



SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES

ISSUE 2



SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES

Dear Readers,

Thank you for supporting us. We put together this collection of stories to communicate with readers like you and maybe even change the world.

We chose stories that make us feel. Stories that invoke joy and sorrow and maybe a little bit of discomfort. Stories that make us think about or question the world in which we live. Emerging and experienced writers alike spill their truths in the pages of the student-run literary magazine, *Shift*.

The pieces here explore themes of life and loss, along with enduring obstacles like sexual assault, war, and marginalization. The authors handle these subjects with care, but if you are sensitive to such topics, we encourage you to read what you are comfortable with.

Shift is a home for prose, poetry, and literary oddities that tell powerful narratives. With our first issue, we set out to provide a platform for stories from around the world and connect with readers. We carry that goal with us into our second issue and aspire for a wider breadth of voices as we continue to grow.

For now, we thank those who submitted their work to *Shift*.

We share these impactful stories and hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

Sincerely,
The *Shift* Team

“La Invasión por Playa Girón, or Bay of Pigs Invasion” by Magda Montiel Davis will be appearing in a forthcoming memoir (scheduled for fall 2020) and is used with permission of the University of Iowa Press.

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Why Did the Girls I Know Want to Be Mermaids?

Anna Kaye-Rogers

It was because of how good our hair looked underwater,
How freeing it would be to never know your own weight.
The ocean stretched for miles, but I would have settled for a lake.
Was it the ability to outswim expectations,
To live free without clothing or men?
They gave us a hard time for wanting to be mermaids,
But later we learned what mermaids meant.
When they pulled men off ships to fill their lungs, it wasn't love;
It was cold water rushing into places meant to feel safe.
I have never felt safe—not in my lungs, not on this land.
Their long claws left marks in the flesh as they sank beneath the waves.
Their fangs sank into a power and claimed it for their own.
We were not told mermaids meant to kill,
But maybe innately inside we knew.
And the boys who told us we were dumb for wanting to be,
Somehow they must have known too.

“Are You Okay?”

Choya Randolph

My thumbs circle each other
My room is cold
But my tears are warm
In the eye of the storm is a wand shattering
The black girl magic breaking
Today is another backspace of my existence
Depression is a pencil rubbing me the wrong way
With an eraser too stubborn to clear my scars
If you open the door you'll see a silence
A missed call from a mother
An imagination spiraling off of the page
When I take hours to respond
When I decline going out
It's because I'm busy breaking
I'm daydreaming a lost reality
I'm spending money I don't have
I'm eating foods I shouldn't
I'm hoping my heartbreakers will halt healing
I'm listening to God laugh at me
And the future I don't work for
I'm waiting for it to get worse
I'm waiting for the final leaf of me to fall
Like the warning of winter
I'm pondering if giving up could be the suicide He'll allow
I wanna die on a Sunday afternoon
I wanna die in the middle of spring
I wanna die in a cold room
With upstairs neighbors loud enough
For my soul to complain
If you open the door you'll see a rainbow umbrella
And a candle burning for no reason
Set the umbrella on fire
Watch the rainbow turn black

La Camaraderie du Cirque

dave ring

Gather 'round, and let me tell you the story of Veronica's *Oiseau de Feu*.

They were dark times, for me. Every bloody day, Chuckles, Magda, and Felix tried to trip me when I walked by, their ugly faces snickering underneath greasepaint. My everything, Michel, ignored them, even when they pulled that shit right in front of his face. It infuriated me. He said it was to preserve "*la camaraderie du cirque*." I loved Michel. But when Michel stood by doing nothing while those painted-mouth idiots tormented me, my love was lost in a rage that could turn a forest into cinders.

On those days, I screamed into my pillow: "Fuck the *camaraderie du cirque*!" Though my pillow did just as little as Michel to salve my wounds.

Before my banishment from the tent, I used to lurk behind the cheap velvet curtains and watch Michel and Lars from backstage after all the tickets had been sold and the punters put in their seats. Dear Michel and sweet, foolish Lars. Our main act. Under the lights, they gleamed. They wore tiny silver posing pouches and white cords crisscrossed around their muscled limbs, like they'd been the pawns of bondage-minded sailors. As if you could pull at a loose string and the two of them would fall apart into a sloppy pile of oiled pectorals, triceps, and thighs.

Lars was the smaller of the pair. When he balanced atop Michel's head or his fist, it always seemed as if his eyes were transfixed by someone in the crowd. As if their shared gaze was the only thing holding him in place. Sometimes, later, you heard different punters saying that they were sure it was them that Lars was staring at. Not the girl next to them, or the swarthy guy on the other side. Them.

