

SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES



Issue 6



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Dear Wanderer,

Shift is an opportunity, not just for its writers but for its editorial board as well. Each year, Ringling College of Art and Design enrolls a team of passionate students to form the publishing team for the journal.

In *Shift*, consensus is our main goal. Over many weeks of trial and error, we read fantastic submissions and honed our process. Chaotic balancing acts led us to what you'll read today in Issue 6.

This issue of *Shift* features writers and artists from across the globe who tackled universal themes of addiction, loss, healing, and the nuances of the human condition. Our contributors have balanced both the light and the dark sides of being, touching upon the complexities of the relationships we have with ourselves and others.

What does it mean to be changed? What does it mean to grow? What are the things we leave behind? These are all questions with no simple answers, but throughout this issue, our contributors have illuminated such topics with humor, insight, courage, and raw emotion.

Contributors, we can't thank you enough for allowing us to join you on this journey through the woods. It's because of you that this journal lives and breathes. Your unique and enlightening perspectives expose *Shift's* readers to vastly different experiences that strengthen and expand the literary community we hope to build.

Readers, we also thank you for supporting not only the journal but the writers and artists who have chosen to share their creations. Until we meet again, we leave you to begin the expedition through Issue 6 of our literary oddity, *Shift*.

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When the Rest of the Als Arrive

Arlene Tribbia

We'll do our best:

for

we love the snow, the thrill of a first kiss, our summers filled with wild roses, fireflies in the twilight, humming birds, bees and cypress trees, poppies and black mustard weeds glowing across the hills, children flying kites holding fast to their strings, and the whispering sound made by yellow pencils moving here and there across desks anywhere, everywhere, and let's not forget our hours spent staring up at everyone's classroom drawings, the hanging pink and orange cut-out moons on green and blue construction paper and then how we learned sing-along loopy songs in school, everyone off-key and then the soft butter cookies after and how somebody clumsy always managed to spill their chocolate milk and we all yelled because we wanted to play musical chairs the last hour before the bell

and

we love how after school there'd always be someone walking backwards and someone else using magical spells used for skipping over sidewalk cracks and then there'd always be at least one first grader or two who'd lose their blue-lined paper filled with an afternoon's daydream's worth of wild rows, crooked letters growing, words spiraling off along with tra-la-la-la stars floating all over the margins and then the dirty shoe prints trailing off from everybody walking on it, grinding and creasing the paper over and over like we tossed this way and that on those nights when we couldn't fall asleep

and

we love the night, the shadows we make from an unknown car's headlights driving down from secret towns, while black birds fly beyond the walls, over long winding roads past honeysuckle vines, farms far away, corn fields left behind from Ago, row after row undulating under the endless lazy clouds above, flashing thunder and lightning like sparklers after a parade of waking dreams when we would sleepwalk through soft rains, while the rest of us climb down from the tallest apple trees, and when the evolving door opens from across the hall we'll gather up our glitter, our paste and rainbow papers, the dumb lime green and sugary pink make-believe crayons and erasers, random pencils and other stuff

and

we'll know we have to go—we won't really know where or how or why—but one curious boy will pretend he forgot his red jacket with the lucky silver coin in the pocket and come back to the empty classroom to wait and see who or what's coming

and

sit at his desk, stare at the walls, watch the second hand ticktock around the clock and hold his breath for as long as possible, then do it again and again and try not to imagine it getting too dark and think about how much time is left before the streetlights come on and will there be a friend, someone he might know who has a flashlight or lantern like he once saw in a movie to light the way back down that one scary road, and what about the trapdoors, dungeons or invisible chains that everyone whispered were coming, and was it true because some people said they knew, and what about the why, how and what if there were going to be blindfolds for all or just going blind

and

so he sat with his breath and felt his heart beat, tried hard not to be afraid because he was one of those born always wanting to know the reason why, and he had to be there to see how an empty schoolroom would unface everyone's deepest fear

and

because he is one of those born who always knows how to be kind to others, he decides to give you what he made today: a construction paper sun sprinkled with a handful of glitter and wishes he pasted down on a rectangle of the bluest piece of sky he could find in the pile, and he hopes you wouldn't mind the fingerprints he left behind along one of the corners next to the brightest yellow where he couldn't push the sun down just right because he had to hurry and finish

and

being curious, he wants to know what you might say about wizards and Superman, his dark cape and did he drink chocolate milk three small sips at a time and how did he fly for real, what do you think about Ferris wheels, bouncing balls, bows and arrows, donuts without holes, those dumb matching card games everyone but him liked to play, and of course, he asks what he always does: who made the blue behind and above everything day after day

and

then he wants to know if ghosts are true, and is it the same for dogs because
he misses his best friend, misses calling out to her, la-di-da as loud as he
could to get her to come home, and because he made a promise to his
grandmother he knows he can't keep, he wants to know: why did the angels
have to go before even saying hello

and

hey, if there's still time, will you make sure he doesn't forget his jacket and
now that it's dark, would you be good to go, give him a ride back home,
and he'll be okay if you play that song his dad used to sing in the car before
saying goodbye

and

just so you know, he won't tell anyone what he saw or heard,
he doesn't have the words.



Indian Surface Pattern

Aishwarya Krishnan

Two Women at MayFest
Jim Ross



Zippo Lighter

Maja Urukalo

Trust the smoker to always have something to light a fire.

The Zippo is my best friend; it clicks clicks clicks. And you can even refill it. But like the thing you take for granted, I sometimes lose it, leave it in places and can't remember.

It should have been in my pocket, but I changed clothes so many times.

Maybe I left it in the purse.

Or in the leather jacket, the one with many pockets, and I tap all of them, do that little dance—you know, the dance you do when you tap all the pockets to find the damn lighter?

And in the end it has been in the back pocket of your jeans all this time.

So I finally strike the cigarette.



People Smoking

Margaret Drew



Two Slow Dancers
Ati Gor

What am I if not ephemera

January Santoso

tethered to an un-glacial plane? Fabricated

cosmos of cosmopolitanisms, stark
lily-white lamp light, bureaucracies

of cotton-ish threads unspooled like
copper wires tangling up a stormcloud.

Neurosis materializes strangely
these days. O Cliché, I'm sick of your impatient

innovation: us brash byproducts
crush up white clumps & ket rocks

with CCs like like-minded robots, rewired
each sniff & drip-closing clot. Remind

me we're alive, just briefly bereaved, O
Dive Bar Bathroom Graffiti: palimpsestuous

READ LENIN under two smudged
lovers' initials under some extra

lumpen shit. Monday morning comes like coke
clearing from my throat: minutes,

minutes milked then poof—there:
I see infinite snow-capped mountains to climb.

Addicted

John Tustin

It's true that there are people
who are addicted to water.
What I mean
is they drink so much
that they drown their own tissue,
and it makes them feel drunk.
They need permission to use the toilet—
permission and a chaperone.
There are locks on their faucets;
they are timed in the shower.

There was a man arrested
for photographing women's feet
in the New York City subway.
He'd ride the trains for hours,
and any glimpse of toes would do.
His apartment was wallpapered
with thousands of strangers' feet.

I graduated from scraps of paper
to 70-page notebooks,
obsessed with filling one
and starting another one.
Then I learned to type,
and I filled my dresser drawer with
piles of pages
while the electric typewriter hummed.
Just as I was learning Microsoft Word,
my then-wife, attempting to domesticate me,
put a stop to all of it,
and I was weaned.
The words still came,
but I let them drift away
until they didn't arrive anymore.

It's been well over a decade
since I picked up the habit again,
and I've become so addicted
that I'll write about almost anything.
No simile too silly,
no subject too ridiculous,
just as long as I fill up the pages.

Tonight's another night
that I feel like an ant
climbing to the top of a volcano
and screaming into its fiery maw
or like a blade of grass
that grew to crack a boulder in two.
(See what I mean?)



Universe 25*

Jonathan Everitt

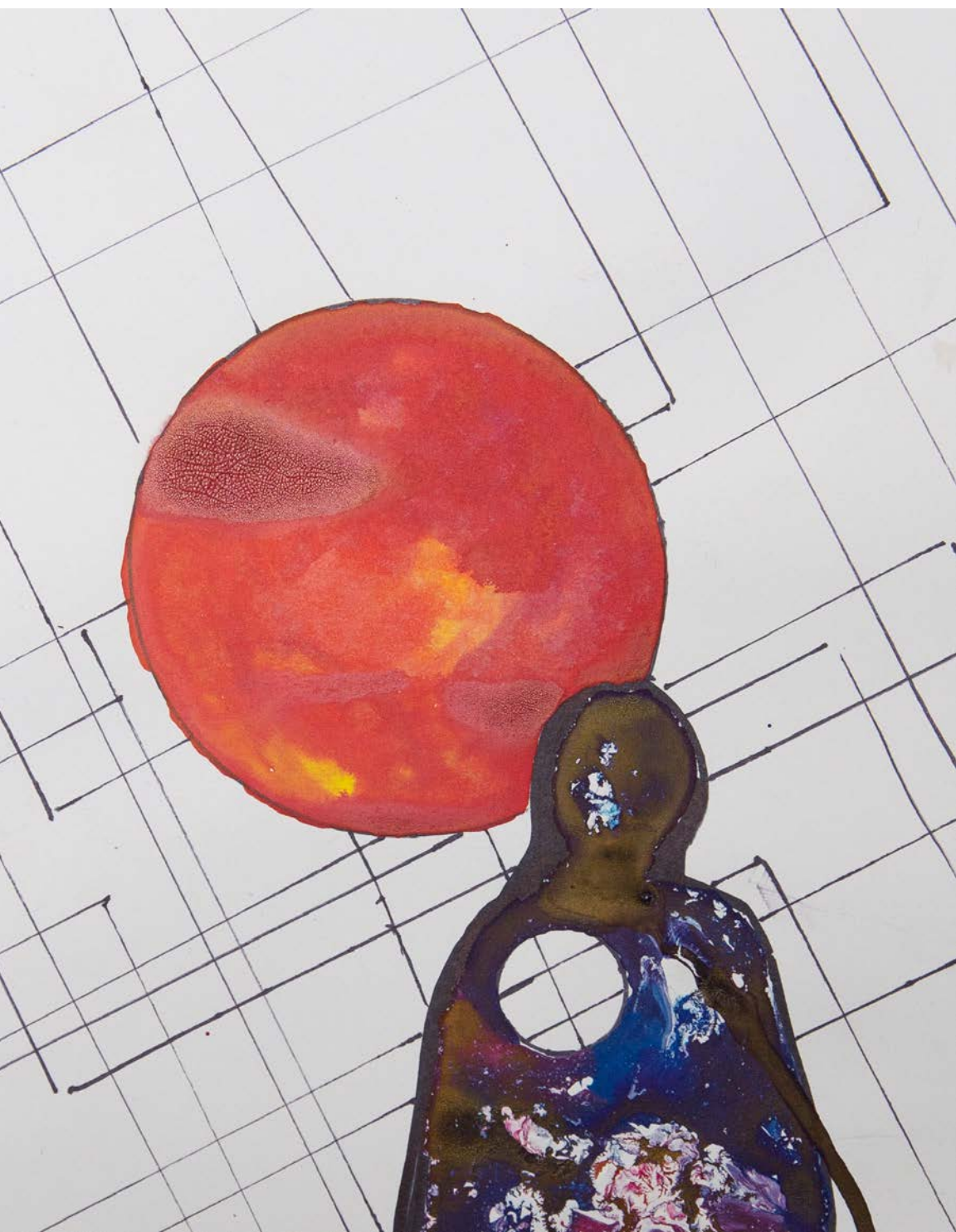
Our cul-de-sac was a pleasure dome
of food and sex. We lounged on plush
plump sofas. Sipped and nibbled.
Humped and cuddled. Napped dreamless—
for there was nothing left to want.

And so we flourished. We lazed in bed. We
bred. We preened. Our numbers grew.
We were the beautiful ones. We were fat
and happy. Our charming ticky-tacky cellars
were stocked with wine and cheese.

Some were grateful. More were bored. Purpose-
less. Reclusive. Bitter. They snapped at us.
First, slap. Then punch. Then bite. Then
they tasted our blood, our savory marbling.
We were devoured as our children watched.

Then they too were made mad brunch.
Our numbers withered. Our cul-de-sac fell
into disrepair. In came the opportunist
grasses, trees, and vines. We vanished
under the woodland. We had it all.

* "Universe 25, 1968–1973: A series of rodent experiments showed that even with abundant food and water, personal space is essential to prevent societal collapse," *The Scientist*, May 2, 2022.



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Richard Hanus

When Will It Be My Turn?

Brigid Barry

My room is cold.

I believe this is what I deserve, for I am a terrible individual who cannot fathom a life greater than this. This life means nothing; I cannot do anything to improve it. I will rot in my own skin and watch the flowers take over, the vines pulling me under until the smallest sliver of light shines through. Seconds will be left then, leaving me with one final wish:

When will it be my turn?

In fact, it's too cold, so I should turn up the heat, or maybe grab a blanket.

Then why is it, when I try to move my arm, or my leg, I am stuck in the same position I've been in since I awoke? Is there something wrong with me? Am I the problem in this situation? Of course, I am the problem, I have always been the problem, I will never not be the problem.

When will it be my turn?

Maybe it's the window; I should shut it. Is it even open? Or am I imagining the cold? I think the vines have come for me now. Something is grabbing my wrist, my ankles, my neck. Maybe this is it. They'll take me down in seconds, and the suffering will be over. I'll be free, I'll be free, I'll be free.

When will it be my turn?

There, that's better with the window shut, but my feet are still cold. Where are my socks? Is this really the life I deserve? To wallow in my own pity? To continue to sulk in the same position as I wait for the rapture? It isn't my fault, at least I don't think. How could it be my fault? All I ever tried was to obey. I never lied, or cheated, or stole, at least not to your knowledge, not to your eyes. I was always on time, I did my chores efficiently; everything was always clean, everyone was always kept. Then why, in the end, did every rebuttal come back to me?

When will it be my turn?

Jesus, I need a sweater, or even a coat. Why am I so cold? Was I always this cold? Can I ever be warm?

