict which they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. The man who acts presumptuously, by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before Yahweh your God, or the judge, that man shall die; so you shall purge the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear, and fear, and not act presumptuously again.

Deuteronomy 17:8

Absalom waits two years. It is a long time for him to bide. When he does it it is in the presence of all the king's sons. He wants everybody to know the path he has chosen, I guess.

Well. He has his men do it. He has given them the order. They bite their lips as they step up to me, the king's oldest son. They are about to commit regicide, almost. Their knives are out. Their eyes are yellow with what they are about to do.

They're about to make me into a cunt. They're about to fuck me to death with their long knives. I try not to flinch as I

wait to be pierced. I am meat. I am a foreskin. I am a woman's
flesh. A woman cannot be king.

Douglas Robinson

Douglas Robinson is from the US but has lived much of his adult life abroad: fourteen years in Finland, two years in Russia, and now twelve years in China—splitting his time between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. He is a prolific scholar on translation and literature—thirty books—but also a novelist whose most recent work of original fiction he calls a pseudotranslation: *The Last Days of Maiju Lassila* (Atmosphere, 2022)

Belief Within Me

by Dallas Atlas

At nine years old I tell my mother I am a lesbian
& she spoon-feeds me what she assumes lives
within already.

Thick as condensed milk canned
in our cabinets, sticky sweet fills me,
pooling & collecting in every opening.

+++

She urges – *allow any penis inside* – our beliefs
do not align. My mother believes a penis will exorcize
the ghost of my molester from vaginal walls.

I believe a penis will wear
the ghost of the first
like white sheet with torn holes
to bore through my own.

She believes only a man
could teach of forgetting.

My mouth murders my molester's name
before it reaches her ears.

+++

Drenched in decades long blame,
pickled by sugar-cream, my voice catches
as my mother says she always thought I'd marry
a woman.

Is there another word for shame
clogging me?

Dallas Atlas

Dallas Atlas (they/he) is pursuing their MFA through the Rainier Writing Workshop. He can be found on Instagram @madremoca or on his website dallasatlas.com.

Gracious Words are a Honeycomb

by Katherine Bost

“You’re sulking,” Briana says.

“I’m not *sulking*,” I say, inhaling the sweet mountain air as if that will keep me from detonating. “I’m just... unhappy.”

Briana doesn’t respond, and I don’t know why I expected her to. I’m baiting her, prodding us to talk about what we haven’t yet. But every time we get close to discussing it, I back away. The cut is too fresh, too deep.

We need to let it scar first.

I bet to most people we look like two gal pals, getting their daily exercise. Friends. But it feels like we haven’t been friends in a long time. I twist the silver band on my left ring finger. It’s tighter than it used to be, my finger swelling beneath it, circulation cutting off.

She kneels before our tent. Last night, she whacked herself in the face with the tent pole, and her nose bled for ten minutes. In her defense, camping isn’t her thing. It’s mine. All this outdoorsy stuff gives her hives, she says, even though she looks fine to me. Not even sunburnt yet.

“This campsite is just as good as the other one.” Her voice is careful, as if she’s unsure of how I’ll react.

“But it’s not *the other one*,” I say. Irritation seeps into my movements, making them sporadic and uncoordinated. I knock our thermoses over twice before I finally give up and leave them on their sides.

“That’s because the other one was full,” she says unhelpfully. I stare, and she keeps her back to me. Probably so she can’t see my glare.

It’s a subtle barb. After everything that’s been going on, we canceled our anniversary camping trip and lost our spot at the typical campsite. Briana waited until the last minute before she begged to come out so I could clear my head. It’s only because she feels guilty, and she should.

We’re supposed to be working through it, but even looking at her vibrates my blood. It used to captivate me, how much I loved her. It affected my body, overtook my mind. That’s long gone. All that’s left is anger.

Watching Briana attempt to pack our bags is exhausting, but she won’t let me help. Every time I try, she tells me *I’ve got this, Melody. Go stretch your legs.*

How long does she think I need to stretch my legs?

“Howdy,” someone says from behind. Someone my dad’s age, definitely, since no one else uses that word seriously. Sure enough, it’s a middle-aged man and his wife.

“Hi.” It’s not that I’m *bad* with people, I just... hate them.

Briana stands up and brushes her knees. She moves to shake their hands and then falls into step beside me. She doesn’t place her palm on my back, nor slip her fingers into my pocket. It feels like we’ll never get back there.

She introduces herself, and then she says, “This is my wife, Melody.” And nudges me forward.

My spine is straight, and I mechanically extend my hand. “Pleasure.” Do people still say that?

The man claps his hands around mine and enthusiastically shakes it. “Pleasure, pleasure!” he says, dropping my hand in favor of wrapping his arm around his wife. “Cindy and I just came from the lagoon. Have you been yet?”

Early risers. Something I had wanted to do but Briana couldn’t manage to pry herself out of bed.

“Not yet,” she says. “We were actually thinking of going to the waterfall.”

The man and woman exchange a look.

“The rain’s made the trails a little slick, and there are some fallen branches,” the woman says. “The lagoon trail is less rugged.”

“We can handle a rugged trail,” I say. It’s supposed to be a joke, but I think it sounds like a threat. This is something Briana has always been better at. She used to help me in social situations, but she seems shier around me lately. There’s no holding my hand, entwining our arms, kissing my cheek. The space between us may as well be a canyon.

“You have a map, right?” the man asks Briana. She nods, smiling with her pageant grin that drives people crazy.

“If you go to the waterfall,” the woman says to me, “stay on the trail.” As she speaks, she stares out into the distance, past one of the trail heads.

“We will.”

“There are bears out here,” she says. “And you’ve heard about the poachers, right? Just be careful.”

I want to snap that this isn’t the first time I’ve been on a trail, but I stay silent. I wipe my forehead with the back of my

hand and remind myself that these people are just being nice. They're friendly fellow campers, and I'll probably have to interact with them a lot more the rest of the trip.

Which is why it would have been nice to stay at the other campground. I knew the trails around there. This one, I have no idea where anything is. I'm turned around, and the maps are outdated.

Briana bids the couple goodbye and slings her pack over her shoulders. "All set," she says in a cheery voice that sounds like a stranger's. "Ready?"

Briana slips several times on the trail, falling once. She skins one knee on an unruly branch, and beads of blood trickle down her leg to her thick socks. Mud cakes the side of her leg, and her hiking boots look worn and wet. They're from the first time we ever went camping together, which was at least ten years ago. She staggers over a rock, barely managing to keep herself upright.

The buzz of mosquitoes mixes with the chirps of the birds. The morning air is hot and thick with humidity. It feels like we're walking through a sauna.

"Here," I say, helping Briana step over a large root rising from the dirt. She takes my hand. Her hand feels smaller than I remember.

We had problems before, I know. Our relationship was never perfect, but we addressed our issues immediately. Now, we've lost the means to patch the rips. Maybe we lost the will.

We stumble through a swarm of gnats and mosquitoes, and Briana swipes the air in front of her. I can see where they've bitten her arms, the skin spotted with swollen bumps.

“I have some spray in my bag,” I say.

“No, it’s fine,” she says. “We’d have to stop, and I know you hate that.”

As if out of spite, I pull up and drop my backpack to the ground. It squelches in the mud, but we’re already both pretty dirty, so I don’t care. I toss the bug spray to her, and then wonder why I didn’t get closer and hand it to her. It ricochets off her bitten shoulder, and she struggles to catch it before it falls. She squeezes the can and gives me a wry smile.

Once she’s thoroughly sprayed, we continue our trek. It’s silent, weighted with things unsaid.

This is how it goes. We are silent, and then we inch closer to the truth, to putting it out in the open, but something drags us back. Something keeps us from crossing that threshold.

About an hour and a half into our quiet hike, our progress is impeded. A landslide of rocks and fallen trees blocks our path. It looks like the entire mountainside has collapsed. Even if I squint, I can’t see the end of this mess. Uprooted trees, rocks, globs of coagulated mud.

Briana, bless her soul, approaches the avalanche as if she’s going to power through it. Two steps in, and her foot slips off one of the lifted branches. I’m slower to help than I would have been in the past. When I grasp her biceps, I feel the raised bites on her skin. “Sorry,” she says, looking away.

“We’ll have to go around,” I say. This is why I wanted to be on the other trails. We wouldn’t have run into a landslide there. Even if we did, I know the layout enough to feel comfortable diverting.

Still, we can’t go through, as Briana just proved.

“You need to be more careful,” I say, pushing past her. I grab a limb for support as I descend beside the fallen trees.

It's the wrong thing to say. She tumbles after me, and I can feel the anger radiating off her. "I said I was sorry."

I can't help but groan. "I know."

"What more do you want?" she asks. "What would make it better?"

The mud is slick beneath my boot, and I'm grateful for the boot sole's traction. Briana's soles are more worn, so she slides around more than me.

"I don't know," I say. It's true. If I knew what could fix this, I'd do it.

Or maybe I wouldn't, and that's the problem. But Briana is trying, in typical Briana-fashion. Bulldozing through.

"Yes, you do," she says. She speeds around me to stop my descent. "Talk to me, Melody. How can I fix this?"

"You can't just quick fix it." It's much easier explaining this when I don't have to look at her, so I pick up my pace again. "Some things take time."

"I said I was sorry," she repeats. "And I'll get our money back—"

I whip around so fast that she squeaks. "Oh my God, fuck the money." Without waiting for her response, I turn around and keep walking.

Behind me is silent. No tread of hiking boots.

"I wanted to tell you," she says finally, sounding far away. "But I wanted to fix things first."

"You lied to me. For months," I say. "The first rule of investing is: if something is too good to be true, it is."

"Is that really the first rule?"

My nostrils flare as I fight the urge to stomp up this mountain and throttle her. “It’s one of the most important. And don’t make fun of me.”

She huffs. “I’m just trying to get back to the banter we used to have. I thought if we had the money, we could get back to who we were.”

“We were *fine*,” I say as I duck beneath a wayward limb. In the past, I would have lifted it for her.

I don’t touch it now.

“We weren’t fine,” she says, hurrying to walk beside me.

“What wasn’t fine?”

“You were working *all* the time, and you were miserable! You took things out on me.” Her voice wavers. She sniffs and wipes her nose.

“I didn’t—how did I take things out on you?” I ask, but I’m afraid of the answer.

I’m afraid of being the one to blame. It’s much easier to box this up and throw the responsibility on her. All issues have a starting point—what was ours?

I should have lifted the branch for her.

“You were distant,” she says, “And whenever something bad would happen, you’d blame me. If the dog peed on the carpet, it’s because I didn’t let her out. If we were out of bagels, it’s because I forgot to remind you to get some at the store.”

My jaw trembles.

“I thought if you didn’t have to work, then we could spend more time together, and you could see that I was trying my best. I’m sorry I forget to remind you about things at the store, but I promise I do let the dog out.”

I realize my jaw is clenched and relax it. My cheeks are sore. I may have been wrong, but it doesn't make what she did okay.

"We used to be so happy," she says. "You used to sing all the time, but I haven't heard your voice in far too long. Remember you sang at our wedding? I just wanted us to be happy again."

Instead of buying into her apology, I press on. We weave through the mess of limbs and rocks, and before long, I lose track of where we are. The map is outdated and muddy and no help. I continue southward.

"Melody, please," Briana says, jogging to catch up.

The ground levels out beneath us. We've plateaued. Rubble and twigs are strewn about, and I hear the gurgling of a river. If we follow that, we'll definitely reach the waterfall.

I step away from Briana and hear a loud crack. No, I *feel* a crack, and that's Briana screaming. She's so dramatic. I go to take another step, but something holds my leg in place. Pain shoots up into my back. The physical impediment doesn't seem real, and I tug at my leg several times before I realize it isn't budging. My body sinks to the ground, as if I'm unable to hold it up.

"Melody." Briana crouches beside me, eyes wide and face pale. "Are you okay?"