Before my fall from grace, Lars confided that he's not really looking at anything. He couldn't even see the crowd without his glasses. He was just staring at a fixed point in space, concentrating on his center of gravity.

Like the crowd, I'd stared at Lars. Wishing that just that once, Michel would twitch, and Lars would fall. But it never happened, no matter how much I wanted it.

Like them all, Michel stared at Lars. At his center of gravity.

It was summer when Magda discovered my spying. We'd made it all the way up to the City of Trees. Michel and I had spent the day laughing and chasing each other through the dappled light, staring in awe at the airships that cluttered the sky beyond the cathedral ceiling made by branches of elm and honey locust. I didn't even notice her beside me until she put out her cigarette and the final, thin plume of smoke that rose up made me sneeze. I'd wiped away the tears on my cheeks even though she'd already seen them.

"They're the real deal, Paolo." I barely heard her over the orchestra. She dropped her cigarette butt into my beer.

My eyebrow cocked up, forming a question braver than anything I could have said. Besides, she knew I rarely spoke aloud. I hated my voice.

"You have your girlish charms." This wasn't a slur, not from Magda. Magda's appetite for dark maidens was as legendary as it was voracious. With a bit of kohl and a careful fall of satin, I could play the part. Still, I knew the compliment was a feint.

"Lars cheated on him." It felt like the hundredth time I'd defended myself. My words came out shrill and high as they always did. I tried not to care.

"And you had no part in it, did you?"

I didn't answer. Yes, Lars had cheated on Michel with *me*, but it wasn't my fault. Not really.

She shrugged, disappointed I didn't rise to the bait. "It doesn't matter *how* you wormed your way into Michel's heart. It doesn't make you any less pathetic. You're not worth a whistle in a rainstorm." She spat on the ground, carmine lips sneering beneath that carefully waxed handlebar moustache. "Now get out of this tent before I have your sister drag you out."

My sister, Veronica, and I were the only two to have been born to the cirque. Different mothers, same father. The late Monsieur Oiseleur. Which would have *almost* made the circus as much mine as hers, if I'd ever been good at something besides selling tickets or polishing mechanical horses. My sister was older than I by a handful of years and collected names the way she collects knives. I'd once thought her my brother, until she told us all otherwise. She cycled through names. A boy's name we'd agreed to never again utter, then Veronica. After that, of course, *Dame de la Violence*, knife-thrower extraordinaire.

I used to be part of *Dame de la Violence*'s act. We spent hours together, I learning the discipline it took not to jerk away when the knife pierced the air so close to my skin and she perfecting her throw. I trusted her more than anyone. But when Oiseleur died last year, she turned away from me. And I had to sell tickets every night instead of standing gamely in front of a plywood target.

Yes, Michel had caught Lars and me in the ring after hours, wearing nothing but the sawdust strewn on the floor. All this after Lars bunked with the clowns while I kept his Michel warm at night. People said that I'd bewitched him, but if I had, it was only with yearning, not crude hexes. After each show, I awoke to Michel peeling away my clothes like an onion's skin. His need, night after night, left me gasping. My fingers found handholds on the sweat-slick expanse of his back, took him into me the way parched earth is grateful for rain.

That feeling was real. It had to be.

I had little of my own. Just clothes. A few knickknacks. And Michel.

That was it.

Certainly not the circus.

Thoughts of Michel were almost enough to make me forget Magda's laugh and the tempo of her lacquered fingers, tapping against her aluminum juggling clubs as I fled the tent. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap.

If there were a way to never leave his bed, I would've seized it. But someone of Michel's bulk could not survive on sex alone. There were also innumerable eggs involved. One morning, weeks later after we'd wound our way back south to Georgia, we dressed and walked into breakfast. The clowns had been telling stories about me again; the dregs of their poison still hung in the air.

Veronica caught Michel's eye and gestured sharply with the side of her palm against her throat. My face hurt from the effort of holding it motionless. Why couldn't she just let me be? I had to leave before she could say anything to him, before Michel could fail me, yet again. How could someone so strong be so weak?

I ran until I couldn't breathe, eyes sore and tearing. The gray sky boded ill that day. Sweat and humidity made every inch of me clammy. I sunk to the ground to catch my breath. My eyes squeezed shut. Just *once* I'd like to hear Michel's voice raised in my defense. Just once I'd like Veronica to take my side. I clutched my knees to my chest.