Or maybe it was my fault. I never thought of it that way. It was always defend, defend, defend. *Hey, don't touch me. Get away from her; she isn't the problem. They're just kids; leave them out of this. Please don't hurt me. Please, please, please.*

When will it be my turn?

It's warm now. When did it get warm? Did I do that? I don't think I did that.

He's screaming at me, loud and overpowering. We're in the hardware store parking lot; everything is white noise. What is he yelling about? Something silly, silly to me at least. He is dead serious. I know it's coming, but it won't come until I get in the truck, buckle my seat belt, and fiddle with the clasp. He gets me right on the back of the neck, then the head. He lifts me by my hair to get a good one at my cheek. That one stayed for a while, made me look cool. Told them it was a bar fight—people would believe that, right? I should have spoken up when I had the chance.

When will it be my turn?

My left side fell in.

Here it is, finally. I've waited so long, fucked up too many times to count. All I can think is that I am free: This is the final battle, the final straw. I'm coming home; it's all over, and I am coming home. Is it finally my turn?

But it's only her.

My dear, my light, the one to follow. My rosebud girl, waiting for her moment to bloom. She grabs my hand and fiddles with my fingers. She gets it; she will take me there.

Is it finally my turn?

Nothing happens.

She continues to play with my hand, lacing our fingers tight together, squeezing once. I want to give back, to show her the love that she deserves in a way that I was never loved before. Can I do that? Love someone as wholly as they are designed to be, when I could have never fathomed a simple word of appreciation? I am lost in this big, big ocean, and once again I am a young boy, watching as my father tears my mother apart, and the only thing running through my little head is *how dare you treat that perfect woman with that utmost disrespect*.

Is it finally my turn?

"You kind of left me down there," she hums, sounding hurt.

She's speaking, and yet I cannot bring myself to respond. My head is swimming, the flood of thoughts coursing through my brain, making everything in its wave unbearable. How dare I treat her this way? How dare I make the fool out of her, the way he always made the fool of me. I left her to drift alone, facing what's below with such determination. I am a coward; of course, I'm the coward. The man I thought to become is hidden behind the eyes of that same boy, who took what was given to him without a second thought.

Will it ever be my turn?

And then it hits, crashing against the surface so hard, it almost moves me to turn. I'm becoming him. Beginning with this mute, tortured soul, one who was never helped, one who drank himself to death, taking his issues out on those for whom he cared, whom he loved. Or so he spoke. He never loved; he never cared. He kept anger, his trauma, huddled inside until it eventually boiled over, exploding into rage. He was the villain in this story; he would always be the villain.

And I was exactly the same.

It will never be my turn.

Something compels me in that moment, something powerful, an overriding feeling. I crawl to my knees, turning to sit upright against the wall. She let go of my hand, only to reach forward and wipe across my face. My cheeks are wet. When did this start? She holds me there, thumbs balanced on my cheekbones, occasionally wiping at my undereyes. Why won't they stop? Please, make it stop, please, please, please, please, please.

It will never be my turn.

I reach forward as well, one hand on her shoulder, the other her cheek. I could never hurt her. Not her, not them, not anyone. I am not my father; I am not evil. My words come out as broken sobs, almost incoherent, I cannot catch my breath. "I will never hurt you. I am not him."

She pulls me forward, my head balancing in the crook of her neck. And she lets me. Everything pours out and doesn't stop. Maybe this is it. Maybe the first step in becoming starts here, at the very bottom of the hill, taking the steps up.

Maybe it is my turn.

These Hands

John Grey

Mittens—yes.

Boxing gloves—no.

A woman—yes.

A lion's mane—no.

Maybe they have gone places
they shouldn't have,
but they've never been bitten
or had acid poured on them
or been chopped at the wrist
by a hacksaw.

They are not, of course,
autonomous.

They don't do anything
unless my head or my heart
gives the instruction.

Okay, so sometimes my thirst gets involved,
and I reach for the beer bottle.

And then there's hunger—
all meals are finger food at their core.

Lifted—yes.

Slapped—not since seventh grade.

Played guitar—yes.

Played accordion—no.

One of them once
came to rest unwittingly on a hot plate.
But they gravitate more to my pockets
than pain.

And, yes, they have been employed from time to time
in the healthy sport of onanism.

But not pottery.

Not basket weaving.

Caught ball—yes.
Delivered pizza—no.
Trapped frog—yes.
Picked up snake by the tail—no.
I've often wondered if they are
the part of the anatomy
that is employed the most
in everyday human activity.
They are, after all, writing this
while my toes loll about somewhere below me.

Really, their importance
should not be underestimated.
Sure, the eyes may initiate contact
with the world.
But it's the handshake or the hug
that puts connection into operation.
What would I ever do without them?
Don't really know—yes.
Know—no.



January 3, 1994

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

He works all day in his office
a snow-covered bench on Church Street
writing and declaiming
writing and declaiming
while bundled-up commuters look away
his borrowed jacket is alive with lice
his stomach feeds on itself
his frostbitten fingers cannot feel
the pen they are holding
and now his pen is running low on ink
he does it all for nothing
he does it all alone
he is fighting the eternal battle
freedom against oppression
real or imagined real and imagined.

In a year he will be gone
in jail for eating a meal he could not afford
or trespassing to get in out of the cold
or in the state hospital
and out again (no one knows where)
or dead probably dead
but there will be others
to take his place
to continue the struggle every day
on benches and on street corners
in each city and town
across this real and imagined
writing and declaiming
writing and declaiming
while we

Molotov Sermons

Kevin Ramirez

Willie pressed his finger to his cheekbone and pulled his bottom eyelid down. He stared at the reflection of the sphere, the orb of his eye, bloodshot, stained on the outsides with what looked like red ink. The wrinkles around his eye were deep and driven, and his skin looked grayish brown, dried from the cold like the bark of a dying tree. Then he tossed the shard of broken mirror back to the rubber-stained asphalt. He tried his best to avoid looking at the wreckage, but his eyes kept stealing back. He agreed with the police officer that, yes, his eyes were indeed pretty red. The officer, after a moment of quiet evaluation, asked him to repeat one more time what he had seen.

"I already told you."

"Tell me one more time, then."

Willie sighed.

"My friend, Joe, and I were walking together down the sidewalk here, and a car hopped the curb, and . . . and . . . yeah." He pointed helplessly toward the wrecked car.

"Did the driver appear inebriated to you?"

"How am I supposed to know that?"

The officer looked into Willie's eyes, his gaze quiet and critical. Willie felt a well of once-dormant anger begin to boil inside of him.

"Where were you two going?"

"We're homeless," Willie said. "It doesn't matter where we were going; it wouldn't matter to anyone else."

The officer removed his hat, held it with his thumb and index finger, and scratched his head with his other three fingers.

"You abusing drugs or alcohol?" The officer's eyes squinted as he spoke, sharp and sable. Willie considered asking the officer what exactly he meant by the word "abusing."

"No, I'm not."

The officer studied him for a few more seconds, then gave a sharp grunt before closing his notebook and waving him off.

Willie stepped away from the scene, then stopped to take it all in one last time. He knew he wouldn't want to think about it ever again once he walked away.

What were we even talking about? he wondered. *The weather? The next church we were headed to?*

He couldn't recall but found it didn't even really matter. In the grand scheme of things, nothing would ever really feel important enough.

The car was a crushed soda can now, its front end horseshoed around a splintered telephone pole. Willie recalled the impact—the enormous sight and sound of it. There had been a terrible metallic crunching sound in the beginning when the car had hopped the curb, then silence in the split second it had gone airborne. Willie remembered feeling the rush of air as the car flew past him and crashed into his unsuspecting friend.

The ensuing crash had been so tremendous that the only way his mind could comprehend the event was to divide the sound and the sight of the crash into two totally separate events. There was the splintering sound of the wooden telephone pole and the bones of his friend crunching and giving way to the crashing Corvette occupying one side of his brain. In the other half, there was the sight of the top half of the pole falling into the roof of the car and Joe's head bouncing back against the pole, then onto the car's hood. His friend's old body hadn't stood a chance.

The driver and passenger of the car were pulled from the wreckage, unharmed, for the most part. They were now surrounded by men and women in uniforms and gloves, some who held notepads in one hand and pens in the other, some who carefully traced and followed the skid marks left by the careening Corvette with tape measures, some who examined the almost 90-degree angle of the snapped telephone pole, some who stood in the road to direct the town's trickle of traffic away from the scene.

A white sheet, now beginning to grow soggy and red in the middle, had been thrown on top of Joe. Most of it covered him, but the angle of the way it was spread over him, haphazardly, left the right side of his head and part of his left hand exposed. Willie walked over to him. As he stood over the body of his friend, who was now pinned, facedown and bent at the waist, between the car and broken telephone pole, he imagined just how easily it could have been him there.

Why wasn't it me?

He recalled the moment again. Joe hadn't pushed him out of the way like a hero would in an action movie. They'd been walking side by side, Willie on the left and Joe on the right. Neither could have anticipated a car running them down. The car was just suddenly there, and it just happened to have veered to the right rather than the left.

God saved me, he thought bitterly.

He lifted the sheet up a little. The back of Joe's head was dented and cracked open from when it had slammed into the back of the pole and the hood of the car had bowled in around his forehead. A slender tributary of blood snaked its way from under his forehead and across the hood. The thin sheet didn't hide Joe's body; rather, it highlighted the curve of his back and the angles of his arms. His right arm lay straight down by his side, yet strangely detached from his shoulder. His exposed left hand, black from layers of dirt, lay palm-side up with his fingers loosely curled, as if he were reaching up to someone.

Willie felt his stomach lurch, so he pulled the sheet until it covered Joe completely. He could feel his friend staring at him through the sheet. Joe's abandoned eyes—Willie could see them in his mind, focused on only him. He turned and gathered his bag, along with Joe's, then walked away.

He walked aimlessly for a while, unsure of what to do. Joe had family, and Willie knew the best way to do right by his friend was to contact them somehow and let them know of his passing. When Willie was far enough away from the scene, he sat on a nearby bus stop bench and dug through Joe's bag.

"Come on, Lord, give me a clue," he murmured.

There were a couple of pairs of socks and a couple of old shirts. A half of a pack of saltines they'd found yesterday. He found an old picture, and he pulled it out. It felt well-worn and had white lines crisscrossing in all directions from having been folded countless times. The picture showed a teenage girl posing for what was likely a school photo. Her hair was straight and brown, and her tanned skin, a tawny yellowish-brown. She had Joe's eyes and the shape of his lips. He turned the photo over, hoping for an address or phone number or anything to point him in the right direction, but it was blank.

He tried to recall his previous conversations with Joe, scouring his memory for some piece of information that would point him in the right direction. But Joe had been a man who rarely talked about his past. The most Willie could recall was that Joe had mentioned that he had family in Baltimore. And Baltimore was quite a ways away. Dejected, Willie placed the photo back in Joe's bag, then continued walking.

The road was cracked from erosion and the treading of a decade's worth of tires. The uneven road jostled his joints and made his old, stiff body hurt as he walked. He and Joe had left the dense downtown area that morning to visit some small churches on the outskirts of the city. It was a ritual the two friends had shared; they'd go to different churches on Sunday mornings.

Many of the churches served lunch after service, and they were very welcoming to the “unhoused and unfortunate.” Joe, an ardent nonbeliever, would always say that a good meal was worth listening to an hour of babble.

Willie looked forward to Sundays, as it was the one day of the week he’d be guaranteed to have his body and spirit fed. Deep down, he had always secretly hoped that a sermon would rub off on Joe. He believed that everyone had a weakness in their disbelief, a chink in their agnostic armor, so to speak, and the right sermon at the right time had the potential to sway anyone. Willie felt a wave of sadness wash over him as he realized that Joe would never find the sermon for him.

Willie walked along the faded yellow divider like a tightrope. Everything around him seemed to crumble the further he got away from the city. This made sense to him in a sad way. If one were to search for God, the best place to find Him would be in the depths where the roads were cracked and the streets were abandoned. The buildings he passed now were decaying teeth. Signs that once were painted with bright colors were now faded and forgotten. The sign that read Jimmy B’s Stop N Shop Gas Station hung off-kilter above cardboard-covered doors. The striped barbershop pole that hung to the side of Roscoe’s Hair Palace had a large, jagged hole in it—the result of rock-throwing children, perhaps.

He found a cracked, empty glass bottle of vodka lying on the side of the curb. He wondered what kind of fingers had been wrapped around the neck. Had they been old, brown, and withered like his? He thought of the lips that had tasted the burning liquid, and he suddenly envied them. He hadn’t tasted the poison in years now, but the craving had clawed its way out of the center of him like the undead. The image of his best friend, crushed and dead against the wreckage, thrummed in his mind like a pulse. He pondered how long the bottle was destined to remain there on the curb.

Here and there, he spotted a person in the spaces between the old buildings. Some would be sitting against the wall, a hood or tattered hat shielding their faces from the sun, their arms wrapped around their drawn-up knees. He would see others shuffling along aimlessly, their shoes tattered and caked with streaks of Georgia red clay, their arms swinging awkwardly against the rhythm of their steps. He understood that he was exactly like these people. He knew their groans, their eyes, their sighs. He could hear their steps because the sounds were coming from his own feet.

Ahead somewhere, Willie could hear voices in harmony, together in song, though the words were unintelligible in the distance. He followed the sound, shuffling forward with no real urgency. The singing eventually led

him to a building with a faded sign above the doors: COUNTY LIBRARY. He pulled the doors open and followed the voices. They led him to the children's reading room, and when he pulled the doors open, he saw a row of seven people facing a pastor and probably his wife, who, in turn, sat facing them from behind a table.

The pastor stood up and held out his arms.

"Welcome, welcome! Please, pull up a chair, sir," he said with a smile.

Willie stood at the doorway for a moment. One of the young men from the row of people walked to the back of the room, retrieving a chair and placing it at the end of the row. He gestured for Willie to sit. The woman next to the empty chair motioned him to come in. Willie looked around the room. All of the regular library fixtures—the beanbags, the children's paintings, the shelves of books, the tables covered with puzzles—they had all been moved to the sides of the room.