I look at what she's staring at. A bear trap. The clamps have skewered my ankle. Bits of bone have splintered, white shards protruding from a mass of reddening flesh, and I cover my mouth with my hand. Blood vessels are smashed, their contents seeping out. It's not that the trap's teeth are sharp, it's that they hit my ankle with such force that they split the skin.

I don't notice the pain for a moment. Adrenaline keeps me from feeling anything. Briana immediately tries to pull the

clamps apart, her tiny muscles straining with effort. She pauses to inspect the trap, as if a button will appear.

“My ankle.” It’s all I can say. The realization begins to catch up to me. My forehead feels clammy, and I wipe the sweat away with my shirtsleeve. Blood seeps from puncture holes in my ankle, pooling on the mud beneath.

Briana tries to pry the trap off me again. I’m panicking. How do I get this thing off? Her hands are slick with my blood, and it doesn’t seem like she can get a good grip. I roll on my back, trembling.

“Help me,” she says. She’s crying, and for the first time in a while, I want to brush those tears away.

With great difficulty, I push myself back up. My hands shake as I grip the trap. It’s coated with my blood, and I force back a gag.

Whatever shock had been keeping me from feeling this injury has abandoned me. The only thing that makes sense is to rip the device off, but the clamp is too strong. We don’t have enough weight to spring the trap any other way.

Briana grabs on either side of my hands. Together, we yank. The teeth separate, and I groan when I catch a glimpse of space between the trap and my leg.

But the device is slippery, and it slides from my grip before I can free myself. Briana’s not strong enough to keep the trap from recoiling. It bites a different part of my ankle, fracturing that part of the bone with another clean snap.

“*Damnit*,” I scream, thrashing with my good leg.

Briana is crying, blubbering apologies. She cups my face in her bloodied hands. My blood is sticky on my cheeks. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry! I wasn’t—I’m not strong enough.”

I grasp her wrist and squeeze. “It’s not your fault,” I say, and I mean it. She nods, but she doesn’t seem convinced.

“We could, um, we could try to…” She lifts the chain attached to the trap. It jingles, chains glinting in the sunlight, and we follow the length with our eyes. The end is harnessed around a tree, padlocked in place. Its trunk is thick, fed by the river that sloshes just beneath it. There’s no hope of breaking that chain.

“We have to rip this off,” I say, nodding to the trap. My hands are pale from the loss of blood. The other option would be to take a pocketknife to my leg, but I don’t think I could survive that. Even thinking about it jostles my already upset stomach.

Briana ruffles through her pack. Her face is pink, but she has a calmer demeanor than I would expect. She opens pocket after pocket until she finds what she’s looking for. A phone.

The frown on her face deepens, which confirms what I already figured: no service. She tries to dial an emergency number, but it won’t go through.

“Fuck,” she says, rubbing her eyes with her forearm. It streaks my blood across her face.

“It’s okay. Give me a hand,” I say. The pain makes me wince, and I stifle another scream. “Once it’s off, we can hobble back to camp.”

The journey back would take hours, and it’s all uphill. Still, it’s our best bet. We’ll have to leave one of the packs here because it’ll be too heavy to carry.

Briana follows the chain to the tree and yanks at it. “It’s a little loose,” she says. “I don’t think it’s actually padlocked.”

I nod. Can’t use energy to speak. I just have to trust her.

She fiddles with the chain, but it doesn't budge. I recline, my head resting on the cool mud, and try to focus on the rush of the river. The whisper of the leaves as the wind blows. The—

Briana screams, and I jolt upright, jarring my ankle. She kicks at something twisting in the bushes. It writhes like a lizard's severed tail in the fallen leaves before the black body slithers away from her, seeking shelter in the river.

"Are you okay?" I ask, massaging feeling into my leg. We have to get this thing off.

Briana stands still for several moments, like she's fallen asleep. "Yeah, it just, it bit me," she says slowly. "I can't get the chain..."

She stumbles back to me. The bite on her calf is already swelling, purpling in place.

"What kind of snake was that?"

She shrugs, the movement sloppy, and falls to her knees. "I'm sorry I chose wrong again." Her eyes are unfocused, but she stares at the trap clamped to my ankle.

"On three," she says, closing her eyes. She guides my hands back to the trap. "One."

"Briana—"

"Two."

"Bri—"

"*Three.*"

We yank the trap again. It creaks open slowly. Sweat beads at her brow and her arms tremble as she pries the teeth apart.

As soon as there's enough room for me to wiggle my ankle out, I do. We let go of the trap, and it snaps closed beside us.

I carefully stand on one leg, my injured one hanging useless. I can't put any weight on it. Briana doesn't get up from the ground. She slumps, her shoulders curling.

"Briana?"

I try to grab her, but she slips from my grasp. Too much blood and sweat. She doesn't answer.

"Hey," I say, lowering to the ground. With quivering, bloody fingers, I lift her chin. Her eyes are closed, and her breathing is shallow and labored. Wet and shuddering. Faint.

I need to get her to camp.

I drape her arm around my shoulder, sliding mine to her waist. She's super light, but it's difficult to carry her with my broken ankle.

If we can survive this, we can survive anything.

"Hang on," I say.

I take one step, and my leg gives out. I can't... I can't.

No, I have to. Briana would do it for me.

"Stay with me."

I try another tactic. Wrapping her arms around my neck, I move to carry her piggyback style. I can crawl on my hands and knees up this mountain with her on my back. The blood loss has made me weak, though, and I don't make it far before I collapse, her body crushing mine with its miniscule weight. Alone in the forest, I scream. An animalistic, raw shriek of anger.

"Briana, *wake up*," I say. Her calf is so swollen that it looks like a bowling ball is glued onto it. The wound is purple, with black spindles webbing out where I imagine her veins are.

I'm so tired and cold. I hold her to my chest, tucking her head in the crook of my neck. The shining sun laughs at us, and she shakes in my arms. My chest rumbles with unshed tears, but I can't bring myself to cry. I'm too sad and too shocked. My ankle throbs, and I kick an uprooted tree to feel more pain.

"We can rest here for a minute," I tell her. "Just a minute. Help will come."

I imagine that she laughs and nods her head, but her body doesn't move.

On my back, staring up through the thickets of trees, a lone cloud drifts across the sky. I close my eyes, and the cloud disappears.

Around us is silent, the mosquitoes and birds abandoning us. I sing beneath my breath to fill the void, the same song from our wedding.

Katherine Bost

Katherine Bost holds an MFA in creative writing from Miami University, and her work has appeared in Last Resort Literary Review, The Doctor TJ Eckleburg Review, Tangled Locks Journal, and Mikrokosmos, among others.

Kim Jong-un Wants Your Dog

by Kurt Newton

Kim Jong-un has made it clear,
he wants your dog.
He doesn't care what size,
what breed,
what temperament—
he's not looking for the perfect pet—
he wants your dog.
If you have a dog and try to hide it,
a special team of dog extractors
will show up on your doorstep.
They won't leave
until they have your dog,
so please cooperate.
If you know someone
who has a dog,
it would be in your best interest
to report this matter quickly
and with much enthusiasm.
After all, it's just a dog.

If Kim Jong-un wanted your dog,
you would gladly give it to him,
wouldn't you?

You don't need to know
what will happen to your dog,
or your neighbor's dog.

Just know that it is in the best interest
of everyone

that Kim Jong-un gets what he wants.

And, right now, he wants your dog.

We must all be thankful.

Because, tomorrow, who knows
what he will ask for?

Kurt Newton

Ever since writing the fashionably subversive poem "Koala Bear Underwear" in the fourth grade, Kurt Newton has been entertaining classmates, family members, sometimes even literary aficionados, with his comedic blend of humor, horror and absurdist commentary. His most recent collection, *Nazi Swastika Bikini Wax Illuminati* (Alien Buddha Press, 2019) is currently out of print (although, copies can be had by contacting Kurt directly). His next collection, *A Troubled Sleep*, a chapbook that reads like a fever dream from a disturbed mind, will be published in February 2023 by back room poetry (UK).

The #SpicyTok Table

by Ross Hargreaves

Things took quite a turn when the #SpicyTok table started moaning. We set up the BookTok tables because people on TikTok would dance out recommendations of their favorite books and this influencing really increased sales. We didn't get it, but we did get books. The three of us are assistant managers at Books? Books. Books! When the younger employees brought up the idea we took it to Katrina, the head manager, and she gave the go ahead.

At first it was a home run. We'd sell huge quantities without having to do any promotion. *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami is a Harry Styles fav; the fan base eats it up. There were tables for #ChefTok, #HorrorTok, #DarkAcademiaTok. The #SpicyTok table moved the most merchandise. These were romance books, but not your meet cute, hate turns to love, beach reads. These titles were hot.

Erotic.

Spicy.

The table itself was rather plain. A long used, square table made of lightweight hypothetical wood, tan in color, with four square pegs for legs. The legs are at least sturdy. Not all the tables we use at Books? Books. Book! can boast that.

People shelving over in romance, where the #SpicyTok table was set, started the rumors. Complained about hearing what sounded like customers inappropriately enjoying themselves. We shrugged it off. We get a lot of weirdos at Books? Books. Books!

Then, some busy Saturday, we took a stack of *Sinner* by Sierra Simone, with its cover of a ten-packed dude taking a sensual shower, placed them on an empty spot on the #SpicyTolk table. “Right there,” the table said.

We stood there. Looked around at the geek kids trying to inconspicuously steal Manga.

“Don’t stop,” the table moaned.

After we stopped blushing, we went to Katrina. “I’m too busy for this,” she said. “It’s not like the table soaked up all that spicy literature and came alive erotically. Ignore it. It will go away.”

We ignored it. It did not go away.

We started to see a dip in traffic from the customers who buy conservative commentary, the rural mysteries of CJ Box, large print Bible crosswords. Saw a spike in *Penthouse* collecting individuals with the hair style of Lord Farquaad. We went to one of the high schoolers we employee, Lilly, asked her if TikTok might have the solution. She told us she’d consult with an #excorist and get back to us. Came back with the reply. #Makelovetothetablechallenge.

“No,” Katrina said. “No way. Nobodies screwing a table.”

Then one day she had to shelf romance because no one else would. She dodged around random guys who were standing around sipping coffee. Asked them if they needed help with anything. If they were finding everything all right. “Get it to cum,” one of them whined.

“Excuse me?” she said. Was just about to toss this creep out of her store when he came from the table, in a sultry whisper, “I’ve been bad.”

“I know how you like it,” the creep said.

“Oh cowboy! Turn into a wolf and lick my button,” the table gasped.

After that Katrina okayed the #make Lovetothetable challenge. Left it to us to find a volunteer. We settled on Tyson. The *Off-Campus* series by Elle Kennedy sold well. Depicted the hook-ups between spicy college girls and even spicier hockey players. Tyson didn’t play hockey but was in a badminton league. He had type 1 diabetes, which wasn’t spicy. But dressed preppyish, the girls liked him. He’d get sullen when we asked him to cashier. Brood, instead of telling customers about the benefits of a Books? Books. Books! credit card.

“You want me to what?” he said.

We explained it to him again. Told him Katrina had already approved the hazard pay. “Sure,” he said. “I’m down. Hey, why don’t you just throw the table away?”

We looked at each other. “We need the table. Christmas is coming.”

That night, after close, we had everything staged and ready to go. Lilly had her phone out to record and download the whole thing to TikTok. Katrina explained to Tyson that he needed to wear a condom. She wasn’t cleaning up his mess. Nor did she want him getting a splinter. “Should we take the books off the table?” we asked Lilly.

“No leave them on.”

Tyson walked up to the table. Dropped his pants. “What do I do?” he called.

“Dominate it,” Lilly said.

“I’m losing my job,” Katrina said.

We nodded, very aware that this whole situation was going to drag down our yearly eval. We looked toward the table. Focused more on Tyson’s upper half. Waited. “You only have three minutes,” Lilly said.

“Uh. Table. I’m going to fuck you now.”

“Wrap your fingers around my throat and squeeze,” the table demanded.

Then came the grunts, groans, moans, cries, pleas, screams, gods, eeks, ahhs, ohhs. Despite our best efforts, we became aroused. Until Tyson yelled, “Too spicy! Too spicy.”