He walked forward, and the young man grasped his arm and elbow and helped him into the chair.

The pastor spoke.

"So, how else have you seen God manifest Himself in your lives?"

The old woman next to him, dressed in a shapeless lavender dress, began to stand. She reached forward and gripped the handle of a small oxygen tank in front of her with a wrinkled, bony hand, using it to push herself, shakily, to her feet.

"God . . ."

She stopped and raised an oxygen mask to her face. Then she looked down at the floor, shaking her head from side to side, her eyes closed as she searched for her words. The room was silent except for the hissing of the tank and the labored inhalations of the old woman. After a moment, she opened her eyes, lowered the mask, and tilted her tired, leathery face up toward the fluorescent light of the room.

"God loves you and me."

"Amen," the pastor said.

"And sometimes . . . I forget."

Someone in the middle of the row murmured in agreement.

"My knees don't bend so good no more, but that don't stop me from praying."

"Praise the Lord," someone else said.

"Last month, my husband, Varion, died right next to me. And I asked God . . . I—"

She paused to take a few breaths through her mask.

"I asked Him, 'Why didn't You just take me first?' I asked Him why He needed to take Varion from me and leave me by myself. I asked Him why . . . why He would have me breathing through this here mask."

The woman's eyes were as pale yellow as sun-beaten wallpaper. It looked as if there was a film of moisture across the woman's eyes. Willie wondered if she was about to cry; he didn't want to be around for that, much less next to her. He had a sudden fear that her crying would lead her to look at him and expect him to join her. The emotions he felt inside of himself were meant for Joe, and he wasn't willing to share the moment with anyone. He wanted to mourn his friend privately, the way Joe would have if the car had veered toward the left rather than the right. But, something in her face suggested that she was not going to cry now and that she was never going to cry again.

"It took me a . . . a little while to remember all of the good things that God has left for me. And I thank Him for everything He has done. God claimed my Varion and I . . . I thank Him for bringing him home peacefully in his sleep."

"Thank you, Jesus!"

The woman looked as if she were going to say something else, but she stood there, looking at the pastor but not really seeing him. Her eyes seemed to be seeing things no one else could. Her mouth hung open, forming some half-realized word. Then she clamped it shut, her teeth clicking together, and lowered herself back to her seat.

"There is," the pastor began, "a blessing in every curse."

The pastor spoke slowly in a soft but commanding voice. Each word felt drawn out, hammered and nailed, as if it had been cast out from some never-ending fire that burned within his chest. The pastor slowly stood up.

"With each moment that weighs you down and wears you out, always remember that that is the devil clawing his way to your soul. LET GOD STEP IN THE PATH OF THE DEVIL!"

A man in the middle of the row began crying.

"FIND YOUR BLESSINGS!" commanded the pastor. "THANK GOD FOR YOUR TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS, FOR THEY WILL LEAD YOU TO SALVATION!"

Another woman stood and stretched out her arms, crying, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Willie leaned forward in his seat and looked at the row of faithful followers. They all rocked to their own internal, unconscious rhythms. Some had their eyes shut tightly, drawing crow's feet at the corners of their eyes.

Some turned their faces to the ceiling and moved their lips to soundless words. Any other day, Willie would have been right there with them. He would have been rocking along with the other parishioners.

This morning was different though. There was something hollow about it all now.

"Your loss," the pastor said, his voice just above a whisper, his eyes scanning the room, "your pain, is the doorway to something great that God has in store for you."

The woman beside Willie had tears running down her cheeks and down the sides of the plastic oxygen mask. The pastor looked around the room, then nodded at his wife. She reached beneath their table and pulled out an offerings basket.

Willie studied the pastor and the room of worshippers. Willie's teeth felt like they were going to crack against each other. He thought suddenly of the police, back at the scene of the crash, talking to the driver while Joe lay against the hood of the car, alone, a sheet tossed over his body in order to make the scene just a little bit easier to stomach. He thought of Joe's family and wondered whether they'd ever realize he was gone. He thought of Joe's daughter, now an adult, searching for her father, not knowing that she'll never find him. Willie remembered staring down at his friend, knowing it would be the last time he'd ever see him, and how it felt as though the warmth from his body had been sucked out into the coldness of the morning, where the cold prediction of his future hovered in the air like the smell of rain. There was something building behind his eyes. He squeezed the bridge of his nose.

The image of Joe's hand invaded his mind once again. His fingers had been curved so perfectly, his palm had formed such a delicate, slight bowl, that it was as if he had never been real at all, as if he were something that had been sculpted or painted or written. Willie looked at his own hands, curved and holding the remainder of his life in his palms. He wondered what the point of it all was.

The pastor's eyes rested somewhere in the middle of the row.

"Thank God on bended knee for the pain."

Willie pictured the bottle of vodka from the curb, this time half-full of alcohol. He imagined pushing a handkerchief into the neck, letting it soak the liquid. And for the rest of his time in the county library, he wondered how fast everyone in the room would go up if he lit the handkerchief with a lighter and threw the bottle against the floor after wedging the door closed with a chair.

Chess Piece

G.F. Fuller

i've learned what it feels like
i've played the game
to be born from two opposing sides
when a clock had thumped *begin*
when black and white met
they miscegenated across squares
and now their pawn
(not the queen's
or the king's
but the game's
the grid's)
plays for no one's team
in neither set is shielded
but looks more like one
or moves more like one
is being slid by hand over
colored tiles
across and over
as if it were a
black horse now
or white bishop then
and yet through every move
in time that pawn grows stronger
larger than the rook
and bigger than the board
learning more about the game
faster than the rules can change
stronger than the hand that grabs it
until the game no longer can grasp it

Carcass

Dalton Sikes

A blue blur on the filthy wood,
plucked of its hollow feathers.
Beak inverted, a blind collision
with an invisible force of others'
creation.

I find you on my floor.
Hazy vision of what's material deceives
each & every time. I squint at
the gnarled mass. Teeth marks,
deep teeth marks, on your side.
My stomach churns,
my dog's rumbles.

I'd prefer to live in blissful blindness,
dancing around my house,
no recognition of the forces I collide with.
Yet, I am no bird. The window
pane cuts into my remembrance
& makes me know I'm never alone.
The carcass of my past rots within.

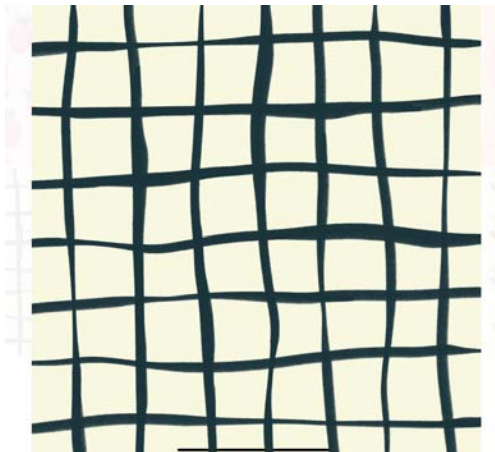
I grab a paper towel & grasp it,
swiftly picking the corpse from my floor,
ignoring the eyes of my proud dog,
& discarding life into the trash.
The blue blur topples down
a rocky road of disposable items.
Am I one of them?

I chat with my dad about my upcoming
birthday. A celebration of life
when I've just witnessed its antithesis
on my own dark wood floors.
My stomach churns once more.
It's sickening.

Have you thought about the cake?
How could I think about anything else
other than my tainted hands?
The carcass sings its birdsong to me,
decrying its treatment. However,
death has always been a part of me.
My mind obliterates the true darkness
creating chasms that cast their own shadows
over the sliver of my
remembrance.

My body is a funeral home,
the past so entwined yet repressed
that no one can recover the bodies within
before they've already decayed.

I belong with the carcass.
I've already discarded too much.



Dear Linda

Lanay Griessner

I have been trying to reach you for months. I called you, sent you a wide variety of age-appropriate emojis on WhatsApp, and even sent you a zero-commitment invitation to connect on LinkedIn. So far, no luck. Dave gave me your cell phone number, by the way. Nice kid, but he couldn't hit water if he fell out of a boat.

So, this is my last attempt to reach you with an old-timey (hand-written!) letter. Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night will stop the U.S. Postal Service from personally delivering to you my registered envelope. At least I will have your signature (or the signature of your authorized signatory if you can no longer use your hands) and the knowledge that you are actively ignoring me on your deathbed. That is a bit childish, don't you think?

Let me take this opportunity to give you some free advice. You should seriously consider updating your LinkedIn profile to include more active vocabulary. It's no wonder to me that you have just 30 connections consisting mostly of extended family. You're connected to Aunt Mary? Useless. Since you apparently don't have enough money to retire yet, you should at least try to network effectively.

Look, I wanted to contact you sooner, but I didn't know how. It has been 30 years since we've spoken, after all, and you can't just drop by unexpected for a casual chat, especially not at a hospice. Thankfully, we finally have something in common—a reason to reconnect. Cancer! I've got a resistant cancer too. Prostate cancer (no, the irony is not lost on me). So, let's take a few moments now to say what needs to be said to each other before we both bow out.

Do you remember how hot it was the day we got married? We sweated so much through the priest's sermon that you could have wrung our clothes out and used the water to refill the stoup. As soon as it was over, we jumped into my dad's Oldsmobile with the strings of aluminum cans tied to the bumper and drove off with the windows open. It was so loud. We stopped by the gas station on the way to our reception at the Lion's Club. You grabbed a Coke and drank it on the hood of the car in your wedding dress, your long brown hair blowing in the summer breeze. You were an absolute knockout back then. You should have been on the cover of *Vogue*, not in Hopkinton, Rhode Island, with a part-time job at a Stop & Shop.

You had such beautiful hair. I hope you saved it when it fell out from the chemo so it could be used to make a wig—or, at the very least, stuff a pillow.

We were so young and so hopelessly in love back then. It was puppy love, but we didn't know any better. It should be against the law to get married before you have broken a few hearts. It's no one's fault that our marriage fell apart when you think of it that way. If you ask me, it was a lack of good government that did us in.

We both thought we wanted a big family. And it all happened so fast. First Kathy, then Kyle, then Dave after a steady stream of miscarriages. You got pregnant so fast we barely had time to think of baby names. Come to think of it, all the women I have been with got pregnant right away. I had exceptional sperm back when I still had testicles.

I'm sorry about the miscarriages. But there is honestly no way to know if it was the fighting that caused them. Fetuses are surprisingly robust, and I don't think that cavemen were always making sure that their cavewomen had their feet up. Humanity would not have survived. Did you know that chromosomal abnormalities account for most miscarriages? So out of the six of them, maybe just a couple of the second and third trimester ones were my fault. Statically speaking.

Once the kids arrived, things were different between us. I didn't change, but you changed a lot. You were so moody during your pregnancies, and you became so motherly after. I guess it was great for the kids, but our relationship, as I knew it, was out the window. All we did was fight, and I didn't want to be around anymore.

I wish you would have told me how you would change before we got married. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I was barely 19. I wanted adventure, and all I got was diapers. In my defense, I did try to stick it out with you for a few years. But it wore me down. I got drunk all the time to forget about our moldy duplex, to drown out the tantrums and the constant stream of questions. But at some point, you just snap.

I had to leave. And—let's face it—you were damaged goods by that point. Even if I had straightened up my act, cut out the casual affairs, sobered up, and poured sugar over you and the kids, I'd always be that asshole that put your tits between a pair of garden sheers during your sister Josephine's birthday party and threatened to cut them off if you didn't go right back into the house and get me a beer. I didn't want that following me for the rest of my life. I'm sure you can understand that now.

So, one night, I tossed a few spare clothes in a backpack, emptied our joint bank account, and went to the bus station. The moment I walked out our door, I felt better. I was free.

Back then you could really go off the grid. You would have had to hire a private detective to track me down in those days. And I knew you didn't have the money for that because I took every cent I could find when I left. Today some floozie takes a picture of you at a bar two states away and the next day there are police at your door putting you in handcuffs for overdue alimony payments. It was simpler in our day.

I'm sure child support would have helped in the short term, but I had barely enough money to sustain myself. Besides, you were too proud to take charity. I knew you would be okay without me and could get a job and support the family if you had the right incentive, like an impending eviction. It was a win-win situation for me to disappear from your life as if I had never existed.

The years after I left are all a bit hazy. I went on a bender. I slept my way through most of the East Coast in the backs of strangers' cars. I thought a lot about life. And it was a productive time. Ever since the mid-'90s, some grown woman shows up at my door every few years claiming to be my daughter. I wonder if I didn't have illegitimate sons or if they just never sought me out. I guess I will never know.

Eventually the honeymoon period of my adventure came to an end. I got a serious case of gonorrhea and needed insurance. I joined the military for the health care, and then instantly pretended I was loco so that they didn't send me to Vietnam. It worked. I got a cushy desk job and did some training that eventually led to a civil engineering degree from Mohawk Valley Community College. Can you imagine me as a college graduate? I knew I could make it if I tried, and I did. I want you to be proud of me.

I know that my leaving wasn't easy for you and the kids. Kathy told me that the whole family would regularly split a single can of tuna for dinner because it was all you could afford. The kids made friends just to be invited over to someone else's house for dinner. That made me sad. Real sad. But they all grew up and turned out okay in the end.

I mean, none of our children is famous, and they haven't done anything important so far. Kyle works in construction. Dave sits in one of those highway booths and passes out tickets. Kathy sorts mail at the post office. They could all be replaced by machines if we're honest. But they pay their taxes. They contribute. I think it was my good genes that got them through the hardship—perhaps the only gift I have ever given them, but the only gift worth giving.

Did you know that even if you have good genes, you need to activate them? The right air quality and nutrients can really do the trick, especially for young children. A diet rich in folate would have very likely pushed them to

get better grades, maybe helped one of them get a scholarship to college. Not that I am blaming you. You did what you could. For the record, Kathy is as sharp as a bowling ball.

Listen to me rambling on while we are both clinging to life with our custom prescription cocktails. What have you been up to the last few decades? Did you get fat? Lots of people do. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I didn't, of course, but I am sure you knew that already.

I heard from Kyle that you got remarried after the kids were out of the house to a self-proclaimed cowboy that you met through a newspaper dating ad. Good for you! I would have loved to see you in a pair of cowboy boots walking through the New Mexican desert. Is he anything like me? I am happy you found love again. And look at the bright side: If I had stayed in your life, you never would have met your future Buffalo Bill!

But why does Kyle call him Dad? Are you encouraging this? I think you should talk to him about it. It's absurd. We both know that Kyle is just a few lumens short of a blown Christmas bulb, but he must know that a dad is the gene contributor and not the person who happens to be sleeping with his mother, right? I made the dad contribution, and our kids carry my last name. Not Billy the Kid's, not yours. Mine.

I read a newspaper article last week about a woman who died when she fell into a faulty elevator. It was partially open, and somehow she got sucked in and pulled to bits in the machine. Right in front of her toddler too! Talk about scarring. I know we always told the kids to be careful that their laces didn't get stuck, but Jesus H. Christ what a terrible way to go. Think of the legacy! The only accomplishment this woman will be remembered for is her ridiculous death. I don't even know her, and that saddens me.

I am telling you all of this because I want a different legacy with you in the short time you have left. I don't want you to go to your grave thinking of me as the person I was when I walked out on you and the kids.

I want you to know that I made something of myself. I got out of Rhode Island. I got a white-collar job and sobered up. I have not had a drop to drink in 15 years. I settled down, started a brand-new family. I never laid a hand on my second wife or any of our four boys. And for what it is worth, I've spent years reconnecting with our kids, to be a small part of their lives after all this time. I wish you could know the person I became, not the person I was.

I'm sorry, Linda.

I can't ask you to forgive me. But if there is a merciful God, then perhaps you can soften your image of me just a little before you die, and I can leave this world a happy man.

Anne Boleyn

Emma Wells

iPhone flashes
dilate my eyes
as they search for me
in darkened night,
bending torches
through nocturnal tunnels,
seeking my marble face
or melancholic frame:
a headless oddity
with twisted wisps for hands.

Sometimes, I toy,
closing in on huddled humans,
stroking camera lenses
with cloudy, unholy palms,
misting photos
by adding silken sheen
to spectral sightings.

Skittish as kittens
on my day of execution,
I ruffle collars
using noose-like breath;
whispers of me
coat corporeal skin
as brushed honey on figs.

Playing up for the cameras.
I was always an actress:
quick-witted, sharp-tempered
//slashing as beheading blades//.

Blood drips
from my carried head,
lacing my bosom,
forming a crimson coastline;
my eyelids flutter
in mock surrender
whilst ghoulis coachmen
lick their lips—
too eager to kiss me.

Yet, time is fluid,
racing as blood flow
through hollow fingers. . .

I'm here for the night,
one night only:
May 19th—every year!
It's so repetitive,
predictably mechanical,
echoic of Henry's lovemaking.

Ha! I laugh now.

Rousing the crowd,
headless horses whinny,
chafing the ground
with eager, hell-quenched hooves
readying to swift me away
as they always do
at murdering midnight
to speed along the drive,
disappearing into my childhood home
leaving broken Os for mouths.

Gone—until the next year
when ghost-hunters
gather in hope,
anticipating my presence.

Tonight, I'm fire,
scorchingly hot,
not willing to bend
to traditional tastes.

Refusing to ride
and board the carriage,
I mill into the crowd
whispering promises
into expectant ears,
stirring a madness
that I feel inside
as spell-locked cauldrons
bubbling with intent.

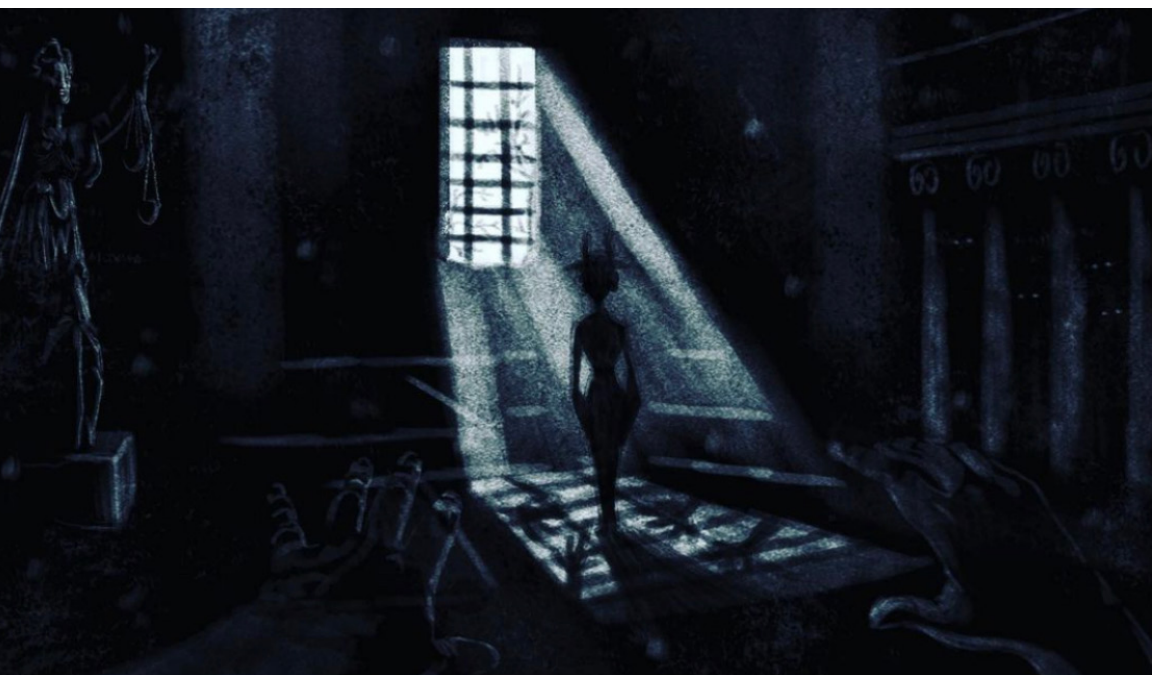
Hating Henry
Hating Thomas Cromwell
Hating my father and uncle
Hating the coachmen
Hating Henry Percy
Hating Cardinal Wolsey
Hating men (all) . . .

I linger longer. . . .

A collection of men
I gather in my palm.
A litter of toy soldiers
or suckling newborns,
they follow me,
unthinking automatons,
ensnared by historical scent,
hungry for phantom touch,
blindly drunk on unknown nuance.

Lambs to slaughter.
I guide them easily:
(a flock of men).

All whisper my name
in childish chants
as I siren them forth
to doors of oblivion,
following the virginal flag
of my blood-smeared veil.



Film Noir
Natalie Salters

Halving a Home

Brandon Nadeau

The old pickup coughed a blue cloud as it hobbled inside the cockeyed garage. Liam killed the engine, listened to its death rattle, and sighed. He'd been neglectful.

The garage door closed with a crash that echoed in a catacomb-like darkness. Liam took a breath of fresh silence, grabbed his phone, and opened his email. There it was: *Congratulations on Your Promotion*. A chemical warmth filled his chest, and he said, "Fuck yeah."

The door to the backyard thudded shut behind him as he squinted along a path of abandoned toys. The summer sun was low and to the west, and Jasmine cuddled Ash in the shade of an overgrown dogwood. She listened to the boy's chatter with weighted eyes that pulled her face toward the Earth.

Liam drew near, took a knee, and cleared his throat. Ash sprang up, toddled over, pressed his forehead to his father's and whispered, "Hi."

"Hey, bud. How are you?"

"Bye." He ran off.

Jasmine approached with open palms. "So?"

"Got the job," Liam said.

"Told you." She punched his chest. "You doubted."

"I was cautiously optimistic."

"Same thing."

Liam gestured toward the garage. "Truck's fucked."

"I'm heartbroken," Jasmine said. "North Edmonton Kia's having a sale." She could recite the gas mileage of any vehicle on the market.

"Meant to give it to Mike," Liam said. "Not much of a gift now."

"You've done enough for him."

"He's going through a rough patch."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't deserve your friendship."

"Nah, he's a good guy."

Jasmine winced, scanned the horizon. A tan haze climbed an otherwise clear sky. "Air's supposed to get bad."

Liam nodded. "Can smell it already."

"Why does a forest fire smell like burning plastic?"

"Science."

"Figures," Jasmine said. "I'll make dinner. Will you watch Ashley?"

The boy burst from the foliage along the fence line and disappeared behind a raised garden.

"I'll try," Liam said.

Jasmine left.

Ash pulled Liam to the paved pad by the backdoor of their post-war bungalow. The concrete heaved above ground that'd shifted over spring. Liam worried about the foundation.

They sat with a bucket of sidewalk chalk between them as Ash drew an abstract depiction of untamed emotion while eating a leaf.

Liam wrote "Mama" in red. "What does this say, bud?"

"Mama."

"Nice," Liam said without looking up. He wrote "Dada." "How about this one?"

"Mama."

"No, dude, this one." Liam underlined it. "Sound it out."

Ash giggled. "Mama."

Liam followed his son's gaze to the kitchen window, where Jasmine puffed her cheeks and pulled her ears wide. Ash bounced on bent knees, scratched his armpits, and said, "Ooh-ooh-ah-ah-ah."

Jasmine blew a kiss. Liam caught it and put it in his breast pocket. He chalked a heart around "Mama" and "Dada" and drew a cross between them. When he looked up again, Jasmine had gone. He wondered if she was content. She was hard to read, had been for years. Her emotions flatlined after the operation as if the surgeons removed something they shouldn't have. Now, she rarely laughed and never cried.

It occurred to him that he'd misplaced a helpless child. An emergency search ensued. He scoured the backyard, checked under and behind all child-sized objects, crawled through spiderweb-infested bushes.

He ducked into the play-fort behind the shed and said, "Thank God." Then his throat tightened. "Whoa, where'd you get that?"

Ash faced a four-story Victorian dollhouse, opened like a book along a central hallway. Catwoman napped in the upstairs bedroom as Two-Face showered in the ensuite and Batman brooded on the balcony. Liam felt hot and cold and nauseous. He thought Jasmine got rid of that dollhouse.

"Ash, dinnertime," Liam said.

"No."

"Let's go."

"Bye."

"You're funny." Liam slipped his hands under Ash's arms and lifted. Ash squirmed and kicked over the dollhouse.

"Hey," Liam forced a patient tone. "Calm down."

Ash swung his head back, smashing Liam's chin.

"Jesus, fuck," Liam dropped his son harder than he had to.

Ash fell silent, turned crimson, then erupted. Liam ignored him, inspected the dollhouse.

"Dada." Ash reached out. Liam brushed past him, left the fort, and stormed across the lawn. Ash followed, imploding into a pile of sobbing child as the dollhouse was placed on a flowerbox beyond his reach.

Liam rubbed his jaw, inhaled slowly, turned around. "Hey, man, I'm really sorry."

Ash's chin trembled. "Dada ouched me." His first complete sentence.

Liam considered lying. *Just an accident, didn't mean to.* "You're right." He struggled to swallow. "Wasn't very nice."

He took a step forward, Ash flinched, and pain coursed Liam's torso. Felt as if his sternum had turned against him and stabbed his solar plexus.

Liam sat down and rubbed his son's bouncing back. A breeze awoke the windchimes above the back gate.

"Time out," Ash said.

"I deserve one."

Ash crossed his arms around his chin.

"Dadas mess up, too," Liam said. "I hope you'll forgive me."

Liam carried Ash inside like a backward knapsack and shouldered the door shut against the wind. He walked across the open concept as Jasmine watched from behind a boiling pot, steam beading on teak cabinetry. The house smelled like garlic bread and burning plastic. Liam buckled his son into his highchair and began a countdown. Ash grabbed his harness straps and grinned upward.

Blast-off: the boy's rocket shook until it left the atmosphere.

Liam tidied, watered the plants, and emptied the litter box. Removed a fur-laden basket of unfolded laundry from the dinner table. Consolidated Jasmine's real estate brochures, placing them with her empty day planner and dusty copy of *Real Life Organizing*. He turned on the radio, set the table, and sat down.

Jasmine turned off the radio, put out dinner, and sat down.

Spaghetti and meatballs.

Jasmine cut the garlic bread in two, passed half to Liam and said, "My mom heard Ashley say the S-word today."

"Shit?"

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"Yeah. And you're the only one that swears around him, so—"

"Shit's a swear?"

Jasmine rolled her eyes.

"Your mom was here?" Liam said.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"My cross-fit competition . . ."

"Yes," Liam double-tapped the table. "That's right."

"You forgot."

"Did not."

Jasmine mashed a bowl of pasta for Ash. "Said you'd make the second half."

"I know that. . . ." Liam shifted. "And I meant to, but—"

"Jesus, fuck," Ash said, and then no one said anything for a while.

Liam broke a piece off his garlic bread and passed it to Ash, who threw it on the floor without looking at it.

"My afternoon was crazy," Liam said.

Jasmine snorted.

Liam rubbed his wrist across his brow and poured himself a glass of Malbec. Ash looked from the wine bottle to his mom, then turned his head and wide-eyed his dad. Liam slid the bottle forward. Jasmine's lips formed a smile while the rest of her face didn't.

Liam poured her wine and said, "I forgot your competition."

Liam cleared the table, emptied the dishwasher, and filled it. He hand-washed the pots and pans, took out the garbage, swept, and folded laundry.

Mike texted: *GAS CANS ON MY PORCH THANX FOR LENDING I FILLED HER UP!!!*

Liam leaned against the kitchen counter. What's Mike doing right now? Stocking his beer fridge? Relaxing in the light of a high-definition gunfight? Seducing some twentysomething over trendy takeout?

The floorboards announced Jasmine's arrival. She paused behind Liam, who didn't look back. The wall clock ticked obnoxiously.

Jasmine rubbed his back and said, "I'm sorry."

"You did nothing wrong."

"That's not true." Her voice wavered. "Liam, I need to—"

"I'm the sorry one," Liam said. "Start over?"

"Okay," Jasmine said. "Yeah . . . okay."

They cuddled on the crimson loveseat. Ash rolled on the rug and chewed a fire truck. Wind and far-away fires had cast an apricot veil across the picture window. The sun was a white hole.