The table had procured for itself a knife. Had it planted in Tyson’s badminton hardened buttocks. We sprang into action. Tore Tyson away. Flung all the books off the table. One of us ran to get the first aid kit from the break room and returned to pack Tyson’s wound with gauze. Another picked a book out of the mess on the floor and held up *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. “This doesn’t go here.”

“Oh Jesus,” Tyson cried in agony.

“Oh Jesus,” the table cried, in a decidedly different pitch.

One of us drove Tyson to the emergency room. The other two stayed to help clean up. Wrapped the knife in trash bags. Threw it away.

Katrina looked over the table, at the blood soaking in the carpet. “I need to rent a Rug Doctor,” she said. “Take the table to the back. We can throw it away later.” Then looked at Lilly and in her most serious manager voice said, “Don’t post this.”

Lilly already had, of course. It got tons of views in the hour before TikTok took it down. Everyone believed it was

real. And no one did. There was an uproar. To bring calm back to the brand, Corporate parted ways with Katrina. And until they conclude the long search for her replacement the running of day-to-day operations at Books? Books. Books! has been left to us.

We are in charge.

A few weeks later, we go to the back room. Run our fingers across the tables smooth yet pitted surface. Hear only the faintest whisper of a moan. Then we take it out to the sales floor. Cover the whole thing in boxed Christmas cards.

Ross Hargreaves

Ross Hargreaves has an MFA from the University of Idaho. His work had appeared at Mikrokosmos and Quibble lit. He lives and writes in Idaho.

The Fifteenth

by Christl Rikka Perkins

The 14th Dalai Lama, in his saffron and burgundy robe, prostrates before the large Buddha statue and gestures for the Archbishop Desmond Tutu to sit on the small brown corner couch set facing the statue. An acolyte brings out a large wooden bowl with unshelled peanuts and smaller bowls for the shells. Another monk brings out two small clay cups and a large clay jug. He fills each cup with a frothy golden liquid -- chhaang.

Dalai Lama thanks the lamas with prayer hands, bows and says, "Ah, rice wine brewed and hand crafted by our monks." Then he sits down cross-legged on the couch next to his friend, turns to the Archbishop and raises his cup with both hands to toast, "Suk-bo de-thangi."

The Archbishop chimes, "Amandla!" He surveys the room, grounded by the shades earthy colors, and deeply inhales the sandalwood incense.

After drinking, the Archbishop and His Holiness each signify that they have emptied their small cups by turning them upside down. As soon as they put them back down on the table, a monk steps to the table and fills both cups. Then the monk

fades into the background, standing in half meditation near the door.

His Holiness gets up and paces. He wants to say something, but hesitates. Then, noticing that Tutu looks taken aback by his agitation, Dalai Lama blurts out, “Ain’t this about a bitch, DT...the Chinese outlawed reincarnation... can you beleeb that?” Now that he has said it, all the rage that he has been holding in is released in a torrent. He reaches underneath the coffee table, pulls out newspaper articles and faded documents, slamming them on the couch beside the Archbishop.

Shocked and concerned, Tutu pulls his reading glasses, puts them on and reads: “State Administration for Religious Affairs, Order No. 5. Tulkas must complete an application and submit it to several government agencies for approval. Otherwise it be illegal or invalid – Say whaaaaatttt?”

While the Archbishop flips and skims through *Time Magazine*, *Xinhua News*, *the London Times* article clippings, His Holiness rocks from side to side, wringing his hands, trying not to cry. But when he closes his eyes, tears squeeze out and roll down his cheeks.

He whines, “They waiting for me to die so they can run my next life and manage my homeland.” Needing another drink, he looks up at one of the silent monks and purses his lips in the direction of the cups. A monk fills each one and steps back to the wall.

The 14th plucks up his cup and quaffs the Chaang as if to consume his emotion. *I have spent many hours and many months in meditation on the situation, asking for signs from Palden Lhamo, protectress of the Dalai Lama lineage. What I can’t admit even to my friend is that I feel more and more powerless with each news report of Chinese encroachment and immigration into Tibet, with each self-emolation by monks, and*

with each riot by Tibetan peasants. Maybe my 14th incarnation is the “drop the mic” lifetime and I should enter Nirvana.

“Now, now my friend, why you cry!?! Sounds like we need those hands,” the Archbishop retorts. Instead of consoling Dalai Lama, Tutu urges his friend to channel his fear and sadness into strength and defiance. One of the standing monks raises his eyebrow at Tutu’s urge to fight.

His Holiness reaches up, wiping the tears on his sleeve, but continues to sob, “Well they don’t outright ban reincarnation, but they think they can control who comes back from the dead. So anyone who wants to reincarnate, including me, has to file for a government license. By barring any Buddhist monk living outside China from seeking reincarnation, they tryin’ to ‘find’ and choose the next me. Plus they got Panchen Lama locked up, so it might be a wrap.”

Tutu smirks, “Word? So what is the penalty? Hundred consecutive life sentences without parole? How many times can they execute you? They doin’ too much.” He hates seeing his friend this way and wants to show he has his back...but first he needs to pee.

While the Archbishop uses the bathroom, Dalai Lama stands up and walks over towards the patio. As he opens the sliding glass doors, he looks down at the myriad of balconies of apartments, crammed with Tibetan families, nestled among the pine and deodar trees. He chuckles as a family of three monkeys jump onto the balcony of one of the apartments to forage for scraps of food. He is forever grateful to India for delegating this small piece of their own country to Tibetan refugees. His eyes go from the valley and the market streets below, across to the Himalayan Mountains. He misses his home there and throngs of his people on the other side of those mountains. Feeling helpless against the tide of Chinese colonization of Tibet, he walks back to the couch, plops down

and rolls his eyes and sighs. Dispiritedly, he says, “See, I might as well just enter Nirvana....”

In an effort to reinvigorate his friend, the Archbishop chimes, “Word? Now I know you ain’t gonna let them talk shit like that, DL. You bedda tell dem what time it is! You gotta consider your people! You want China to take over your homeland and decimate your culture? It’s getting to be too late!”

“Chill... I’m just sayin’ – You know I’ve been livin’ as a Bodhistva for many revolutions, maybe it’s time for me to leave the cycle of birth and death and enter Nirvana. I guess what I am saying is that I haven’t exactly decided on whether or not I will reincarnate.”

“Ah, so reincarnate or not to reincarnate, that is your question.” Tutu snickers at his own play on words.

DL gives him a high-five. The two toast on this question: “Suk-bo de-thang!” “Amandla!”

Dalai Lama shakes his head. “Nah, man, you right -- I can’t let it go down like that. Actually, a few months after I read that, I announced that the next Dalai Lama will not be born in China; instead I’ll be reborn in India or Nepal.”

“Now dats what I’m talkin’ ‘bout!” the Archbishop raises his porcelain cup and His Holiness touches his cup to the Archbishop’s. “Amandla!”

“Suk-bo de-thang!”

“Whatchoo gon’ do? Do I need to loosen my collar and take off my shoes? You let me know, you know you can tag me in. Have you told the Pope about this? Cuz, you know I got his DM. Oh yeah, Cisco Kid would be down.”

The Archbishop’s assertiveness is a contagious virus that infects Dalai Lama. “I’ve been telling the Tibetan leadership to

form a representative body. But it seems they are resistant to all efforts -- they draggin' they feet!"

By this time in their conversation, the two do not even notice when the monks refill their cups. They only notice that the cups are filled and so it is time to drink. The Archbishop tries to calm His Holiness down by toasting. The two toast to the circle of life. "Suk-bo de-thang!" "Amandla!" They toast again to Nirvana.

"I'll tell you what I'm NOT gonna do -- I'm NOT gonna reincarnate as some weak-ass, punk-ass, mark-ass Dalai Lama snitchin' lackey of China! That's NOT what I'm gonna do!" To His Holiness, this law smacks of set up; he seethes with the memories... of how the Chinese military committed the biggest home invasion since the Anglos invaded and colonized ... everywhere, the shit China has pulled on him and his people. Although he called China his "sacred friend" and smiled in front of the cameras, in private he knew he could not trust them. He still wants to believe that China needs to go through him in order to control Tibet.

"I know that's right!" The Archbishop verbally co-signs.

The two, getting lit, beginning to slur their words. His Holiness mumbles, "All these triflin' *tulkas* who are already linin' up..." He topples over and then picks up his cup to toast. "Suk-bo de-thang!"

"Amandla!"

But The 14th continues to vent, "Chill, I'mma handle this. After all, I am the Dalai Lama. You fucks with me, den you fucks with the most peaceful! First, I'm layin' these lil' verbal breadcrumb... Next, I'mma wait until I'm ninety to tell er 'body what's up. Give the Chinese some time to sweat. I could really come back as anything as long as I have some Tibetan blood in me."

The Archbishop intuits, “No, no, no – Cuz, if you come back as White Euro, then you might be a Richard Gere-type and there might be an issue of cultural appropriation or white privilege. Latino, then people might more associate you with Catholicism...” Then he holds up his cup with a sudden idea: “Ideally, though, you know, it would be really cool if you reincarnated as a Sista.”

There is silence in the room as the two men cogitate. The Dalai Lama recalled his previous thirteen incarnations. His first through third incarnations were par for the course; he mainly spent those lives setting up and overseeing temples and great monasteries. In his fourth incarnation, he was born in Mongolia and relocated to Tibet. But without that Lhasa street cred, he was not recognized by most Tibetans. Some incarnations he died young; other lives he lived long. He didn’t really play politics until about the tenth reincarnation. But one of his favorite incarnations – other than the life he is living now – was the sixth where he was big pimpin’, living that playboy life. Yeah that’s when the LLDL: Ladies Love Dalai Lama...

It was not so much whether or not to reincarnate... it was that he wanted to make sure he made the final decision. According to tradition, only the Panchen Lama is supposed to pick the next Dalai Lama. But during Dalai Lama’s last incarnation, the 11th Panchen Lama was kidnapped by the Chinese when he six years old and has not been seen since 1995. Then they announced and propped up their own fake ass, bitch ass PL – their way of tryina check and mate. So 14th gotta find a different way to rebirth.

“Hey, you know...” His Holiness shakes his finger in the air while pondering the notion. Then his eyes widen and he says, “You know I like that; that’s one hell of an idea.”

The Archbishop chortles as he explains: “There is black Jesus, there needs to be black Buddha. Siddhartha’s hair was nappy, you’re bald. In your next reincarnation, she needs to

have her mom's hair and your eyes. Dat way people know she comes from half the world."

"When I reincarnate, I wanna be named Karma and be raised rough, where it is steep, bumpy and beautiful. Maybe like the Bronx or Chi-town Southside.... But even though I grow up in the hood, I still show signs of Buddha nature; maybe I have some visions. Lamas hear rumors of my existence and come find me."

"You crazy, man – What that gon'do fo Tibet? Isn't she gon'be too hood for good?" the Archbishop brow furrows as he burps.

"Good point -- maybe you're right. But even though she may be born in a different place or country, she has to have some Tibetan blood. Tibetans might accept her, but will the world?"

Then he came to a realization and asked, "Hey why am I talking like I'm from da hood?"

The Archbishop sighs, shaking his head and replies, "Because you are in a dream of course, Your Holiness." He reminds the Dalai Lama, "Member? You 'member... that story about a man dreaming that he is a butterfly dreaming that he is a man?"

Karma wakes up at 3 am thinking to herself, It's a good day to enter nirvana. Feeling the morning urge to pee before walking and meditation, she hurries past the abbess whose rounded shoulders silently hold out Karma's burgundy day robe. Karma looks in the mirror above the bathroom sink, thinking to herself, Today may just be the last day anyone sees me alive. It's a good day to enter nirvana.

She is not doing a very good job of shaking this thought off, when she comes out of the bathroom muttering, “Yeah, so what am I supposed to do? How’m I supposed to do this?” ...