An auburn light appeared in the haze where their street intersected with another. It grew larger and brighter and brought a motorcycle with it. The bike halted before the house next door, and Mike removed his helmet. He killed the headlight, dismounted, lit a cigarette. Then he looked up and flashed a coy smile at Liam and Jasmine, as if he knew they'd be watching.

"Goddammit he's charming," Liam said and waved.

Mike tipped an invisible cowboy hat, then strolled the cobblestone path to his front door.

Jasmine examined her hands. "Garage door's acting up again."

"Opening on its own?"

"Three times today. Pain in the butt."

"I'll fix it." Liam leaned back and squeezed his neck. "I'm nervous. What if I'm garbage at managing?"

"Liam, look at me. I have every confidence you'll be garbage."

Liam smiled.

"At first," Jasmine said. "Then you'll get good. Then you'll be the best."

"You're the best."

Ash farted. They laughed as a family.

"I got bronze," Jasmine said.

"Bronze?"

"Third place."

"Your competition . . ."

"Yup."

"I didn't even ask," Liam said.

"Nope."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

The white-hole sun neared the rooftops.

"Didn't know you kept the dollhouse," Liam said.

"Of course, you made it for Ashley."

Liam raised an eyebrow.

"What?" Jasmine said.

He made the dollhouse for their daughter, who died in Jasmine's womb on a cold Friday almost two years ago. The sky was gray that day. The roads were icy, and God was a monster. They drove home with a miscarriage care package in the back by the carseat. Liam ground his hands raw on the

steering wheel as Jasmine hugged her stomach and wailed. Removal was scheduled for the coming Sunday.

Ash climbed onto the couch and sat between his parents. Liam kissed his wife's temple and said, "I love you."

Liam sat in bed against the padded headboard after a long, hot shower. A breathtaking red sunset bled into the room.

Jasmine walked in naked and said, "Let's fuck."

"Oh," Liam said.

"Oh?"

"Sorry. Just tired."

Jasmine straddled him. "I'll do the work."

Liam pressed a hand against her belly. "Not tonight."

"Come on, you're not tired."

"Please fucking stop."

"Wow." Jasmine rolled off and glared at the popcorn ceiling.

"Jasmine, I—"

"Forget it."

Liam put on the podcast they passed out to every night. He picked a random episode.

Welcome to Mystical History. Today, we examine the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Was it a miracle? A metaphor? A collective delusion in response to an unbearable trauma? For the next three hours, we—

"Can't we just talk sometimes?" Jasmine said.

Liam cringed and pressed pause. "Love to. What should we talk about?"

Jasmine huffed. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Let's just have a conversation, talk about whatever comes up."

"Fine, let's see what comes up."

The sunset drained away, and life was a twilight wasteland. A gust billowed the bedroom curtains, and Liam despised his wife for leaving the window open. Jasmine's silence was serrated while they waited to *talk about whatever comes up*.

"I had an affair," Jasmine said.

Liam left his body, heard himself say: "Who with?"

Jasmine sat up. "Mike."

Liam felt nothing. "Since when?"

"April."

"How many . . . encounters?"

Jasmine shrugged. She'd never looked more beautiful.

"Jasmine?"

They watched her fingers lift off her lap one by one. "Five," she said.

"Five. . ."

"I'm ashamed, Liam."

"Five."

"The amount doesn't matter."

"That's a relief."

"Just have to repent." Her voice cracked. "Repent and be forgiven."

"You don't believe that shit."

"Sin is sin, Liam. Remember? Five times, once, what's the difference?"

"Four." Liam turned away, and pressed play on the podcast.

The podcast was long over. Liam lay awake and frozen for a vacuous eon before his mind shattered and shot off in all directions. *Who initiated? How long had it gone on? Where'd they do it?*

He leapt out of bed and recoiled from his pillow. Jasmine slept, breathing loudly through a tight, churning jaw.

The moon was a metallic blotch on a charcoal canvas, and Liam was on Mike's lawn. A toxic breeze embraced his bare back and made the grass wheeze. The highway moaned and wailed, and violence was a virtue.

Liam sat on Mike's porch. The gas can was red, and everything else was grey. He upturned a barren flowerpot, and the key beneath it caught the streetlight. Its freshly cut edges were still sharp for lack of use. Liam clenched the jagged metal inside an impossibly powerful fist. He doubled the pressure with his free hand and screamed through his throat.

Sirens sang a dissonant chorus that swelled toward a crescendo as Liam floated about his backyard like a pale spectre collecting toys. He uncoiled the garden hose with bloody hands and washed away the sidewalk chalk. He tore the dollhouse in half and smashed it.

Was Mike the first, or one of many? Was Ash even his?

Of course, don't be ridiculous.

Liam laughed.

Liam wept inside his truck inside his airtight garage, and the brake pedal felt odd beneath his bare sole. He turned the ignition; the motor muttered and fell silent. He tried again, gave it some gas, and it choked on fluids and fired up. An exhaust plume conspired beyond the dash lights.

"Life is so cliché," he said and laughed and wondered what he meant by it. He opened his window, leaned his seat back, and closed his eyes. "I should've poured your wine right away, should've remembered your competition."

Liam caressed the pickup's trembling console. "Sorry for being a bullshit husband." His head and chest ached in synchronous waves. "But it's fucked up what you did, and I'm not giving you excuses. Anyway, I hope it was everything you wanted, and I mean that. Hope he respected your body, and . . ."

Liam's stomach churned. "Jesus, Jasmine, your womb was a coffin for a weekend. I can't imagine . . . you became a tomb—so . . . closed-off . . . open up and . . . sorry . . . let you down . . ."

Mike's motorbike backfired as it roared past the open garage door, shocking Liam awake. The truck had stopped running. He turned the key: nothing.

Liam went inside, had a cold shower, and wrapped a roller bandage around his hand. He sat on the bedroom floor and watched his wife sleep.

"She would have been beautiful in all ways, like you are, Jasmine. She was our daughter, she existed, she was all we talked about for eight months and then never again. Why can't we just talk about her sometimes? I need to—"

"She would've loved the dollhouse," Jasmine said. Her eyes were oxidized coins in a well, and the windchimes sang and danced in the distance.

Liam nodded, inspected his bandage. His phone buzzed. He checked it and said, "Shit."

"What?" Jasmine said.

"Air quality advisory."

"How bad?"

"Bad as it gets."

"What do we do?"

"Hunker down until it passes."

Liam closed the window. Jasmine sat up, crossed and then uncrossed her arms.

"Are we going to be ok?" she asked.

Liam laughed. "It's not a tornado."

"I know that." Jasmine rubbed her hands on the blanket. "I mean, like . . ."

Liam sat beside her. "We'll survive."

Tragedy + Time

Joshua Michael Stewart

Nobody falls into quicksand anymore. When was the last time you saw a yo-yo trick? Does anyone else miss the smell of Sunday comics? Raise your hand if you lost your virginity to a couch cushion and a Jazzercise VHS tape. Usually, I don't allow myself to drown in nostalgia, but I smell her Aqua Net, her strawberry lip gloss, as she drifts down my stream of consciousness in a green one-piece. Who'd dare compare a woman's body to an hourglass these days? It's not true what they say about time's healing powers. It only deadens the nerves surrounding the wound. I'll admit, I'd still sink into her. I wouldn't even pretend to watch my footing. I wouldn't reach for her dangling serpent, telling me it's a vine. This time, I'd choose death over death.



House
Zahra Merchant

Scott and Oswald, from The Book of Misunderstandings

Robert Wexelblatt

A brief fistfight that broke out in the bar of the Drury Plaza Hotel made the evening news in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The story came at the end of the show when viewers are offered a sentimental or humorous item to give the hour of crime and catastrophe the feel of a happy ending. One night, it was the five-year-old who stole the family car and made it to the interstate; the next, a WhatsApp-addicted robber who posted a selfie in his victims' bedroom. Generally, there's nothing amusing about a barfight, but in this one, the combatants were a pair of college professors in town for an academic conference. It was the incongruity of two tweed-clad academics going at it that made the story work, like nuns on Harleys. The story came from an eyewitness's tip, which didn't include an account of the reason for the altercation.

Professors Harold Murphy, 59, and Eugene Horowitz, 31, were in town for a three-day conference devoted to the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Saint Paul's preeminent native son. Professor Murphy, a distinguished scholar, author of three books and dozens of articles on Fitzgerald and the current editor of *Fitzgerald Studies*, was there to deliver a paper titled "Fitzgerald and History." Horowitz was an assistant professor in his tenure review year. His supportive department chairman arranged for him to be one of two scholars invited to serve as respondents to Murphy's paper. Both were given advance copies of the presentation and asked to respond to it in no more than five minutes.

Murphy's paper included an allusion to "the well-known elements of *Gatsby* inspired by Spengler's *Decline of the West*." The Spenglerian influence on Fitzgerald's masterpiece was ground that had been trodden for decades, often inventively, by many scholars. In fact, the longest chapter in Harold Murphy's career-making first book was an exhaustive treatment of the subject. There was no controversy about the basis of Spengler's influence on *Gatsby*. Authority for it came from the highest source, the author himself. On June 6, 1940, F. Scott Fitzgerald sent a letter to his editor, Maxwell Perkins. In it, he wrote, "Did you ever read Spengler? . . . I read him the same summer I was writing *The Great Gatsby* and I don't think I ever quite recovered from him."

When Murphy finished reading his paper, the first respondent, an

associate professor from Notre Dame, author of a book about Zelda Fitzgerald, complimented Murphy's work. She said she was especially obliged for his pointing out the connection between D. H. Lawrence and the visit to the Somme battlefield in *Tender Is the Night*. She then thanked Murphy on behalf of the audience for his many invaluable contributions to Fitzgerald scholarship.

Murphy acknowledged her comments with a gratified smile and a collegial nod. The audience applauded politely and began making ready to leave. When Horowitz got to his feet people reluctantly settled down.

"I'm also grateful for Professor Murphy's many contributions and particularly for today's illuminating comments on D. H. Lawrence. But, in the short time allotted me, I would like to say a few words about a more famous influence which he mentioned, that of Spengler on *Gatsby*. While our distinguished speaker was not the first to write on that subject, his first book did the most to establish it as a fixture of Fitzgerald studies. And so, it is with both temerity and compunction that I will be questioning that influence in an article that I will be submitting to the journal so ably edited by Professor Murphy.

"The basis of my disagreement is simply stated. *The Great Gatsby* was published on April 10, 1925. In his letter to Perkins, Fitzgerald said that he was reading Spengler during the summer he worked on the novel, which would have been that of 1924. But Fitzgerald couldn't have been reading Spengler in the summer of 1924 because Charles Francis Atkinson's English translation of Volume One of *The Decline of the West* was published on the first day of January in 1926. Volume Two didn't come out until 1928. It's true that Spengler's two tomes were published in 1918 and 1922, but in German, and Fitzgerald wouldn't have been able to read them."

The room stirred with a rumbling like that of a train slowly approaching a station. Murphy, who had a fair complexion, went briefly pink in the face; then he gave out a scoffing guffaw.

"What are you proposing? We have the proof in Fitzgerald's letter. Your great discovery is no discovery at all. We all know that Fitzgerald couldn't have been reading *The Decline of the West* while working on *Gatsby*. What he obviously meant is that he'd been reading about Spengler, whose book was making a great stir in the early '20s. His ideas were in the air. There were slews of magazine articles in English about Spengler and his views. Fitzgerald was referring to those."

Horowitz was shaken, but only briefly. He turned to the senior scholar. "With respect, Professor, Fitzgerald didn't say he was reading *about*

Spengler's book but the book itself. He may have read articles, as you say, but I don't know of any hard evidence that he did."

Murphy frowned. Horowitz, daunted and feeling that the ground beneath him was softening, was unwilling to give up his idea. He pushed on by stubbornly defending it at greater length than he'd have preferred.

"Fitzgerald was an alcoholic. He'd been drinking hard for years. His memory might have been unreliable. By 1940, he was in poor health and all but forgotten. *Gatsby* had sold less than 25,000 copies since it appeared fifteen years earlier. He was miserable in Hollywood, unsuccessful as a screenwriter, and he'd be dead before the year was out. I think he might have been confused, that his memory was muddled.

"Spengler did have a bit of impact on his writing, just not on *Gatsby*. The novel he wrote under the influence of Spengler's ideas is the one that features 'emotional bankruptcy' and examines historical decline from Grant through the Great War and its aftermath. It's the one whose protagonist carries the old ideals but is seduced and tragically falls. It's the book Fitzgerald wrote when both he and the country were suffering from depression. I'm proposing that Spengler didn't influence *Gatsby*—that he couldn't have. However, Spengler's ideas can be found all over *Tender Is the Night*, published in April 1934."

Horowitz paused. He looked toward the audience, then at Murphy. "Thank you all for your attention," he concluded. He hurriedly returned to his seat.

The restive audience grew noisy, and Murphy's face reddened. The moderator, a Virginia Woolf expert in a striking red dress, could read a crowd. She strode to the podium and quickly put an end to the proceedings.

Horowitz and his fellow respondent came over to shake Murphy's hand, but the professor did not extend his hand to either. He got up, looked disdainfully at Horowitz, stepped down from the dais, and was at once surrounded by a gaggle of admirers.

Professors Murphy and Horowitz had both taken rooms at the Drury Plaza for the weekend. They were staying over for the Sunday luncheon that would conclude the conference. They might not have chosen to go to the hotel's bar around five o'clock on Saturday, but they did. Murphy arrived surrounded by old friends and fawning colleagues. They took a booth and ordered a round. Horowitz was on his own. He had never been to a Fitzgerald conference before, knew no one, and nobody was keen to sit with

him. He was hoping to do some networking as his chairman advised. He was sitting at the bar sipping the single malt on which he'd splurged when one of Murphy's crowd detached himself and came over to him.

He introduced himself as Nils Anderson from Michigan. "Well," he said, "that was quite something you did today. You didn't make yourself any friends, but it was electrifying. I think Harold was staggered. *I certainly was.*"

"I'm sorry to have upset Professor Murphy. I admire him, of course. I just think he was wrong, or rather that he accepted something he ought to have checked. A lot of people did."

Anderson summoned a waitress, ordered a gin and tonic, then rubbed his chin and suggested that Horowitz might want to apologize to Murphy. "Well, not so much apologize as have a chat about the Spengler business, a friendly one. Murphy has a lot of influence, you know. Might be a wise career move."

Recalling Murphy's dismissive look and red face, Horowitz was reluctant.

"Oh, come on," said Anderson. "He's a good man; his bark is worse than his bite. I'm sure he'll have gotten over the shock by now. He might even call you Old Sport! Let's go over. I'll come with you."

So, against his better judgment, Horowitz was eventually persuaded to approach Murphy, who by this time was polishing off his second double Jameson and had been grouching for a half hour about the young moron who had responded to his paper.

As Horowitz and Anderson approached the booth, Murphy's friends fell silent. Anticipating something entertaining, they smiled at each other.

"Professor Murphy," said Horowitz solemnly, "I'm sorry if I offended you this afternoon. If I'd had more time, I'd have been less blunt. I only meant to point out the discrepancy in the dates."

"Only the *dates*, eh?" roared Murphy. "You haven't offended anybody. You've only shown yourself to be unimaginative and pigheaded. You haven't offended *me*, but you have insulted us—both of *us*. *Me and Scott!*"

Horowitz was taken aback by the vehemence of Murphy's outburst. He took in Murphy's scarlet face and those of the smirking courtiers around him.

"I respect you, Professor Murphy, and I revere Fitzgerald. That doesn't mean you both couldn't make mistakes."

"Oh," said the woman sitting across from Murphy. It was the moderator, still in the red dress.

Horowitz turned toward her. "I once heard a story about a certain sea captain. He was supposed to sail from Lisbon to New York, but when he left the harbor, he made a half a degree error in setting his course. Confident

that he'd gotten it right, he stuck with the heading and didn't check it once during the whole voyage. As a result, he wound up in Brazil."

The woman laughed.

That was when Murphy rose in his seat and, bellowing "arrogant bastard," threw a pair of wild punches, the only ones of the night. Fending off the blows with his forearm, Horowitz's elbow caught the lurching Murphy's nose, which began to bleed. The men on either side of Murphy grabbed his arms and restrained him as he swore at the younger man and at them.

Horowitz's article was, unsurprisingly, rejected by *Fitzgerald Studies* and then by five other journals. His tenure application was likewise rejected. He spent a couple years as a member of what he called the proletariat of the spirit, cobbling together a living from adjunct and part-time positions. Then he gave up on academia. With the help of a college friend who had gone into publishing, Horowitz began a new career as a ghostwriter, producing marketable autobiographies of garrulous actors, worn-out athletes, retired gangsters, and conceited CEOs.





Alligator Cowboy
Percy (Paige) Dooley

Birth of Recognition

Scott Taylor

seventh grade, lying on my back on the floor in my room, dawn just breaking,
mouth frozen open in the dim light bleeding through the curtains,
i can't believe this is the way it is, the way it will be,
the collective beast has begun its feast with astonishing ferocity,
no warning, as if at a signal
the little sharks swim the halls mindlessly in tight daily circles
and none of my desires make sense,
my carpet deep blue all around does not soothe as it once did,
the world is awakening once more as i have, the clock ticks arrogantly
and i already don't want to do this anymore



Dead Possum

Finn Wilson

Pigeon-Toed

Scott Schaible

My family never moved during my elementary school years, but a series of redistricting events and one notable condemnation of the Roosevelt School made it so that I was in a different school just about every other year. No big deal, right? Except I was badly pigeon-toed since birth, so much so that I slept with a bar between my ankles as a young toddler, and I was constantly going to see orthopedic doctors.

My mother was a registered nurse, one of the only moms I was aware of who worked, and I know she just wanted the best for me. So, she kept after my condition vigilantly. My father surely never complained about the cost, even if it was a strain on the finances to see yet another specialist in New York City. One of these many doctors determined the proper course of action would be a set of leg braces. Not something sleek like Tom Brady might wear today on a bum knee, some discreet titanium and Velcro unit for a sprained MCL. I am talking about a big, unkind leather waist belt with long metal cables running down each leg, attached with metal rivets into the heel of the shoes on the outside—truly the Forrest Gump situation.

And by shoes, picture uncool shoes, not sneakers. Hard-soled leather man-shoes.

I was fitted for my contraption toward the end of fourth grade, just in time for 180 days of wearing shorts in hot and humid Livingston, New Jersey. As the new school year approached, of course I ended up enrolled in yet another public school with an entirely new gene pool of students likely to light up the new kid with the lame hardware. I was anxious those last few days of summer, knowing full well how it was going to go for me following a months-long chorus of “loser” and “dork” shouted from cars, mopeds, and bicycles. My friends on the block were fine with my gear, but the shouts from random people were like running through a sprinkler spouting hydrochloric acid. I pretended not to hear the cruelty, but it would sting.

I arrived on the first day of fifth grade that September with a few of my Roosevelt School and neighbor friends, but most of the kids had gone to Collins School since kindergarten. The comments flew like throwing stars from the glass case at the Hong Kong shop in the mall. Even when kids asked, “How was your summer?” it sounded like “*Who’s the weirdo?*” to me.

Some kids were mercifully straightforward. “Hey, what’s wrong with your legs?”

“I’m just pigeon-toed, and this will fix it.”

What specialists know today that they didn’t understand in the ’70s was that most kids simply grow out of it and don’t need braces.

I preferred the kids who made direct queries—ignorant or simply curious in nature—over the ones who turned away, leaving me to imagine what hurtful thoughts they were chuckling to their friends. The wondering—that entire rabbit hole—was the worst.

A handful of my peers, these Essex County fifth graders, were harsh enough that I felt like faking an illness just to get out of there. But I bit my lip, got through the day, and after school I walked home feeling like it could have been worse, taking a silent inventory of who had said what. In 1975 I could ponder payback the way you might consider which pie looked good in the rotating display case in a 24-hour diner.

“How was school, sweetie?”

“It was good, Mom. Mrs. Gall was nice. She asked if I was Chuck’s brother.”

I didn’t want to burden her with the truth. Besides, she’d just call the principal, Mr. Grover, and it would only get worse.

Later that afternoon I walked to the Variety Fair five-and-dime for some baseball cards and a few packs of Chiclets gum. Flipping cards might be a good way to get to know the boys in this new school, and to settle some scores. I could practically throw a “leaner” at will—the card I threw would kiss the brick wall, flutter down, and lean against the wall on an angle. Normally the closest card to the wall takes both cards, but throw a leaner and I take every card on your body, not just the one card you flipped against mine.

Stripping a kid of a two-inch stack of Topps cards the first week of fifth grade was the elementary school equivalent of kicking the shit out of a random inmate on your first day in prison. You could create a narrative—a mythology. I could probably take down six or seven kids before word got around to avoid playing me. This idea I liked.

But practically no girls flipped baseball cards, and girls had said some of the meanest things that day. Things like, “How’s the view from the short bus?” Somewhere between shopping at the dime store, catching frogs in Canoe Brook, and walking home with brook water squishing out of my idiot

asshole grownup shoes with strands of smelly green brook moss stuck on the stainless-steel joints anchored into my heels, it came to me: a more nuanced plan than my baseball card smackdown.

The Feen-a-Mint laxative gum that my mother sometimes gave me when I was constipated looked a lot like Chiclets. I grabbed the laxative from the medicine cabinet, went to my bedroom, enjoyed a jaw-crushing wad of actual peppermint Chiclets, and refilled the empty yellow packs with the Feen-a-Mint squares. I slid the slightly oversized pieces into the slim cardboard sleeve the way a hunter might load rounds into a clip.

I was 11 years old.

Day two in the new school. I reminded myself they looked just like Chiclets—not a perfect match, slightly thicker and squarer than a Chiclet, but shaking one out of the box, no fifth-grade kid would have thought twice.

I showed up cheerful and smiling in shorts and leg braces, about 30 baseball cards in one pocket. Good cards—Thurman Munson, Vida Blue, Joe Morgan, Tom Seaver—and the ersatz Chiclet packs stashed in the other pocket. I broke out the faux gum when I encountered the kids who had said harsh things the day before. “Hey, what’s up? Want a Chiclet? Here, just take the whole pack.”

You can imagine what happened a couple of hours later.

Picture that pie-eating scene from *Stand By Me*—but coming out the other way. It took Mr. Grover and the school nurse about 45 minutes to triangulate the matter back to me, following some explosive in-the-pants diarrhea and phone calls to parents. I was quietly sent home after lunch, and that was that.

Today, there might be expulsion or legal ramifications for such an act. I’m thankful I wasn’t born even one year later than I was—today’s doorbell systems and cameras make it a challenge to even smash a pumpkin without doing recon and taking measured precautions. In this case, with a little help from administrators who gave me the benefit of the doubt, it was chalked up to *he didn’t know it wasn’t regular gum*. Case closed.

Can you imagine anyone even noticing the kid in the leg braces when there were multiple stories about classmates pooping their pants? Walking the halls was a breeze after that.

I had made myself invisible.

Green Money

Chris Huff

I took this job and started calling people who had payday loans but didn't pay them back. I dialed out from a call center in Phoenix, and the debtors who sometimes answered my calls were scattered throughout the United States.

One morning, after I'd worked there for about two years, I spoke to an elderly woman. She listened closely to every word and paused for a few seconds before speaking.

"I know it; you're right. I shouldn't have taken out them loans. Had to help our grandson. We been tryin'. He moved in because he said he wanted to straighten out his life. But he ain't nothin' but trouble. I don't know what to do. We's supposed to be retired, but now we workin' just to stay afloat. I got medical issues on top of that. Had to have a heart operation . . . but I'm gonna pay you back. I don't know how, but I'm gonna pay every dollar of them loans back. I have each of the receipts in my Bible, and I been prayin' to the good Lord and askin' Him what I should do. You ain't the only ones I owe."

I asked more questions and confirmed that the woman didn't have any extra money anywhere. No 401K, friends, or family members to borrow from. I said goodbye and hung there on the phone—it was a protocol that the customer had to disconnect first; otherwise, I could get in trouble.

The woman didn't realize we were still connected as she cried out, "I know I owe the loans, oh Lord, I know it. I took them loans out. Oh Jesus, please allow me to pay them back. They helped me out when I needed 'em, and I know I've got to pay 'em back."

It was hard to take. I held down the urge to yell out, "Never mind what I said! Don't pay. And stop answering your phone." It wasn't affecting her credit anyway, and my company had paid only a few pennies for every dollar that she supposedly owed.

Within the next hour I gave another customer the same canned pitch. Using voice inflection with the right words, I tried to make him slightly afraid. Then I convinced the guy, Martin Whitlock, a trucker from Knoxville, Tennessee, to give me \$2,000 in "green money"—what my company calls money that gets paid today, as opposed to something the customer promises to pay later. The company makes a huge deal out of green money. Hypes the hell out of it.

That night, I went home to my girlfriend, Fiona, but I couldn't get the

woman out of my mind. The older woman who said, "Oh Jesus, please allow me to pay them back."

"It broke my heart," I told Fiona. "I don't think I can do this anymore."

"No one put a gun to her head and made her take the loan out. You're letting them get to you, and you're the one who told me that you couldn't feel sorry for them or it'd cost you money."

Fiona nudged me playfully and set a plate in front of me: a medium rare steak with sautéed mushrooms and steamed asparagus dripping with butter. We kissed, and for a moment I felt the warmth of just being there with her.

I smiled. "You're right. I think I'm just getting burned out."

She set her plate of food on the table and waited a few moments before sitting down. "You know, you're starting to sound like them," she said with a gentle smirk. "No one's forcing you to stay at this job." She shrugged. "If you don't like it, get another one."

"I probably should. I don't know. You have to eat crap at every job."

"I just know all you've done is complain since you've been there. Life's too short to be this unhappy."

I looked over, and she wasn't affected by it at all, but I knew if she had heard what I'd heard she'd feel the same way.

"This was different. I'd never had someone pray while I was on the phone with them. She prayed to God in the way that someone does when they have nowhere else to go. It shook me to my core. I felt like God was on that call, floating in between us, shaking his head slowly, sadly. When that happened, I looked at my screen and saw that the original amount she borrowed was \$1,200. Wanna know how much I was asking her to pay me? Take a guess."

"I don't know, \$2,000?" Fiona said.

"Almost \$4,000! I'm telling you, between me, her, and God floating in between us, I wanted to give her all the money I have in the bank to make up for what I've been doing there. Terrorizing these poor, impoverished people. The crazy thing is, she lives in Phoenix. Tell me this wasn't a God-thing. I call people all over the U.S., and the woman lives 26 miles from here. I damn near drove straight there after work."

"That is crazy. You'd better be joking." Fiona stood up, walked to the fridge, and filled her champagne flute. "Why would you say that? You told me the reason you haven't asked me to marry you yet is that you need to pay off some debt. That you needed to take care of your shit first. We've been together four years, Mitch. You're 35 years old. And now you're gonna give this stranger all your money? Someone just like you, who doesn't pay her bills."

I took a measured breath, deciding whether I should keep going or retreat. Then I half-grinned. "Yeah, I was just messing with you."

"I knew it! But you can get so damn sensitive sometimes," she said. Facing me, she pressed her fingers into my shoulders and chest. I stood up and brought her toward me, held her there.

For months I'd been shifting talks of marriage to something else. I'd know it was there, that need, but just avoided it until it came out in an argument. It was very important for Fiona to get married, and we had talked about it from early in our relationship. Yet a little over four years together and I'd somehow made the conversation taboo. I could tell when it was coming though—when it couldn't be contained. There was a thick silence, and I tried to force myself to bring it up first, so she'd know I cared and wasn't ignoring her.

I couldn't do it. "Thanks for dinner," I said.

"When is my handsome man gonna ask me to marry him?"

She sounded pouty and playful, and I wanted to ask her right there, but I knew she deserved the kind of proposal she could brag to her friends and parents about. I couldn't admit I hadn't scrounged up enough money yet. I needed another check, maybe two.