Karma ‘s brand, ever since she was a baby, was saying, “So dat’s how I would do it.” In fact that was one of the indications that she was the 15th because the 14th last words to the Council were, “This is how I would do it...” without any explanation. But up to now, she still didn’t really know what or how she would do it.

“Really, Karma? How ‘bout you not worry about that right now. How ‘bout you stay in the present?” The abbess, who had just brought in Karma’s robe, asks rhetorically as Karma flushes the toilet. “Focus on the morning routine, including yoga, walking meditation, sitting meditation, eat breakfast, then TV interview with Trevor Noah of *The Daily Show*.” The abbess is one of the few people who still calls Karma by her government name. Everyone else in the temple calls her by her Buddhist name, Chemalep.

“Well, Lob Chi, it’s just that I just had that dream again. It’s so, like *déjà vu*; now I wonder...am I a man who dreams of being a butterfly or am I the butterfly dreaming that I am a man?” Karma questions as she takes her maroon robe from the abbess.

The abbess sighs and shakes her head as she held out the top piece to Karma’s zhen, her day-to-day robe, so that Karma could just slip into it. *I guess Lamas gotta say something smart-alecky when they are youngsters.*

The nappy headed, dreaded, dark chocolate moon face with button nose and slanty eyes dresses and contemplates her life: Found at four years old and proclaimed the fifteenth Dalai Lama when she was five years old. Lived in the U.S. until she was ten years old, then moved from school to school in nunneries and monasteries throughout the Himalayas, Nepal

and northern India. She went to all the best *shredras*, trained as a lama until now at fifteen years old, always avoiding being netted by the Chinese. Today she is going to have her head shaved, take her vows and be enthroned as the fifteenth Dalai Lama.

Although not born here, she has a deep connection with this land, as the 5th Dalai Lama, she founded the Twang Monastery just a few kilometers away. In her 6th lifetime, she had been born in the town. So she felt it most appropriate that she would be enthroned in her 15th incarnation here.

But she is distracted by the perpetual fear of capture and that her enthronement ceremony might be raided by the Chinese. All the headlines: “Chinese government denies legitimacy of 15th Dalai Lama,” “China says 15th Dalai Lama is an imposter,” “List of Crimes Committed by Imposter Dalai Lama.” A lot can change in a lifetime, and so it has. After my death as 14th, it took another seven to eight years for me to be rebirthed.

After all, her enthronement is taking place at the Gyangong Ani Gompa, the largest Tibetan Buddhist nunnery, 5 kilometers from Twang, on the disputed border between China and India. Chinese spies have been tracking her all her life, trying to abduct her since anyone knew who she was. She is the only person standing in the way of China’s claim of being the largest Buddhist country.

Her preparation had been on multiple levels – streetwise, she always went into a place being observant of escape routes, using soft power; ceremony wise, paying attention to the gravitas and pageantry of the occasion. But was she prepared spirit-wise?

On her way to the courtyard to join the other walking nuns, Karma steadies her breath and thinks, *I love that spiritual connection that I have with the audience when I give a sermon.*

There is that moment that I am them and they are me. While meditation is to empty one's mind in order to attain enlightenment, today I must focus my mind to attain enlightenment.

While doing walking meditation, Karma mulls over the teachings she was to give that afternoon. As she breathes in, she inhaled earthiness, the thick aroma of sandalwood, the yak butter being churned for late morning tea. As she exhaled, she smiles.

Karma pushes her breath down into her dan and out of her belly button and allowed it to drift out of her skin, seep out of her robes, above her small walking body. Her breath hears her booties as she steps on the earth in the courtyard and wanders upward above the white walls of the temple complex embedded in the side of the mountain. As Karma inhales, she breathes in the scent of blue pine, cypress, poplar and magnolia. As she exhales, she smiles.

After the procession in and the crowning, 15th stood in front of the chanting crowd below. *But something doesn't feel right.* Karma's eyes can and she sees a ribbon of green army fatigue and hears Chinese shouts. Just as Karma is about to give her speech, the Chinese military police bust in. Without explaining to the crowd below, Karma runs out the temple, through the earthen courtyard and out to the school part of the courtyard. She ducks into the school and dresses up like a schoolgirl before she is almost cornered and about to be captured. Chinese military bust into classroom, screaming, "Which one of you is the Dalai Lama?" All the children look the same so they cannot tell them apart. Fifteenth sat in the moment, feeling the fabric of her being fray.

One of the girls across the room yells, “I am Dalai Lama!” and just as the police approach the girl to arrest her, another girl stands up yelling, “I am Dalai Lama!” Then one by one, the classroom erupts as all the students chime in, loudly pronouncing, “I am Dalai Lama!” Outside the classroom, throughout the school, throughout the town, there are echoes through the hills and mountains of the Himalayas: “I am Dalai Lama!”

The Chinese military police are baffled; they don’t know what to do. Who should they arrest?

Finally, an emboldened Karma yells out, “I AM DALAI LAMA and when you fucks with me den you fucks with the most peaceful!”

Christl Rikka Perkins

Christl Rikka Perkins is a bi-racial (Black/Japanese) writer currently living in Oakland, CA. While living in China, she was an English teacher and freelance writer for English Language Publications such as Beijing Scene. She was a 2018 participant in Voices of Our Nation Arts (VONA- Voices) as well as an inaugural member of the Writers Grotto-SF's Rooted & Written. She was published in *American Fiction 17* and in *Half and One* (online). Christl has been a longtime member and active participant in WriteNow!- SF Writers Workshop and was published in their anthology, *Essential Truths: The Bay Area in Color*. Christl earned her BA in International Relations from San Francisco State University and her MA in Government & Politics from University of Maryland, College Park. She earned her Certificate in Fiction from UCLA Extension's Writers Program and her MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles.

Dog Days of a Blind Cottonmouth

part one

by Mads Levshakoff

Insufficient Evidence

Texas State Penitentiary

Huntsville, TX 77348

LuLu Jones

5700 Squeezepenny Lane

McKinney, TX 75050

Did you keep my shirt?

Cat, Meet Mouse

Lucy leans eagerly in her seat, squinting as her eyes adjust from the dim interior of her car to the fluorescent glare of a gas station.

“Can I come with you?”

John looks like a tired father sighing because he knows he’s going to indulge his favorite girl. When his moods are capable of being gentle and thoughtful, Lucy is unmoored. He is not gentle very often. The reminder squeezes her jaw, squishing her cheeks in the wide span of his palm.

“Are you going to behave?”

“Y’th,” she pouts, quick enough to sound obedient and whines when his grip tightens. Her hands jump to his wrist and John pries her left ring finger back to twist the engagement diamond inward.

“Good. Good girl.” Decision made with the same hand pushing her hair back, following the curve of her skull to cup her neck. A shiver starts under his hand when he doesn’t grab her hair, just keeps her still— attentive. “Do. Not. Say my name.”

He gets out in a grunting stretch. With nothing else to look at the cashier watches with tired, glossy eyes as John crosses to the passenger side. Through the smudged glass Lucy sees his attention shift to his phone to avoid any greetings. John holds her door open under the artificial hum of cicadas in a winking light.

Lucy’s free to roam the aisles of brightly packaged candies and snacks, colors too bold and blurring before her. Under the burning whitewash of fluorescents, she returns to John rubbing her eye with the back of her hand holding a bag of *Skittles*. He mechanically rips packets open into burnt smelling coffee without looking at her.

“I’ll be right behind you,” John says with a tight jaw restraining a yawn. He reaches for more sugar.

Lucy dumps all her crinkling treats onto a counter offering more lottery tickets than she can count. Not that her luck is any good.

“You look a lot like your dad,” the cashier notes, too preoccupied with her items to notice the numbness sneak in from the empty rows of gas pumps, meandering and filling up the void of this neon bright building growing up from the nothingness of the highway, or how she blanches at the generic compliment.

She has seen photos of her mother and inherited none of her Lucillian features. Lungs full of water in her fragile chest, she recovers somewhat with a smile. Her mama's, Lucy hopes.

"Thanks, I get that a lot. He just has a large coffee. Daddy, can you come pay?" she calls. John's head whips toward her but Lucy's already turned back to the apathetic cashier with, "We're on a road trip."

"College tours," John finishes the pleasant lie in an adoring paternal tone as he eyes Lucy's plunder. "You won't be getting any sleep tonight, not with all that sugar."

Her cheek and spoiled smile against his bicep and Lucy can get whatever she wants. John stares down his nose, aware she's up to something with suspicion tight in the corner of his eyes.

"Alright, alright," he relents, ruffling her hair, "Anything for my special girl."

K-I-S-S-I-N-G

Puppy paws scratch and slip over the pine duff of a seldom used path, John finds he enjoys the domesticity of dog walking. A stumble following a root makes it all the better when Lucy reaches for balance, catching two of his fingers.

"Keep up, LuLu."

Her grip jerks, yanking his attention and feet toward her, digging her heels in and everything. How easy it is to rile Lucy, but it is a little mean to call her that.

"Don't."

John curls a knuckle under her chin, not missing the chance to see her eyes bright and unflinching. There's his girl.

"Sure, baby." John bends to kiss Lucy's forehead. "We're almost there."

The brook is thick with angel singing, green-yellow beams of slanting light scattered by fluttery leaf shadow shatters on the water.

"My aunt lived, uh, six miles south. Jane and I would bike up here a lot."

"Shut up, John," she laughs and slips off her shoes. Fy yips from the shore and paws at the water her puppy instincts don't trust. Lucy steps lightly on round, slick rocks with sunlight in her hair. A grin, crooked and perfect. "I don't want to hear your *oh so* tender sentiments of your precious boyhood. Might make it weird when I don't feel bad for killing you, ya know?"

She kicks a foot at him, sprinkling his face and shirt with the spray.

"Don't go spoiling everything," John bemoans, laying back onto his elbows. "Far too nice a day."

"Nothing left between us but truth," she chirps with an insolent shrug while tripping about the crawdads. The hem of her skirt floats on the water, rippling and tugging fabric over her hip.

"Truth," he parrots, as if he's given her anything else. Lucy scuffles for balance, wrinkling her nose at him. "Alright, sure baby, c'mere."

All this space to run and her footprints glisten on the sun warm stones right to him. She sits with her legs stretched out, mirroring him on the flat boulder he claimed.

"I would come here and think about how I'd bring my daughter, some—I saw that." John graciously accepts her sullen

apology for rolling her eyes. “*Someday*. Jane was too old when I dreamt of a little girl holding daddy’s hand in the shallowest parts.” He tosses a pebble into the water sparkling in narrow flashes of copper minnows. “Hide and seek would be her favorite and squeal when I find her and let her run off. Daddy close behind in case she trips— maybe let her trip so she knows I’ll always be there to patch up her knees.”

“Do you really think you could be a father?” Lucy asks. Her pebble skips once and settles on the clear bottom near his.

“Imagine how she would grow up and learn what I plead guilty to— when did you know what your father was?”

Lucy’s face darkens when she gripes, “I don’t remember how old I was when I could see I was treated differently by those who knew. People didn’t see me, only my mama’s un-lived potential they thought they could retroactively protect. Kindness shown to me was their obligation or like it was for my own sake they maintained a buffer of pity between me and the big wide world capable of making me. And so, there were those who had a limit of how long they could act out sympathy. But I don’t think they knew kids went to school repeating the shit they said.” John pinches her, Lucy swats his hand. “So, yeah, I knew before my grandmama told me. She waited until I was sixteen, on the very date of— *conception*. Old enough for my mama, old enough for me and all that.”

“Did you hate him?”

“Do I hate my mother’s rapist?” she reiterates like a cut of a dull knife. “Who took everything from my mama and any childhood I could have spent with her.”

“You see the point then.”

A hot flash of anger curls her lip before her brows rise above her softening frown, and he thinks, yeah, maybe she does.

“Where’s the mother in that dream scenario of yours?”

John rests his elbows on his raised knees and looks at Lucy over his shoulder, enjoying the brightening pink of her cheeks when neither of them look away.

What a silly thing to ask.

“Your skirt is wet, take it off– socks, too.”