"Soon, baby. Soon." I meant it. Part of me did.

I'd kept secrets from her. Like the fact that I had two bank accounts. I only kept it from her so that I wouldn't spend it. We spent money fast. I put as much as I could in the secret bank account every month and tried to pretend it wasn't there; I even cut up the debit card to create an obstacle, so that I'd have to walk in to withdraw money. We went out to eat a lot, and I'd spent money on trips I shouldn't have to Cancún, San Francisco, Key West.

I'd gotten out of debt by hiding the money from myself, and from her; otherwise, there would've been more trips, more food, more clothes, and there wouldn't have been any financial improvement. I'd be one of the people I called perpetually. Hell, maybe I would've taken out some of the ridiculous loans I collected on.

I was saving for her engagement ring. The next day, I checked my clandestine bank account, and I needed about \$5000 to get her the ring. I was close. I'd have at least that much on my next commission check.

I knew she wanted a large diamond—with the right clarity and color. Early on, planning our trip to Cancún, I'd tried to purchase the ring on credit. I thought maybe I could surprise her and propose to her there on the beach or while we were out snorkeling in the clear, blue water.

Back then, I told the salesman my credit was bad. He reassured me. "I'll get you approved; all you need is to have a job and a Social Security number. I'll get you approved," he said. I gave him my Social Security number. Thirty seconds later, staring at his computer screen, he wrinkled up his brow and sucked at his teeth as if it were something painful to look at. Shaking his head, he walked back over and told me he couldn't get me the loan.

Fiona dropped hints into conversations, to me or friends of hers while I was nearby. What size her finger was. That she liked white gold and the ring somehow had to incorporate flowers. I'd taken good notes because I planned to give her what she wanted. I wasn't going back to the jeweler in the mall, though, the one who'd rejected me. I'd found a good place, a family-run jewelry store that had better diamonds and specialized in custom designs. They'd been in business for over 30 years.

I'd nearly confessed. I wanted her to know that I wasn't delaying out of fear. I'd delayed it because I'd been spending all my money on her, on us. On trips and cars and clothes and food. I'd hid the bank account from her to get to a better place, so I could finally give her everything she dreamed of. I held off.

Something else was pulling at me, and I wondered if maybe I was delaying out of fear. Was marrying her what I really wanted to do? If this were someone I really wanted to build a life with, wouldn't I have proposed long before? Surely, I wouldn't have gone to Cancún before buying the ring!

Later that week, I was rolling. I'd collected over \$3,000 in green money and still had a few hours to my workday left. I was coasting to my monthly goal. It wouldn't be a month where I had to fret on the last days about customers' payments that could bounce. I would get there easily, and now the only thing to worry about was how high I could stack my bonus. Then the auto dialer beeped, and I heard a voice I recognized. I held my breath and stared at the computer screen.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

It was Quintella Jeffries, the woman who was counting on Jesus to pay her debt to us. I'd stuffed her memory away and thought I was over it. I read the recent notes as she continued to call out to the open line, asking if anyone was there.

"Can anyone hear me? If you can hear me, I can't hear you. Hello?"

I wanted to talk, but I couldn't; my lips were numb. She held on, unlike many of the customers who avoided our calls, dodging the intimidation and the guilt. I continued reading the daily notes from my coworkers.

Lady is rude and said we call her every day. Advised she needs to set up a payment plan or I'll have to list it as a Refusal to Pay.

Customer said she's doing everything she can and that it's a very hard time right now. Started crying. Made the excuse that she and her husband have a lot of medical debt. Told her we were there for her when she needed us and now it was time for her to do the right thing. She said she'd beg her church friends and would have the money by next week.

"No one talkin', but I think someone's there," she said. "I can't just hang up; that's rude."

I held on while someone in the background yelled, "Hang up the damn phone! Here, I'll do it. Give it to me." Maybe it was her grandson.

I looked around to make sure no one was watching and quickly scribbled her address on the jeweler's business card from my wallet.

It made me think about the ring I was going to have made for Fiona: the color, the clarity, the carat, and the cut. I stared down at the floor, sighing as I thought about how happy and shocked she would be. Her parents would line up to hug us the next time we went to visit them. I imagined the sparkle in my father's eyes as he looked proudly at me. I thought about children, grandchildren, houses, and bigger houses.

I pushed away from my desk.

"Havin' a hell a good day—get that green money, Mitch!" someone said as I walked down the aisle. Then, "You okay?"

I walked out the door to my Camaro. Peeled out onto the street, driving too fast and then too slowly while lost in thought, then too fast again. I forced myself to stop at the red lights. Flashes of the diamond came to mind, an image of Fiona admiring it and showing it to her coworkers and friends. I thought of where all the money came from, and the poverty I'd helped to keep my customers in. They were the ones who would pay for Fiona's ring, our wedding, and our parents' smiles of approval.

I pulled up to the bank lot, parked the car, and went inside. The teller looked nervous and asked how she could help me. I told her what I needed and set my ID in front of her.

I felt like I was hovering outside of my body as she asked if I had any fun plans for the weekend. My mind spun, and I told her I was thinking of driving to Portland or Iowa or possibly Athens, Georgia. She didn't say much after that and handed me a few plump envelopes full of hundreds.

I felt the money pressing my front pockets, and the sadness filled me even more—interrupted by flashes of diamonds, aromas of large family dinners, gifts at Christmas, vacations. I saw Fiona and me walking along beach sand and riding our bicycles on California roads.

I looked at the woman's address and apartment number. I didn't want to

call her on the phone. I had to face her. I knocked and stood there in silence for a minute, then knocked some more. She answered her door and smiled, the kind of vulnerable smile that could pierce through anything. There were teeth out of place and missing, but it was an honest sight. I apologized for the intrusion and told her who I was.

"Mitch, what are you doin' here? I told them I was gonna do what I had to do."

"I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you," I said.

She looked up at me and shrugged her shoulders. "Let me make some iced tea then. Come on inside. Excuse the mess; I was just gettin' things in order. I been so stressed and distracted lately. Can't sleep. I owe everybody money. Husband is out tryin' to sell some jewelry right now. Mine and Mama's ring, something I swore I'd never part with."

Inside, my eyes were drawn to the dark beige couch in the living room, dressed in an ugly green quilt with diamond patterns. The tiny cobalt-blue coffee table looked like a novice craftsman had built it. It was hard to figure out where the kitchen started and the living room ended. Four cooking pots of all different sizes hung on nails that were hammered into the wall right next to the old beige couch.

My gaze landed on an open bag of Lay's potato chips on the floor under a metal foldout chair that faced the television. The dinner table was nearby: a small card table with a slit in the middle pressed up into a corner wall. I'd never considered what their homes looked like—the homes of people I called to collect money from.

Quintella washed a glass, dropped ice cubes into it, and poured tea. She walked back toward me, holding the glass in front of her carefully so nothing would spill. That sucked my motivation right out of the air, and I struggled to find my breath, to tell her what I'd come to say.

I told her everything, what I'd done and what I'd been doing. She shook her head and held her hands up, as if someone were aiming a gun at her.

She held them there until I told her, "Look, it's not my money. If you don't take it, I'm just gonna throw it away."

Walking back out to the car, I felt as if I were electrically charged. It hadn't hit me yet, what I'd done. Not fully. I didn't know where I would work, what I would do. Whether Fiona would remain with me after I told her.

The mortgage was due in a week. Even as it started to sink in, the cost and the consequences of my actions, nothing in me considered turning around to ask Quintella to return the money. In that moment, I never wanted to ask for money from anyone ever again.

I Don't Need These Anymore

David Romanda

You know how I was all weird last month and gave you my Paul Auster books for no apparent reason? Well, I'd like them back.



Goody Two Shoes
Ashley Kormanik

INTERVIEW



Mountains and Mentors: An Interview with Mesha Maren

Gabriel Lopez

Mesha Maren is a novelist and writer of short fiction and nonfiction. Additionally, she is an Associate Professor of the Practice of English at Duke University. Her short stories can be found in *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *The Guardian*, and more. Her novels include *Sugar Run*, *Perpetual West*, and *Shae*.

GL: I want to get to know you better. How did you start? And how did you get here in terms of writing?

MM: It's interesting when you say it like that. How did I get here? It's an interesting question for all artists. There are so many ways to mark your success that it can be hard to answer the question, "Where am I?"

I grew up on top of a mountain outside of a small town in southern West Virginia, and I was never very good at socializing. I think I'm a bit better now that I'm almost 40, but as a kid, I wasn't good at making friends. I always felt out of place and awkward in school; and for me, hanging out in the woods and reading books after school always felt good. Finding something in books to make life feel worthwhile has been a thread throughout my whole life. At a certain point, I started to write stuff myself. Even when I was quite young, I was like, I'm writing a novel! Every day felt better when I had time to read and write, and that's pretty much stayed true for me.

I didn't start my undergrad until I was 26. In the meantime, I waitressed, worked in bars, and did similar jobs. I had a mentor, the novelist Katherine Min, who really convinced me to take writing and school seriously. From there I applied to 15 different MFA programs and didn't get into any of them. If you'd asked me then, I thought it was the end of the world.

So when I was working on my first novel, I treated it like a second job, but it also had to feel meaningful to me. Because, if I was doing it for some sort of external validation, it logically wouldn't make sense. The writing is still just that *thing*, just like it was when I was in third grade, where the day feels better if I've touched it than if I haven't.

GL: Right, it's about the internal satisfaction of just getting out there. I call myself a screenwriter, but for the past two weeks, I've been caught up in other work and hardly writing. I call myself a writer, damn it! We want to write.

MM: It's a lifelong struggle. The truth of it is, when life has gotten busy teaching or different things are going on, it's still just as hard to get back into that headspace of writing. That's what I hope to get from the artist retreats I go to—"Okay, I'm just going to try to spend as much time as I can there literally writing."

GL: On the topic of artist retreats, what's the importance of having that sense of community to you, and how do you get involved with it?

MM: I personally love to spend time with different kinds of artists, specifically nonwriters. To me, that's more exciting than if there were other writers around me. I like engaging and having conversations about artistic practices and why you make art, but with people whose art forms are different from my own. Part of that might be because I was always friends with musicians when I was younger, in Asheville, North Carolina. I think it's so interesting to hear about people's challenges and inspirations, but through a different lens.

GL: Totally. As somebody who attends an art school, I get to interact with different types of artists every day. And I feel that it grounds me in the sense that, "Oh, right, we're all storytellers. It presents a different angle with which to approach my art."

MM: That's what I like that a community brings. I think sometimes, amongst writers, not always, there can be some sort of competition. And I'm sure that exists in other art forms as well. Part of the reason that I love hanging out with visual artists or musicians is because we are trying to do the same thing in the big picture. I can have a conversation with somebody and see their art and go, *Wow, I would never think to do it that way.* It's so inspiring to see that someone's brain went in this direction.

Actually, just before this, I was talking with this photographer whom I'm interviewing for the *Oxford American*, and their first debut photobook is coming out. And, like me, they're from southern West Virginia. So it's just

very cool to think we came from a similar place and we can relate in so many ways, but the art form is totally different. There's something really exciting about that.

GL: Absolutely. You mentioned interviewing a photographer for the *Oxford American*, and you have written nonfiction pieces in addition to your fictional pieces. What is the difference in approach for you in regards to writing fiction versus nonfiction?

MM: I find writing fiction and nonfiction to be completely different for me. For instance, I did a profile of a young trans man from the same hometown as me. That experience was very gratifying, but also very terrifying. That was such an outward process; I had to go out in the world and hang out with him and interview him, but it also felt like he was trusting me with his story, with his *life*. And I kept asking myself, "Can I do this? Am I the right person to do this?" With a fictional project, I'll have some of the same questions of how do I portray this character fully, but I get to grapple with all of those questions alone by myself.

In the initial phases with fiction, it's all images in my mind, and I need everything to be really quiet and really still, and then I make them into language. With nonfiction, the initial process is so much interaction, and then I have to take it all and distill it into language. They're almost the opposite. It made me respect journalists a lot, because I feel it takes all the skills that a novelist needs and then some.

You absolutely have responsibilities when you're writing fiction, to whichever community you're representing or place you're writing about. But in nonfiction the responsibilities are different, and they're much more present and on the surface, I think. It's life. Where do you start? Where do you stop? There's always more material than you could possibly ever use. With fiction, for me, it's all about building it up from nothing. My first novel started, in my mind, as just this image of an open window and the wind blowing the curtain, and there's a glass with melting ice and whiskey in it.

GL: You mention your first novel spinning out from this kernel of an image to expand and evolve into something else. What is your, say, routine or roadmap for writing a novel?

MM: They've all begun as images for me. So with the first book, it was this image of a window. With my second book, I had characters in the first image, but I didn't know anything about them. They were inside of this car stopped in traffic at the US-Mexico border. Then I had to figure out what their situation was. With my third novel, that was an image of a young woman on this blue velvet couch that I kept coming back to. It feels like when you get a song stuck in your head and it's just there in the background. If the images persist long enough, I write them down in a little notebook. If they keep persisting beyond that, then I'm like, *Okay, what else?*

I write first drafts of my novels longhand on yellow stenographer's pads, and then I transfer it over to a computer. I do another draft, print it, and share it with very close friends who will read what ends up being a third draft and they give me their feedback. About two to three years into it, I usually share with my agent the fourth or fifth draft. He's a writer and always has really good notes. Somewhere probably around the sixth draft, we show it to our editor, and she usually has smaller line-level notes.

As far as publication time, it's really varied. In 2015, I started to work with a publishing house on my first book, and then it didn't release until 2019. This novel that I have coming out in May, it'll be about two years from the time that I gave it to them. That is mostly out of my control, but it involves copy editing, fact-checking, all of that kind of stuff.

And then the book comes out! And then you're like, *Wait a minute—what did I write?* That's the whole funny process of going to bookstores to give talks; you're essentially trying to remind yourself what you wrote, because by that time, I am usually fully into a new book that I'm drafting. And so then I'm like, *Oh, that's right, that thing I wrote.*

GL: That's so relatable. In film, we have a similar long postproduction timeline. So by the time that the film is premiering, I'm like, *I did that?*

MM: Yeah, and I'm not good at outlining. I feel like if I outline things then I get caged in by it and, honestly, bored. I'm like, *Oh, now I know what happens.* There are writers whose process is much more streamlined than mine, and they probably are able to do it all more quickly. I sometimes get jealous when people say that their ideas for a novel come in the form of an idea. Mine is always an image; that's just the way my brain works. I have to

essentially ask the character lots and lots of questions for a year or so before I actually even start drafting what would look like a book.

GL: I feel like it's more adventurous that way, the day-by-day of, *Where are we going today?* In addition to your writing ventures, you're also a teacher and a mentor. What's the importance of mentoring and teaching writers to you?

MM: So there's two answers. One is, it pays the bills, which is great. I really do enjoy teaching. But it's also nice, and I think important, for artists to have a steady income and health insurance. It's important to me that my income doesn't come from my art because if it takes me 10 years to write the novel and I don't get paid in that time, I'm not freaking out because I have my paycheck from my teaching job. But also, teaching writing keeps me in touch with the craft of it, and reminds me every day that it's a muscle; it's like going to the gym. You build up your muscles, and if you stop, then they wither away.

The most enriching teaching that I have done was in the federal prison system. In the classes that I taught, groups of incarcerated folks gathered and shared writing with each other. They wouldn't have been allowed to gather and share writing with each other if I wasn't there to oversee and provide teaching, but I also provided an environment. That really felt important to me, to use my status as a writer and teacher to provide a space for incarcerated folks to share their writing. And yes, I gave advice and I taught them, but almost more important than that was to provide a space for them to share that writing with each other.

GL: It's clear that celebrating and elevating aspiring writers is a passion of yours. What advice would you have for writers who are just starting or, say, about to graduate from college?

MM: My advice is tied to some of the things that I said earlier about asking yourself first, *Why is writing important to you?* I know that a day where I write is always better than a day where I don't. I keep that in the front of my mind as the reason I write, even if, of course, it feels amazing to hold the copy of my book in my hands. Everyone will have their own answer to that, *Why do I write, and how can I feed that?* Because there'll be times when you're in between having books come out, or other external validations, and you can't rely on that. So what's the internal reason for writing?

And then you need to treat it like a job. It's got to be both: you have the reason that you do it for yourself, but then also, on a real career level, it's got to be treated like a second job. I knew that I needed a full novel before any agent would want to look at my novel, and I knew that I was going to have to write several drafts of it before showing it to an agent. So some of it is just putting in the time. The inspiration will come if you set aside whatever amount of time works for you. For me, it was four hours in a cubicle at the public library. Five days a week, I showed up, and the inspiration would come.

And now, it is a little more integrated in my life. But back then, it was like pushing a boulder up a hill. I'm being slightly hyperbolic. But no one was asking, "Mesha Maren, we want you to write a novel!" No one knew who I was. I had to push that boulder up the hill every day. And then it becomes easier. But in the beginning, you've got to be your own cavalry.





Cat Controller
Robyn Braun

CONTRIBUTORS

Brigid Barry is a young writer from Peabody, Massachusetts. She is currently studying for a degree in professional writing at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont with hopes of becoming a screenwriter. She focuses on contemporary fiction and comedic writing, attempting to branch skill sets into more complex forms. This is her first official publication of hopefully many, and is honored to be featured among many other talented writers and artists.

Robyn Braun is an artist and writer living at the northern edge of Canada's Treaty 6 territory with a kick-ass 13 year old and a cat named Fuzzy. She earned her MFA from UBC's School of Creative Writing in 2022, and her debut novella, *The Head*, came out from Great Plains Press in May 2024.

Percy (Paige) Dooley is an artist of several backgrounds. They were born in Connecticut and raised in Florida, yet they're really from New York. However, by looking at the piece chosen for this publication, one can determine there is a clear answer. In recent years, Percy has focused on honing their skills in digital illustration and glass working (both hot and cold), but they have origins in a variety of mediums spanning ceramics to watercolor to linoleum carving. Currently, they are predominantly working on digital sequential comic-based projects, but they are certainly open to experimenting more in the future!

Margaret (Margo) Drew is a junior at Ringling College of Art and Design majoring in Illustration. Margo has explored and experimented with many different mediums but is most passionate about drawing simplistic yet charming cartoon styles, which she loves expanding into character designs and visual development. Recently, Margo won the Bronze Award in illustration in Best of Ringling 2024. Besides illustrating, she enjoys cooking, weightlifting, and reading fantasy thrillers/dramas.

Jonathan Everitt's poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Laurel Review*, *BlazeVox*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Small Orange*, *Impossible Archetype*, *Ghost City Press*, *The Bees Are Dead*, *The Empty Closet*, *Lake Affect*, and the *Moving Images* poetry anthology, among others. His poem "Calling Hours" was the basis for the 2015 short film *Say When*. Jonathan also led a workshop for LGBTQ poets and co-founded the long-running monthly open mic *New Ground Poetry Night* in Rochester, New York. He earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Bennington College.

G.F. Fuller is a young writer from St. Louis, Missouri.

Ati Gor is an illustrator based in Orlando, Florida. She usually makes art surrounding the topics of absurdist existentialism and classical mythologies, more specifically Indian, Greek, and Roman (though she always seeks to expand that knowledge). Her works feature heavy and intricate line art that is complemented by limited color palettes. The personality that Ati brings with her work often aligns with the media and/or the literature that she finds herself coming across. You can find more of her work at <https://www.atigor.space> and on Instagram @onionstars.

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident recently published in *Stand*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, and *Lost Pilots*. Grey's latest books *Between Two Fires*, *Covert*, and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon. Grey's work is upcoming in *The Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa*, and *California Quarterly*.

Lanay Griessner is a short story writer with a PhD in biology that she doesn't know what to do with yet. Originally from Springfield, Massachusetts, Lanay moved to Austria in 2008 for graduate school and couldn't figure out how to leave because the signs were all in German. She has nine published short stories, over 50 publications in science journalism, and two adorable kids.

Richard Hanus had four kids but now just three. Zen and love.

Chris Huff was born and raised in South Bend, Indiana. He's currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Northern Arizona University, where he also teaches English. He lives in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Stephanie Hunton is an illustrator at Universal Creative and a part-time designer for Hallmark Cards. She loves creating bright, whimsical work that brings a sense of comfort and coziness to the viewer. She loves combining traditional materials like watercolor, gouache, and colored pencil with Photoshop and Procreate to incorporate texture in her work. You can find more of her work at <https://stephaniehunton.com>.

Ashley Kormanik is a sophomore at Ringling College of Art and Design majoring in Illustration. She has a love for character design, visual development, book illustration, and so much more. Her goal is to make art that has energy, tells a story, and makes people smile. When she's not in class or making drinks at Starbucks, she can usually be found sketching animals or taking care of her jungle of houseplants.

Ashwariya Krishnan is an illustrator driven to create stories that inspire. Much of her work is reflective of Indian society, culture, and traditions, which make up a large part of who she is today. You can find more of her work at <https://www.aishukrishnan.net/>.

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer is an award-winning author of books for children and adults. His first book, *The Outsider*, which takes as its subject his late father's struggles with schizophrenia and homelessness, was published by Broadway Books. His most recent book, an all-ages graphic novel called *The Singing Rock & Other Brand-New Fairy Tales*, was published by First Second. He lives outside Atlanta with his family. You can find more of his work at <https://www.NathanielLachenmeyer.com>.

Mesha Maren is the author of the novels *Sugar Run*, *Perpetual West*, and *Shae* (May 2024, Algonquin Books). Her short stories and essays can be read in *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *The Guardian*, *Crazyhorse*, *Triquarterly*, *The Southern Review*, *Ecotone*, *Sou'wester*, *Hobart*, *Forty Stories: New Writing from Harper Perennial*, and elsewhere.

Zahra Merchant is a rising senior in Illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design with a focus in visual development. She currently serves as president of the Figure Enhancement Workshop (FEWS) and has a passion for figure drawing and plein air painting. In 2022, she interned at Disney Creative Group and in 2024 at Disney Television Animation in Glendale, California. She has also contributed illustrations to the *Drawn To Art: Tales of Inspiring Women Artists* comic series by the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. See more of her work at zahramerchant.myportfolio.com.

Brandon Nadeau (he/him) is a writer, public servant, and Canadian Army veteran. He lives with his family in Edmonton, Alberta.

Kevin Ramirez is a fiction writer based out of San Marcos, Texas. He graduated from Columbus State University in Georgia with a BA in Professional Writing. After leaving a career as a technical writer, he decided to turn all of his attention to his writing. He takes inspiration from Raymond Carver and Joe Hill. His work can be found in *After Dinner Conversation* magazine, and he placed 10th in *Writing Digest's* 92nd Annual Writing Competition. Outside of writing, he loves creating art with his wife, Denielle, rough housing with his dogs, and playing video games.

David Romanda's work has appeared in places such as *Columbia Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. His book *Why Does She Always Talk About Her Husband?* was published by Blue Cedar Press in 2022. Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. You can find more of his work at <http://www.romandapoetry.com>.

Nico Roper is an illustrator and designer currently attending Ringling College of Art and Design. They enjoy producing colorful and textured illustrations that can be used in a wide variety of contexts. When they're not drawing, they can be found playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, baking, or arguing about *Star Trek*. They combine educational content and whimsy to create pieces that speak to children and adults alike. You can find more of their work at <https://roperillustrations.wixsite.com/portfolio>.

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after a rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, he's published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, photography, hybrid pieces, interviews, and plays on five continents within eight years. Ross's photo publications include *3Elements*, *Alchemy Spoon*, *Barnstorm*, *Burningword*, *Camas*, *Feral*, *Phoebe*, and *Stonecoast*. His photo-essay publications include *DASH*, *Kestrel*, *Litro*, *NWW*, *Paperbark*, *Pilgrimage Magazine*, *Shift*, and *Typehouse*. He was recently nominated for Best of the Net in Nonfiction and Art. He also wrote and acted in a one-act play and appeared in a documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim's family splits time between the city and the mountains.

January Santoso (she/her) is a poet from Fresno, California. Currently based in the DC metro area, she is a first-year MFA student at the University of Maryland. She has 10 tattoos and a cat named Tree Trunks, and she was not born in January. She is also a DJ and freelance graphic designer. You can find her everywhere @januarysantoso.

Natalie Salters is a Sarasota-based digital artist, painter and sculptor. She graduated from Ringling College of Art and Design in the spring of 2024 with a major in Visual Studies. Her work delves into fantastical, supernatural, and comedic elements.

Scott Schaible grew up in Livingston, New Jersey, one of the towns memorialized in the iconic HBO series *The Sopranos*. He graduated without distinction from Newark Academy and Lafayette College. Scott served as a special assistant to a US senator and worked on political campaigns before moving to Denver, Colorado, in the 1990s. He opened a communications agency, met his future ex-wife, and raised three children as if they were still in Jersey, teaching them that lines were meant to be cut, rules were more like suggestions, and nobody messes with you without some payback.

Dalton Sikes is a West Coast writer, poet, essayist, and former managing editor of *Silk Road Review*. His work has appeared in *Audeamus*, *Inscape*, *Chaotic Merge*, and *The Heartland Review*, among others. Dalton is an Honorable Mention for the 2024 Joy Bale Boone Poetry Prize. His work ranges from dark to delightful through poetry and prose.

Joshua Michael Stewart is the author of *Break Every String*, *The Bastard Children of Dharma Bums*, and *Love Something*. His work has appeared in the *Massachusetts Review*, *Salamander*, *Plainsongs*, *Brilliant Corners*, *South Dakota Review*, *Permafrost*, and many others. He lives in Ware, Massachusetts. You can find more of his work at <https://www.joshuamichaelstewart.com>.

Scott Taylor hails from Raleigh, North Carolina. He is a writer and a musician, and an avid world traveler. His short stories and poetry have appeared in numerous print and online publications, including *Ghost City Review*, *Snakeskin*, *Oddball*, *Angel Rust*, and *Swifts and Slows*. His debut novel, *Chasing Your Tail*, has recently been released by Silver Bow Publishing, and his novellas *Freak* and *Ernie and the Golden Egg* are slated for inclusion in an upcoming anthology with Running Wild Press. He graduated from Cornell University and in a past life was a computer programmer.

Arlene Tribbia is a writer and artist. Her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her new hybrid flash story along with a podcast interview is featured on *Onyx Story Discovery* at <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/story-discovery-podcast-short-stories-poetry-flash/id1548499105>. You can find more of her work at <http://arlenetribbia.com/wp/bio/>.

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many literary journals since 2009. His first poetry collection from Cajun Mutt Press is now available at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C6W2YZDP>. You can find more of his work at <https://fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry/>.

Maja Urukalo is a disabled writer and poet from Italy. You may find her other works in *ARTEMIS Journal* and *Hey! Young Writer*. She writes about disability topics on her blog, *A Crip Punk*.

Emma Wells is a mother and an English teacher. She has poetry published with various literary journals and magazines. She enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories. Emma won the *Wingless Dreamer Bird Poetry Contest* in 2022, and her short story "Virginia Creeper" was selected as a winning title in the *WriteFluence Singles Contest* in 2021. Recently, her short story "The Voice of a Wildling" was nominated for *Dipity Literary Magazine's* 2024 Best of the Net for Fiction.

Robert Wexelblatt is a professor of humanities at Boston University's College of General Studies. He has published 12 collections of short stories; two books of essays; two short novels; three books of poems; stories, essays, and poems in a variety of journals; and a novel awarded the Indie Book Awards first prize for fiction.

Finn Wilson is an artist from Portland, Oregon. He is currently studying illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design and has been learning to use drawing and painting to combine his artistic passion with his love of nature. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest gave him a thoughtfulness and imagination about the natural world that has influenced his artwork greatly. Finn uses imaginative humor to draw the viewer into the worlds he creates, illuminating and bringing life to ordinary subjects.





The Rage of Achilles
Ati Gor

Cover art: Nico Roper

Shift: A Journal of Literary Oddities

is published by

Ringling College Press

Ringling College of Art and Design

2700 N Tamiami Trail

Sarasota, FL 34234-5895

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