Lucy lays back, lifting her hips to wiggle out of the waistband. Modesty done away with, she rises in baby blue panties and top rucked up the curve of her waist. John watches her shake the skirt to be hung prim and straight over a sunny branch. Her steps are slower this time, caution prickling with a gleam of sweat in the hollow of her throat. John smiles up at her but Lucy slows at the sight of Fy bounding into his lap, the little steps that follow are out of her body. Can’t have that.

“Lucille Dorothea Jones.” A songbird trills a sound of warning. It’s only the sunlight, John tells himself, making her eyes that hazy caramel he’s missed sticking to his teeth. Petting her content puppy, he asks plainly, “Do you want to tell me what you need?”

With the cutest, confused pout John’s ever come across, she sits again, mumbling, “Don’t need nothin’ at all from you.”

Knowing tilt to his head, voice torched sugar and custard disparagement, John wonders, “Then why are your panties wet?”

Lucy blushes harder and it has nothing to do with the rising heat. Her weepy voice drips into the creek, “I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you if you lay down.”

On her back with her hands folded over her stomach, cloud gazing while John ties Fy to a trunk close enough to the water to distract her. It’s not fear that makes Lucy gasp when

he kicks her bare feet apart. John doesn't have a word for it, but he likes it.

"You still want some sort of gospel truth?" Bends down above her waning trepidation with his weight on his arm near her waist. Her knees are tight against the hips of the same boy who dreamt of little girls so different from the man kissing her bruised temple. John murmurs with his cheek to hers, "If we made a sweet, little baby, you'd love her."

"This isn't *love*, John--"

He shushes her because Lucy is very good at lying to herself, because her hips buck, because she's as helpless to this as he is. John loves his pretty girl itching for something he'll show how to scratch for.

"But don't you ever think, baby, how nice it would be to have someone to give everything you ever wanted to?"

"Everyday," she sighs, soft-eyed smile exasperated and wry to this lifelong heartache.

"I can do that, you know I can. I'd do that for you," John promises, but not entirely, not when his voice is ravaged by his breath bathing the scalloped lace of her neckline. He keeps kissing down the ladder of her sternum and dips to lick her navel. Lucy shrieks and giggles and pushes at his unmoving shoulders. John nips at the soft flesh of her abdomen and kisses her there, too, just in case.

Congratulations on Your Adoption!

Fy's a puddle of puppy limbs sprawling the back seat of Lucy's stolen car—kind of, not really, grand larceny just another charge he'd weasel out of. If they were pulled over right now, Lucy bets John could charm his way into dashing off with nothing but a warning.

“Police are more suspicious of cars from other states, did you know that Lucy?” He informed her earlier, wagging a screwdriver, changing her plates while she finished the coffee he made. Not that calling the cops ever crossed her mind. What good would they do for a spoiled, little rich girl hardly kidnapped from her big dollhouse? *She was raped, too? Go figure!*

After jolting from sleep, her spine stays tense. Something amiss in the silence, the way a desert went quiet. No more of John's smooth chatter ruefully explaining the precautions behind breaking her phone. Sunset taunts her by making his oil black eyes the color of pecans when she rolls her head against her seat to study John's profile. Likely upset Lucy stopped listening to the fanciful intricacies of location technologies, he's moody and jittery. Anxious not of the consequences but with a clear distaste of the aftermath and no longer trying to initiate conversation. Keeps only his fingers busy, a light strum on her steering wheel or changing the station the radio turns to static. Scooby-Doo villain caught red-handed and sulking after the monster mask is ripped off, *rooby-rooby-roo!* The rest of his costume consists of honest jeans, unassuming button up, and leather shoes of a man who cares about his postures.

A sudden mutter too low to hear and utterly at odds with the animal noises in his chest more numerous than his slurred wheedling. John's hand crosses the middle console and Lucy flinches into the door. His lip twitches but he goes about prodding near her thigh. Tests the ice packs he laid down for her soreness with a softness now he's done demanding everything from her. Not that he's stopped doing what he wants

done himself, like reaching across her constricted diaphragm to buckle her seatbelt. Packed for Fy and Lucy, their favorite treats and her chessboard, too, because John is meticulous even in what he thinks is compassion.

Lucy doesn't try to see where they're going. No real point with her absent of sense of direction. Hell, she can't recall a single street adjacent to Squeezepenny— though, that might just be the concussion. Out of her window billboards are more frequent than mile markers. Ray of Hope Baptist Church asks her, *Oh, you want to talk to God now?* Lucy's not so sure she's on speaking terms with God but can't stand this cultivated hush either.

“Did you buy the house across from me?”

“... No.”

“How much of what you've told me is a lie?”

“Just the details.”

“I don't know you at all, do I?”

Looking at her from the corner of his eye, John gives her a fond smile.

“Not as well as I know you.”

Bluebeard's Eighth Wife (1938) **dir. Ernest Lubitsch**

John was rather partial to old-fashioned names. Aurey, Eve, Vera, Ruth made him think in the thrum of cicadas and red-lipped kisses and copper summer colors. Dorthy and Louella

and Florence and blue-white skies, hot breezes and linens hanging on the line. Names he might've given his daughter.

He considered the name Lucille. Held a driver's license above his head to look at the plastered DMV smile. A nice smile, too.

10/28/1997

Jones

Lucille

5700 Squeezepenny Lane

McKinney, TX 75070-55527

5'5"

A little Lucy with... 'brown eyes' like her mommy and daddy. John dropped the license and daydream in the empty living room of 5701 Squeezepenny Lane. The property had been on the market for 175 days, no approaching open houses, and didn't attract attention from regular traffic. He paced the windows facing Lucille's home with the impatient knowing she would be home any minute. The puppy needed to be walked.

She won't close the high security gate after she parks nor after she and her brown puppy scamper off down the block. A shame, really. Safety was a priority of his, always liked how it kept him busy. John breathed through his nose as Lucille passed her neighbor's garage he knew to be empty and could taste the sunscreen, sweat, and sunshine on her skin.

John struggled in the turbulent ebb and flow between id and ego pushing bad habits to the surface. He scrubbed his face, the bill of his hat dug into his cheek before he firmly fixed his attention on the Jones' house. Lucille was not to be touched but to help him with his job. It wasn't that bad of a gig; a missing daughter, a shiny credit card, and an uncaring father to return her to. Lucille Jones was a dry run, so to speak. Past efficiency

against the whetstone, going through the motions, poke and prod and dig up the secrets under the yellow zinnias.

When she returned from her walk, John neared the sun damaged for-sale sign and called out, “Hi, neighbor.”

She shielded her eyes to see him but the polite smile was crafted just for him on the empty street. Looking for treats, the puppy reached him first and John ducked down to scratch the spot she liked under her chin.

“Well, hello, I’m John,” he cooed with his chin turned up from puppy kisses. “Easy, easy, I’m not going anywhere, little girl. I just got here.”

“Sorry, she loves meeting people but I’m sure happy to see you, too. Been waiting for someone to move in,” she stated with admiration of the steep pitch of the roof and ornate balconies similar to her own property. “Hated this house standing empty and unappreciated.”

“Glad it waited for me, I’ve been looking for a long while for the perfect place to settle. I was expecting to be acquainted with take out before my neighbors—late moving company and all, any recommendations?”

“Oh, sure. Pantry Restaurant makes a fine Rueben.” He promised to give them a call when she interrupted, sternum charmingly flinching in a resolved breath, “How’bout you come over and I put the order in. Can’t have you eating in a bare house, wouldn’t be neighborly.”

“I can only allow so much, certainly, can’t have you paying, Miss—”

When she caught up to her pink-cheeked eagerness Lucy introduced herself in a girlish rush, “Lucy. That’s Fy.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a hand outstretched to shake hers when Fy knocked him on his ass followed by frantic

licks. “Sweet thing, huh, she’s got a big personality for such a little name.”

“It’s short for— and don’t you laugh— Fyodor Dogstoyevsky.”

“Wow,” he huffed, brows tailored to any bad punchline. “I’m not laughing, I promise. That’s a good one.”

“Well, come on. Heat ain’t gonna break soon, but I, um, made lemonade this morning.”

John schooled his features, couldn’t let his grin get too wide when he glanced at the empty house behind her, one he was a welcomed guest, and said he’d loved to. Lucy bit the back of her lip and pulled puppy and John after her through the kitchen rather than the foyer full of photographs. Lucy maintained a clean home smelling of wood polish and sugar cookies. Puppy kibble scattered on the black and white tile near a hand painted ceramic bowl. Mail stacked neatly on the counter where she throws her keys. The kitschy *Texas’ Tallest Watertower!* keychain was missing, the key in his pocket belonged to a lock box he spent a reckless amount of time looking for under her bed.

Two crystal juice glasses on the large work table match the pitcher Lucy pulled from her sparse fridge. John walked to the sink, breakfast dishes tidy in the drying rack beside unfurling heads of chrysanthemums from the garden. John wanted to push it toward the edge. See all that pretty wetness, slick petals, and helpless nectar spilled across the floor.

As Lucy poured the second glass of lemonade, John asked, “How long have you lived in McKinney?”

“Whole life,” she chirps, the heart of Texas in her voice.

“So, not long— no, no, you let me get those.”

Her steps so light the herringbone floors didn't creak, a little phantom dancing in sepia dust motes led him to a covered patio. Air thick as apricot jam, horizon hemorrhaging blazing red, blinding as Lucy's honeyed eyes and freckles.

John centered polite conversation around the house and kept her chatting about the renovations. He knew the majority of it, her plans laid out in notes and blueprints on a desk full of paid invoices and bills. Pieces of wall removed to repair plumbing, gold leaf scraped and wilting at the baseboards, plastic sheets wall off the part of the basement where pesky mold seeped up from the foundations. Nothing more interesting than Lucy under the dust covers draped over most of the furniture. Over sweating lemonade, John's ulterior motives shimmered to a soft want of seeing her smile until the food arrived.

Fy flopped ass over tea kettle after a butterfly and Lucy laughed mid-bite behind her hand. Sauce tickled her chin and she laughed again as she dabbed it off. He didn't mind, she had a nice laugh. Throat and truthful.

"Sorry, sorry." Mirth bunched her cheeks up. "You must think I'm an animal."

No, but John wasn't sure what he was. He tilted his head, taking his time to chew to consider his hazy state resting on a hairpin trigger.

"I'd say you're already better than any neighbor I've ever had."

She shied from the compliment and changed the subject, "You've kept me talking and I don't even know where you're from."

John didn't like talking about himself but Lucy seemed to need an even exchange of information. Otherwise, she could think she's oversharing and he can't let her clam up. That's

when they get watchful with a suspicion outmatching his charm.

“Texas, just like you. I was teaching down in Houston at Rice but I wanted to work on a smaller scale.”

“Funny how we’re meeting now. I went to Rice!”

“No,” he replied with faux surprise. How shocking. John pressed his grin against his knuckles.

“What do you teach?”

“Calculus.”

“Ah, I see. Not many of those required by music majors.”

From her transcripts, John ascertained she’s proficient at math but left with only her associates degree and a handful of junior classes. No reason listed as to why she dropped out.

“Do you play the harp I saw in there?”

Lucy looked abashed in her small, proud nod. Humble girl of— careful, John. He sat straighter when her expression dropped.

“I didn’t mean to poke around. Just got a little lost in those bathroom directions earlier.”

“That’s my grandmama’s. Mine is—” she threw a flippant gesture over her shoulder— “somewhere.”

John’s face twisted in something akin to concern as he put his hand over hers to stop the anxious picking at the wedding band on her ring finger. Inherited as everything else, he presumes.

“I hope I didn’t touch a sore spot, Lucy.”

She shook her head and told him not to worry about it. “I was named after her, Lucille.” Her soft complacency returned when he mentioned how lovely it was. “She was lovely, too.”

Um, she was the first to teach me to play. It was just me and her for a long time.”

It hadn't been a hope or a skip to suspect Lucy might have been raised by her grandparents. Where's your mama, Lucy, your daddy, all those who could have kept you safe? John pondered earlier when he noted each memento across her dresser. Photographs of a small Lucy with a man older than he was in the yellowed military portrait. A silver handled brush, a picture of Fy as a wrinkly newborn, and a weathered copy of *Crime & Punishment*. The inside of the cover read: *To my darling Lucy, happy graduation— I wish your Granddaddy was here to see you off the college. Know he's proud of you whenever the angel light sings from heaven. Love, Grandmama.*

John looked across the table and rubbed his mouth back and forth on his index finger. What does she not want him to know?

“She reminds me of my aunt. She took me in after my mother passed as well.”

Lucy drained of color so John moved closer, knee touching hers.

“She— it was a bit more complicated than— you're not from around here so it's not like you can know all of McKinney's not-so secrets. Not that I mind talking about it, it's just— well, tell you true, John, it's a bit of a scotch conversation.

Vacancy, Air Conditioning, and Color TV in Every Room!

The sleeping hours are not the time for a single, white wolf to be sniffing at the state line. Lucy's cradling Fy to her chest outside a motel when John comes back from the office. A hand in his pocket, fingers swinging a room key, snapping his gum. Cucumber-watermelon cool in his favored habitat of faded red

doors, dusty yellow lights shining in his hair, vacancy staining her bare legs blue. The parking lot is sticky with humidity oozing from the tar as Lucy first notices how deceptive his size is. His slow lumber hides the long length of his stride and height only obvious when he's close enough to loom.

"She needs a proper walk and it-it's dark," Lucy mentions in measured pleading to delay curling into his side to be slowly soothed to sleep by his rhythmic stroking down her spine.

With luggage in both hands, John leans around the car with an eager look hardly controlled into cool acknowledgment.

"Do you need me to go with you?" he asks in such a quizzical tone that chills her more than a misstep around a rattlesnake, but she nods anyways. Fy squirms when Lucy puts her down, uncoordinated in her excitement to tangle herself in John's ankles. "Well, how could I say no to you?"

Lucy hasn't figured an answer for that either.

"I need to pay a visit to someone tomorrow, but it won't take long, maybe you could even wait in the— *hold my hand*," he orders.

"What?"

"Can't you just behave and hold my hand, Lucy? I mentioned we're halfway to our honeymoon destination but looking for *discretion* on our first night as man and wife. The receptionist, uh—" he clears his throat, deep timber raw but annoyingly almost normal. Lucy must have gotten the angle wrong— "*Margaret* said she'll be looking for my bride before heading home. We eloped, by the way."

Indeed, a woman clasping her hands over her heart tracks them with frog eyes behind thick glasses. Lucy can barely make her face out when fingers threading through hers make

her temples ring so loud she can hardly hear herself sneer, “That’s worked for you before.”

“Sure. The elderly find the bridal carry so romantic.” His smile grows wide and wild, reminiscent eyes locked ahead in the dark holding his fondest memories. “Plus, she can’t see all that well, so no question why my throat is bruised to hell, but still found me charming enough.”

Lucy hums in meek contemplation, “I sure did.”

“Did?” He pulls her short, making her bump into his chest. From the office the touch to her jaw is that of a gentle lover. A nice husband presses his thumb to the lower lip of his little wife. Margaret won’t see how John’s finger knot in her hair, tilting Lucy’s face to his by making her stretch on the balls of her feet. Breathes into her, “I don’t charm you, baby?”

Teeters on her toes like a horse thief straining for the bucket before its kicked. Lucy nips his mouth with, “Do dogs charm cats up trees?”

Her heart is just as strangled in her throat when she whimpers into John’s smiling kiss.

Where the Buses Don’t Run

Aware of his teeth like crooked fence posts needing to be driven back into the earth, John drives down a Texas highway. Barren. Not a passing car or gas station for miles. Nothing to distract him from how Lucy is performing vivisection with her gutting stare and pointed questions.

“That wasn’t a lie. She died when I was fourteen and my aunt adopted my sister and me.”

“What’s your sister’s name?”

“Jane.”

“Right— *Jane*. John and Jane,” she recited what sounds like an obvious lie.

“A lot of judgment from Lucille the third.”

“Fourth,” Lucy corrects in a distracted tone as she reads a billboard. Another question snaps from her bubblegum pink mouth. “What’s your full name, John Doe?”

“Wayne.”

“Sure, right. Real revolving son of a bitch you are, John Wayne,” she mutters and snorts and slouches in her seat. He stays silent, waiting. Another mile and the Jones’ diamond winks, glinting as her thumb twists the band. Lucy pulls her knees to her chest, resting her cheek against them to study her specimen in the light of new information mutating her analysis. “John Aaron Wayne.”

“Howdy,” he deadpans.

“I couldn’t believe it when you were let out on good behavior.”

“Can’t you?” John leans toward her before glancing out of the corner of his eye. Tone turning clipped, “Eight years of good behavior, mind you. I hated that place, the constraint, the *boredom*. I followed every protocol, attended every therapy session, went to every meeting to get out. The majority of my recovery happened on parole, courtesy of the state. I was reformed, *well* even. Could not have been melted down and poured into temptation up to the very point I found the license of a careless little girl who didn’t even know she dropped it.”

Lucy recoils in a hiss, “*Three* women came forward, but how many are there really?”

“I don’t, um, talk about that.” Too much of a regression, too risky for his tender, healing girl.

“Too bad,” she replies in tempered, patient fury. Endless road ahead shimmering with her lividity. “What number am I?”

“Baby—”

“Don’t. Don’t do that. Just tell me.”

He exhales through his nose at her rude tone, the back of his neck and shoulders suddenly tense. John can hear his favorite mementos vibrating with the hum of the highway where he still keeps Lucy’s drivers license, shifting among all the others. He should look her in the eye but this is a conversation they could only have when one of them is looking away.

“Seventeen.”

“I’m going to kill you,” she says in her petal soft, starter pistol voice. Curled up smaller with her turquoise painted toes and little declaration. He gives her a look that’s all dimples and upturned brows, can barely contain his grin with that sure, honey on the curve of his mouth.

“Try harder next time.”

Morning Sickness

“Your harp is out of tune.” The tender growl coming from the bruising is at odds with his humming contentment when she loops her arms around his neck. Lucy knows she won’t be able to make it back up the stairs and limply concedes to his wishes to hold her again.

“I haven’t touched it since my grandmama died,” she snuffles with a whine when he folds her knees over his elbow. John’s face crumples in confused concern as if he’s unfamiliar with his reaction to a woman’s pain he inflicted.

They pass her tenth-grade portrait near the top of the stairs, braces partially hidden by a purposefully small grin. She joked about covering his eyes to keep him from seeing it when she invited him upstairs for the stashed scotch. He kept her from skipping up the steps, not looking at the picture when he called her smile pretty.

Down the hall, in her granddaddy’s study, Lucy disclaimed her clever, precocious knowledge of what can be demanded from girls. John is the only person to ever see her greatest fear and undeniable desire in her retelling of Jones’ history. How obvious was it to him that it was just an abstract to her, no different than a child considering how adult teeth fit under their gums? Something not quite real until it’s accepted, a change at a certain age, the before and after the same as puberty and baby teeth wiggling loose.

You’re a rape baby, kids said with the same distaste as *kisses* and *cooties*. For a long time, Lucy thought it was how babies were made because in the traditions of things, Lucy first sought counsel from a dictionary. *Why don’t you look it up?* An ingrained Jones’ custom made her sing the alphabet to herself as any other new word until she found that unsaid step. First came love, then came marriage, men sought the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will— Lucy looked up all those words, too, and then some in scrunched determination in her brow— then came baby in the baby carriage. The jokes stopped a year or three later, her and all the dumb kids she grew up with shuffling out of sex-ed and casting nervous glances at eachother’s crotches.

The first time she watched a news story about somewhere in Texas a man was being arrested for rape; Lucy sat with her

legs crossed on the floor near her grandmama's calf dangling daintily from her chaise lounge.

“What does—?”

By the time Lucy turned, seeking clarification, Lucille had crammed her embroidery away with one hand and wielded the TV remote with the other. The fizz of the green screen left static in the roots of her hair. There were more women like her mama and Lucy didn't get to know them either. Kept her shying away from intimacy and connection because of it but—but, Lucy knew that wasn't the whole truth. She was testing her partners and how bad they wanted her, finding none up to the task. Knowing it was wrong to want to give herself to the sick whims of another to pretend they weren't her own all the while with agonized feelings from her distorted youth echoed in what she thought she deserved and couldn't have. Lucy resisted getting too comfortable with the idea of dating and marriage in the selfish intention of letting no one uncover the spiteful, sweet rot of her childhood of wanting to know her mama. Her first chance to retreat into safety from herself and the wolves of this life she wanted to gobble her up was in her junior year of college. Lucy came home for the weekend where her grandmother laid in her silk, sleep mask looking very strange. She died on a Tuesday.

John introduced himself on a Wednesday, raped her on Thursday, so this wasn't Lucy's first Friday that felt like the end of the world. She should have known to not welcome the flash of teeth in his sharp, beautiful smiles. Maybe she did, but the candied niceties of his company confounded her and let him slip into the underbrush of her loneliness. Then, the natural order of things chased her up the stairs and held her down by the scruff.

“I'd offer you a scotch but I know how much you don't like licking up your messes.”

“Fuck you,” Lucy grumbles under the plum blanket he pulls up to her chin. Hair is brushed back from her face pinching with the effort to curl in on herself. It’s not just the ache between her thighs, it’s the bruises on her calves and her bleeding wrists and body which no longer hers. An extension of John’s nature, her mama’s lacking love for her, her grandmama’s dashed hopes for a good man in this world. Yielding to this grim acceptance is to spit in the resilience of Jones’ women. Lucy is every flaw of theirs, every triumph, and it helped her survive John. Guess that was his point, too, for her to survive. Live with him living in her.

She can’t sleep so when the heat of John returns she sinks into his chest. His hand pushed beneath hers to cradle her abdomen in the width of his palm as the sun rose in woozy reds. John knows she’s awake and tattoos a request on the back of her neck. One he makes sound so simple, so easy.

“Come with me.”

So ludicrous John wipes her thoughts clean again. A forced reboot to process just *what the fuck*— and before all logic can stop it, curiosity opens its seductive jaws around the feline tilt of Lucy’s thoughts.

“Where?”

“My— employer’s,” he maintains a bored tone after the brief hesitation, not an entirely true description of his work but can’t bother to think of another word for it, “daughter ran away two weeks ago, and I’ve been asked to retrieve her. I think she’s in Louisiana. Grew up on this plantation butted up against another, still close to the family.”

He must be good, then, at what he does. Hunting-dog capable on a girl’s scent. Not collared well enough but his employer must not care about collateral damage. Buttermilk light soaks Lucy’s room with dawn thrown about by the ring on her finger as she wonders if she saved the runaway from the

same fate. But, Lucy's been reduced to something so small she can only mourn herself. She wants to bite John and uses her teeth anyways to snarl, "If I come with you you'll rape me again."

"Yes," he says, deliberately definitive as he pulls himself onto an elbow and snags her chin to look her in the eye. Examines her with a troubled expression as he adds a new way to control her breathing to his Rolodex of her every reflex. All the ways he can make her scared or slick or supine. Lucy becomes sickeningly aware that if he were to shove his hands between her thighs, he would find fresh stickiness. John clearly knew that, too, as he smiles softly, watching her resolve turn to water in her throat.

"If I come with you," saying it again makes something dark in her twist on its spine, sniffing a mouse tail of opportunity, "I won't make it easy."

"Well, aren't you certain."

He lays on his back, touching the bruise under his jaw, looking so proud.

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 and going to continue exploring her style through wild and resilient women who are a little fucked up.

Tear Me Open, Lay Me Down

by Carina Stopenski

“There isn’t a heartbeat, Finch,” Dr. Feng sighs. “I’m so sorry, I know how much you wanted this. I’ll give you two some privacy.”

The door latches behind her, and all I can feel are Mae’s arms around my shoulders, the smell of her vanilla perfume enveloping me as I sob on the sterile white cloth of the exam table. Three attempts, three miscarriages. I was a fool to expect any other outcome.

“Babe, you’re going to need to calm down,” Mae whispers, her hand caressing the peach fuzz of my freshly shaved head. “We’ll try again. We always do.”

“What if it just keeps happening, though?” I answer between hiccups, wiping snot from my face. “I don’t know how much more my body can take. Or our savings, for that matter.”

“I can take out a loan?”

“Why bother? It’s inhospitable.”

Mae pinches the bridge of her nose and exhales. “You don’t think I would carry this baby if I could? I would kill to do this so you didn’t have to.”

Mae had temporarily stopped her spironolactone in an attempt for both of us to be biological parents, to have both of our names emblazoned on the birth certificate, but when the test results revealed that HRT had already decimated her levels, we knew IVF with a donor was the only option.

I know that Mae wants so badly to be a mother, but when I would look at my distended belly in the mirror, full with the complicated sensation of dysphoric maternal bliss, I wondered if this was for both of us or just for her.

“We could adopt?” I proposition.

“Do you even know how unethical the adoption industry is? I can’t believe you would even suggest that.”

“Okay, then I don’t really know what you expect me to do. This is my body and I’m *tired*, Mae. I can’t keep doing this. There won’t be anything left of me.”

She doesn’t answer. We both sit silent until Dr. Feng reenters the room, gives the same spiel she’s given the last two times that I’ve lost a pregnancy, gives me the prescription for misoprostol, but I tune it out. I just want to go home and pass this clot in peace, scrub the blood from my thighs before it can stain my sheets.

Mae sleeps in the guest room. We don’t exchange many words once we arrive home, and maybe that’s for the best. For so long, I had clung to this notion of home and family that had been beaten into my head far before I knew Mae. My mother had been so enamored with raising a little girl that when I realized I was not one, she thought the least I could be was a mother. When I changed my name, cut off my tits, moved to the city with all the other dykes, where was my mother to guide

me? She only returned when I told her that Mae and I were considering having a baby.

I didn't call her tonight to tell her what had happened. I wasn't ready for her to chastise me, to question why my body could not support life. I could barely support my own life. I do not have the answers.

After taking the misoprostol, I make home on my bathroom floor, laying blankets and pillows on the cold tile and lighting a eucalyptus candle on the sink. Soon, the wave would crash and the black clotting of tissue would make its way through me, and just like common shit it would be flushed.

I shimmy off the bottom half of my clothes so I am only clad in an old black t-shirt, one of Mae's, splattered in bleach stains and paint marks. If I focus, I can hear her faintly snoring in the guest room, already exhausted by the day's endeavors. I close my eyes and suck in a breath as the pangs begin to move in.

As I anticipated the contraction of the clotted fetus sliding out of me, a different type of pain erupted. My abdomen swelled, I clench the edge of the bathtub and grit my teeth. No Lamaze breathing is enough. This is not the pain I had prepared for.

"Mae!" I am screaming at this point, throat hoarse as I feel my insides scramble, my chest fluttering. "Mae, come here!"

Mae shuffles in, wiping the tiredness from face before her eyes widen. "Oh, my God, Finch."

"What, what is it?"

"Just breathe. I'm here." Mae kneels at the base of the toilet, her hands reaching between my legs. "I don't believe this."

My lower half splayed open, tearing the flesh in crude rips, I hear a soft cooing noise before the fullness escapes me. In Mae's hands, no bigger than my index finger, was a fully formed, wailing baby girl.

We decide to call her Roisin, "little rose," since her whole body was pink when she emerged from the maw of my cunt. Mae called Dr. Feng immediately, explained the situation. I overhear the conversation from outside the bathroom door.

"There's no way, Mae," the doctor answered coldly. "There was no heartbeat, nothing viable."

"I am looking at her right now. You want to tell me that I'm crazy or something? That my spouse just gave birth to a hallucination?"

"It's just...I've never heard of such a thing. Bring them both into the office tomorrow."

Mae hangs up the phone without saying goodbye, and I have made home on our floor, gently wiping down Roisin with a warm washcloth, clearing the debris and viscera from her tiny face. When she opens her eyes, I can barely tell that they are a soft sage green, since the sclera are probably only as big as a push pin. She looks at me as she lays in my palm, and I use my pinky to stroke her soft black hair.

"How the fuck did this happen?" Mae asks, pacing back and forth. "There's no way."

"Do you want to come down here and look at your daughter?"

I scrub Mae's hands, now dried brown with the blood of my afterbirth, and she withdraws her palm before I can hand her Roisin. "I'm not ready to hold her. I'll just look."

I had hoped that Mae's maternal instinct would kick in. Instead, her eyes looked glassy, traumatized from yanking our miracle child from inside me. She fidgets with her fingers as she gets comfortable next to me on the floor. I rip a toilet paper roll in half and stick a maxi pad on it before laying Roisin down on it, makeshift bassinet on the linoleum. The three of us fall asleep in the cold, small puddles of blood still pooling around us.

When we wake the next morning, Roisin is not in the bathroom. I lift Mae's arm from around me as she continues to sleep--hardly anything can wake that woman from slumber--and follow footprints the size of Barbie shoes to the bedroom.

Roisin sits at the base of our ottoman, no longer a baby, but a miniscule child. Still naked, but now with longer hair, the ability to hold up her head, Roisin stares up at me and extends her arms, clenching her fists together. *Come, Baba*, I can almost hear in her admiring expression. *Come to me*.

I stoop down to my little girl and she giddily crawls into my hand, laughing and clapping her hands together. I lift her up and set her on the vanity, allow her to look at herself in the mirror.

"That's you, Roisin," I say to her, pointing at the reflection. I grab a handkerchief from my jewelry box and wrap it around her like a bath towel. "Here. So you don't get cold."

She swaddles herself in the fabric and giggles, and I notice her teeth are all sharp little canines, like the ones you would see on a kitten. Yet, the lilting tambor of her laugh is unmistakably human.

"Do you know who I am?" I ask my tiny child.

Roisin bounces up and down, still unable to speak, but she makes grunts and sighs that indicate to me she can hear me.

A smile creeps across my lips. "I'm your Baba. Mama is sleeping in the other room. We love you very much." Here before me sits my child. She is not at all what I would have expected but I love her. She is me and she is Mae. She is brand new matter sprouted from the adoration that my wife and I share. From Roisin, we have had created new roots.

Over the next couple of days, Roisin has grown at an exponential rate. She is still so small, sitting in the palm of our hands and under constant supervision, but we have fashioned a tiny black muumuu from a fabric scrap to grant her some modesty. She now resembles a tiny woman, but her coos still ring out like an infant and she communicates only through her hands and a few occasional sounds. We have not gone to Dr. Feng's office, nor have we answered the dozen calls she's left us.

"I wonder how long we'll have with her," Mae asks me as we marvel over Roisin, who is sitting on the kitchen table nibbling on a pomegranate seed as we eat our breakfast.

"What do you mean?" I respond, taking a long, solemn sip of my coffee.

"I mean, she's already got the body of an adult," Mae responds. "We don't know how she's supposed to age. She was born not even a week ago and she's already a woman."

"She's not a woman. She's my baby."

"Have you called your mom to tell her?" Mae always changes the subject when she doesn't want to start a fight.

“No, I haven’t. Why, should I?” I extend my finger onto the table, and Roisin runs over and wraps her arms around it in an itty bitty bear hug.

“She might be able to give us some guidance, I don’t know,” Mae shrugs, pouring a bit of her oatmeal into the thimble we’ve fashioned into a bowl for Roisin. “Don’t listen to me, I’m just rambling.”

The room falls quiet except for Roisin’s delighted slurping as she finishes her meal. I gather her into the breast pocket of my shirt and finish my coffee, the hot liquid sliding down my throat and settling the warmth in my chest. I barely recognize Mae anymore. The joy I thought she would experience from motherhood is absent, she barely looks at Roisin. Sometimes I wonder if she actually loves me or if she loves the idea of me being an incubator for her dreams.

It has been ten days since Roisin’s birth and while she hasn’t aged anymore, her body has grown slower, her breath more labored. She still does not speak, but her sound communication has improved. We do our best to keep her comfortable because we can sense that the end is coming. There’s nothing we can do to stop it.

“You okay?” Mae sits beside me on the bathroom floor where we’ve set up Roisin’s makeshift cot, the same spot where she was born. She likes it in there.

“I just wish we had more time with her,” I answer, staring down at my lap. Mae puts her arm around my shoulder and kisses my temple, her fingers running through my hair.

“You haven’t showered.”

“I don’t want to miss a moment with her.”

“We’re in the bathroom. I’ll sit here with her. Clean yourself up. It’s okay.” It is the first time that Mae has volunteered to be alone with Roisin. I nod my head and strip down before hopping into the shower, and I let the warm water cascade down my back before scrubbing over a week of grime and filth from my body. I lather my scalp and I listen through the patter of water, as Mae talks to Roisin’s sleeping form on the other side of the shower curtain.

“You know, we prayed so hard for you,” Mae whispers. “You aren’t what we planned, but we are so glad we have you. We love you so much.” There is a small shudder in her voice, stifling a cry, and I bite my lip to stop myself from sobbing. Is this what it is like to grieve a child who is not even gone yet? Is this what it feels like to lose the one thing you were able to bring into this world?

When I emerge from the shower, I call my mother.

Mae has once again dozed off on the bathroom floor, her head inches from Roisin’s body. Who knew that raising a thumbelina of our own would be so exhausting? I go out into the hall, my hair still wet and my pajamas still a bit disheveled, and hesitantly dial the number.

“Mom?” I say into the phone after it stops ringing.

“Finch.” It felt so weird for her to use my real name. She had struggled with it for so long, but she is trying her best. Maybe she wasn’t as bad as I thought.

I break down sobbing, jagged breaths between each few words. “I need you, Mommy. It’s the baby.”

“Oh, baby, did you lose it? I’m so sorry.”

“No, just...I need you to come to my house.”

“Of course, just give me an hour. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” There is a brief pause. “It’s going to be okay, Finch. The baby is going to be okay.”

“I’ll leave the door unlocked. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I’m your mother. It’s my job.”

I hang up the phone and return to the bathroom where Mae has awoken. I curl up next to her and we both watch Roisin with rapt attention, her chest rising and falling, her small body curling in on itself, this beautiful perfect thing that we are able to say belongs to both of us.

“I think it’s almost time,” Mae sighs, her voice grave and sleepy. “The time between her breaths is getting shorter and shorter.”

I don’t want to believe it, but I notice it too. I want my mother to get here before Roisin passes. I want them to meet, for my mother to see I was able to create life, look at this thing I was able to make myself. I want her to see our beautiful girl in all her glory, not as a corpse.

Roisin opens her eyes and sits up. She motions for us to come close. Mae and I each extend a pinky to our daughter, who kisses us each on the knuckle with one last weak smile. She nods and we howl in pain. We know what must happen next.

Roisin takes her last breath.

We cannot force ourselves to move. Whether it has been seconds, minutes, hours, we cannot tell. The only time that passes is the time without our Roisin. The bathroom door

creaks open and I see my mother standing aghast. “Finch...what did you do?”

Mae and I are both laying on the bathroom floor, blankets never changed, our faces tight with dried tears, wallowing in our foul anguish. I try to get one last glimpse of Roisin’s tiny body, but instead, I am met with a fleshy, rotting mass: a barely formed fetus caked in maroon fluid, clad in a hand-sewn black muumuu with flecks of clot strewn around it.

I shoot up from my position and grab the fetus in my hands. “No, no, she was just here.”

“Finch, put that down! That’s biohazardous!” My mother kneels down and tries to grab the mass of tissue from my hands with a wad of toilet paper, but I press it against my chest, shaking Mae awake.

“Mae, please, look!”

Mae shifts herself onto her elbows, an agonized expression spreading across her countenance. “No...she can’t be gone, right? She can’t be. She was just here.”

“No, I know, where did she go?”

Mom looks at us both, desperately clinging to the aftermath of stillbirth we are doting over. “There’s dried blood all over the house. It smells like death in here. How long have you been holding onto that thing?”

“This thing is your granddaughter,” I weep. “Roisin.” Mae and I lean into each other and allow our hands to grow sticky with the decomposing body of our beloved baby girl.

My mother takes in a sharp breath, stifles a gag as Mae and I take turns kissing the putrid mass. She lifts us both to our feet, corralling us to the backyard. Neither of us have left the house since Roisin was born. We stare in a stupor as my mother begins to dig a hole in the dirt between our basil plants with her

hands. She grunts with each handful of soil she unearths and motions us to come to her.

It's okay, Baba. Come to her.

I hold the mass that was once Roisin in my left hand and intertwine my fingers with Mae's with my right, and we walk a funeral procession for our child that could have been. We place the flesh in the hole and for a moment, Roisin's face flashes in my vision. My mother places another mound of dirt atop the makeshift grave and stays seated at the garden plot, a single tear streaming down the slope of her nose onto the freshly dug ground. As Mae and I cling to each other and weep, my mother guides us back inside. The three of us scrub the apartment clean and she gives us each a kiss on the forehead before leaving without a word.

We have opted to use a surrogate this time around. Part of me is grateful that I can have my body back, not have to be forced to hold the grief in my gut one last time. Mae has started turning the guest room into a nursery. We've torn out the linoleum in the bathroom and replaced it with hardwood. The hysterectomy has ablated the disease from my womb, now no longer a hostile environment for the ghosts that reside there.

The healing process is hell. Every day, I feel that part of my body is missing. Yet, I can sleep in my bed, wrapped in plush blankets. I can feel Mae's arms around my shoulders and her vanilla perfume enveloping me once again. I can look outside my window, witness the rosebush blooming in the garden plot between the basil plants, and smile.

Carina Stopenski

Carina Stopenski (they/them) is a writer, teacher, and librarian based out of Pittsburgh, PA. Carina received their BFA in Library Science 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 Coyote Nods

by Lee Pearson

It was some sick bastard decided to name the town Cholla, after the cactus. The cactuses are so long gone now that even their corpses can't be found baking dry and dead in the shadeless heat. Not a trace of them. They were here once, I'm sure, back when the lake was more than some brown puddle full of dead stinking things.

Cholla— nothing so green has graced this valley since before I was a boy.

“Jesus,” says Keats blocking his mouth and nose from the stench while we pass into one of the old condemned houses that lay derelict between town and the res. “The fuck is that smell?”

He hasn't been a deputy long enough to know the smell—smell of dead mans' shit. He seen a handful of bodies now but never smelled them after they been holed up in some abandoned shack for a week with God-knows-what partaking of their corpse. A carcass out here in the low desert is the delicacy of every creature, with even songbirds taking the flesh as they can't find sustenance elsewhere. Seen a vulture crawl

through an open window once, contrary to its nature— just to get at some old feral dog that died up in one of the houses.

Door's a mess of splinters whipped raw by the wind carrying sand like thousands of tiny little razors. I keep a kerchief to my nose and my mouth and scan light over the foyer. Around the corner there's a red shoe. Follow up the leg to the torso and arms and then the head a greasy ball on the floor. Its face green and sagging with death and its mouth agape with a swollen black tongue almost falling out of it. No big thing's had a go at him yet, just little mice had their fill on a few parts. Around his left arm's a belt and little purple holes around the skin below it.

“Well, that's that— overdose,” I say turning back out the house to get away from the foulness.

“Knew him from school,” says Keats.

“Well, I'm sorry son.”

“He always been a sack of shit. No tears from me.”

I nod. I had this corpse in the back of my car several times over the years, back before it was a corpse that is. His name was Johnny Ferns— name too pretty for out here, too pretty to belong to some rotten piece like this. First time I caught him was when he and his buddies was drinking and they were still in high school. Took it easy on them then, joking and carrying on since they was just some kids. Broke into their daddys' liquor cabinets. Didn't know a bad apple when I seen one back then. Johnny Ferns wasn't *bad*. He was goddamn rotten— poison. Few years after that I picked him up when he gave his girl a black eye, and again the day after when he gave her another to match. They had a boy together. Had a broken arm a few too many times, even for some clumsy kid. *Fell out a tree*, Johnny said more than once when I asked him. Ain't no trees here.

“There’s beer cans all over,” says Keats. “His buddies just left him when he died.”

“That’s what they do,” I reply.

Seen as much at least a dozen times. Friends known each other since kindergarten watch their friends slump over in the floor in their puke and their shit in their pants. Leaving them like that and steal whatever dope they had left with their wallet with their money and the pictures of their babies. Leave their friends there rotting up and reeking while they get high.

“You know Santiago’ll wanna hear about this,” says Keats.

“Ain’t been up to the res in a long time. Not since then.”

“You could always just call them.”

“Sure that’s how Santiago would prefer but the old man would probably just huff at me and hang up. He’s old school.”

“I’ll go up with you.”

“You wasn’t even a deputy then. You stay here and figure this all out.”

“Sure,” he says. “I’d prefer it anyhow.”

“I know,” I say. “Going up to Ashbury’s land tonight. Won’t be seeing me till Monday.”

“What’s at Ashbury’s?”

“Coyotes ripped up a few of his goats this last week.”

“Why don’t he shoot them?”

“He’s old, son. By the time he rolls outta bed and gets dressed and gets his rifle they already dragged one of them off in the dark. He told me thing was screaming an hour out where he couldn’t see it while they killed him. I got that rifle to teach them though. See them in the dark.”

Decided I better bring the old man a peace offering— get him some soda before I head up there. Felix is barely awake in his office when I go in the grocery store. Stirs for a second when the bell rings and his head just falls back down and he's snoring a little. His son left not long after mine did— Felix's son. Left for school and never come back. Found some greener grass, I hope. My son's a few years older and them two were good friends. Hope they found eachother out there and they're doing well. This town'll be all but dry when Felix finally passes and no one's here to keep the store open. Was hoping they bring down some McDonald's or such. Been hoping a long time. I grab and pay for the three bottles and leave an extra dollar on the counter before I step out.

Remember cussing and spitting when my boy told me he intended to leave. Mostly mad that the last person I could call my own was leaving me alone. His mama wasn't no free spirit like him, but she thought she'd find a better life out of here. Didn't leave a single trace when she left, nothing. Just packed up and took a bus with all her things to wherever. Left our boy at home alone for hours with the cartoons on and a box of Little Debbie's. Never heard from her again. I found the bottle a little after that and didn't drop it until after my son had left.

Santiago was still young when he met Johnny Ferns. Was only about five years ago when it happen, but his anger aged him more than my cynicism has aged me. He knew the girl we found up on those rocks above where the lake used to be, the ones that used to be the jumping bluffs to my father's father. They was good friends before he was a cop and she was a junkie.

We found her, me and the sheriff at that time— man named Evans. She had holes in her arm and half her clothes were ripped off her. She was raped— brutally. Wasn't the belt

around her neck killed her though, according to the autopsy report. Even if the thing left a bruise more black than blue or purple and dappled with those rhinestones. Was her underwear they shoved down her throat so far she couldn't breathe while they raped her. She choked to death on them.

Evans tried to start shit over *jurisdiction* when tribal police come from the res asking questions about what happen to the Indian girl. Old man and Santiago. Used to spend time up there as a boy when I could, making friends with some of the Indian kids there, so I knew young Santiago a little when he come up pissing fire about it all. Knew the old man from talking to him over the years. Would sit at the same stretch of highway opposite sides in our cruisers and talk a little. Some saw what happened to the girl as just another in a long line of brutalizations done to them and their ancestors before them—can't blame them.

In their little police station Santiago's sipping coffee from a thermos. He's got his boots up on the desk and moves them to see me when I enter. Sighs and takes a big gulp from the thermos. He's got a few days' worth of stubble on his lip and chin. The hair is thick and black unlike most Indians. Reminds him that somewhere up the line some Spanish or French or Englishman raped his great-great-great-great grandma and put a bastard in her that would carry that gene on and on, a reminder.

"Coffee?" he asks pointing to the pot on the counter across the room.

"I'm fine," I say and toss him one of the sodas. "Ferns is dead."

He takes his boots off the desk and nods his head. "Well."

"Thought you all should know."

"Don't do much for anyone now, does it?"

“Suppose not.”

“Nothing at all,” he says.

“The old man here?”

He scratches his scalp and scowls down at the floor. “Been dead about a year now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“We all gotta go sometime. Just too bad he went before that piece of shit.”

“Yeah.”

“How’d he die?” he asks. “How’d Ferns die?”

“It was overdose.”

He nods and I change my mind about the coffee. I pour it into a Styrofoam cup. No sugar or creamer, so I swallow it bitter. It’s nasty and he knew as much thinking it’d be funny to watch me choke it down. That’s always been his sense of humor.

“You cut your hair,” I say sitting down across from him.

“Got tired of it.”

“When it happened you had that long, long hair. Expected you to gather up some war party and ride down to kill Ferns.”

He laughs, brand new cracks and wrinkles showing. “We don’t do that no more.”

“Maybe you should have. We all knew it was him did it.”

He taps the badge on his chest. “It’s all gotta mean something.”

“You’re too old to still believe that horseshit.”

He shrugs. “If we went blood for blood we’d all end up dead eventually.”

“You know the last thing the old man ever said to me?”

“What’s that?”

“He was telling me it’s strange how hard those settlers fought just for some barren sand. Said they killed so many Indians just so they could take something, *anything*. Hell, maybe *everything’s* what they wanted.”

“Chief listened in history class. God told them to take the land, so they took the land. Don’t matter what was there so long as there was *something* there.”

“Manifest Destiny.”

“Bingo. God said so.”

“I forgot how he’d put it though.”

“*Murdering just to determine who gets to starve in the next drought?*”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Chief was smart. Smartest here.”

“I just wanted to ask him about it.”

“You know his dad was one of the last to speak the language? Only a few left these days.”

“I didn’t.”

“Died before he could teach his son. Chief had one of those old traditional Comanche names— never even knew what it meant.”

“He go easy?”

“Yeah, real easy. Peaceful.”

“That’s good.”

No matter how many times I put a bullet through some animal, always feels like they know I’m there off in the distance trying to kill them. Ashbury’s got his old brush gun that his daddy gave him after his daddy gave it to him. The ammo for it is sparse now, expensive as all hell but Ashbury stands by it. I got my fancy rifle with the big night-vision scope on it pointed up at some coyote’s forehead as it scans out across the farm towards yard where the goats are all kept up. He nods at me, the coyote, and I flick off the safety.

His eyes glow from about fifty meters out and we’re here sitting on the porch with all the lights off to see them better in the night. Ain’t a cloud in sight, just the big moon and the stars up there casting those long shadows across the whole valley—see them reach and reach out toward the horizon, just a murky black where the ground stops and the mountains raise up over that abyss like they’re somehow a part of it. Doing their songs out there, them dogs. Some part of the choir out where we can see and the rest all around out in the dark where only they can see. Laughing and moaning and joking with each other thinking, *We’re eating good tonight, boys*. They trot around the yard kicking up sand but not making a sound besides those cackling howls. The goats are crying.

Blood fans up out the wound and makes across the sand shape of some bird’s wing before the pool gathers and it’s all just a red blot there. Another crack as they scatter and the dog’s skull flies open and its legs stick straight down in a brief seizure before it goes slack and falls over next to its dead brother. The goats are crying worse now.

They all take off and won’t be back for a while. We sit out and the sun comes up and it starts to get warm fast, as it does

out in the desert. The goats are all pinned up on the opposite side of the yard from where the coyotes lay dead with their blood all pooled together. The sand is slaked for a bit until the sun is up far enough and the red fades and the ground swallows it all up thirsty like something might sprout from it now that it's finally been fed. I consider it but remember that's never worked before.

Lee Pearson

Lee is the part-time editor-in-chief of *God's Cruel Joke* and a full-time functioning alcoholic. When he's not pretending to work at his day job, he enjoys reading, writing, and rewatching episodes of *X-Files*.

From the Editor

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