A laugh jarred me. There was Magda's cruel smirk. "Always crying," she jeered.

I felt reckless and angry, a fire hissing in my belly, crackling and red. It came up my esophagus, roiling and desperate, until I was almost blinded by it. Magda flinched at my scowl. I felt possessed of sudden preternatural instinct: My hand darted forward, the way a finch might pluck a worm from the ground, and I snatched her voice right from her parted lips. It wriggled in my hand, inscrutably, until I ate it.

I felt her voice careening inside me, captive and afraid. It hurt her, I think. She gasped without noise and clutched at her throat with both hands. What had I done? Why had it felt so easy? The fire in me was relentless. Her voice soon was subdued and took root.

A peal of thunder made us both jump and look up at the flashing sky. I felt her stolen speech become eager on my tongue.

"Still not worth a whistle, am I?"

I taunted Magda with her own voice, feeling cunning and strange all at once. Laughter bubbled up in my chest.

She jerked away and crossed herself, lips moving in a soundless prayer. This was the one who'd threatened me? I loomed over her, and Magda flailed backwards, skittish as a grounded fish. She knocked over an empty pail with her floundering.

Felix's shirtless torso appeared in the slitted door of his tent, his eyes still bleary with sleep, looking for the source of all the commotion.

"What's her problem?" He scratched at the curly blonde thatch of hair on his chest.

My eyes narrowed to slits. I had never felt so powerful.

I thought about every slight, every shove. It only took one fluid motion to turn that clown into a mime.

I talked to myself on the way back to Michel's tent, Magda's clipped voice alternating with Felix's irritating twang. I talked more in those few minutes than I had in days. A strange guest waited outside Michel's tent. It was Lars, and he was crying.

I cleared my throat and tried not to panic; I wasn't sure how to bring my own voice back.

I coughed and tested it out, real quiet: "Lars?"

I sounded like me. It was fine.

Lars pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and crossed his arms. "You win, okay?"

"What?"

"You win." There was heartbreak in his dense, Scandinavian-infused syllables. "I'm going."

I didn't understand. "Michel is at breakfast. If you need to talk to him."

"I'm saying it's not worth it anymore. I'm leaving the circus."

I wasn't sure what to do. I stepped towards him, my hand drifting upward towards his shoulder, but he flinched and pulled away.

"It would have happened even without you." It didn't sound as if he believed himself.

"But, but—where will you go?" I noticed that there was a duffel bag at his feet. "Back to Sweden?"

Lars shook his head slowly at my naivete. "Goddamn it, Paolo. I grew up in goddamn Bullock County, Alabama. My real name is Josh." His accent sloughed off as he talked, a snake losing its skin. "My folks have a farm two towns over."

I drew away from him. Did Michel know? Did everyone know but me?

Lars rolled his eyes. "As if you deserved any kind of truth from me."

I was angry again, any trace of guilt gone. "You seduced me." I jabbed my finger into his chest. He had been my first. I hadn't told anyone. Just let them think the worst of me.

His lip curled. "I hope it's all worth it. You were a mistake. You still are."

I slapped him.

He punched me in the jaw.

I went down like a stone.

He swore, remorseful, and reached down to gather me up in his strong arms.

I jumped up like a live wire, clawing at his cheek. My nails drew bloody lines across his stubbled jaw. The anger rose, and I took it. His voice. It was like prying a pearl out from a shell.

He fell and looked up at me, eyebrows jammed together in confusion.

"It's worth it." My snarl came out in the low Alabama drawl Lars had been hiding from me. "All of it."

He scrambled to his feet and grabbed his bag. A slow smile filled my face as he walked away.

In Michel's tent, I sang to myself in Lars's beautiful, low baritone. It didn't even remind me of him, without the Viking pretense. I wanted to put it on like a new pair of shoes. Where my own voice was thin and effete, Lars's had depth and bass. Things had to change, I decided. Michel would be all mine.

My chest felt tight when my mind drifted toward the unthinkable things I'd just done. I stopped myself and reveled in my good fortune. I couldn't wait to show off for Michel. There was no show scheduled that night. Michel should be back in his tent as soon as he finished up breakfast.

I slid out of my dirty clothes and dressed myself in a lilac robe he liked, daubing musky pine behind my ears and at my wrists. And I waited. Hours passed, and still he hadn't come. I started gnawing at my fears, twisting them into panic. What if Lars had gone to him before he left? What would he think? What if I spoke to him in Lars's voice? Would I lose him?

I wouldn't tell him, I decided. And at night, after he'd fallen asleep in my arms, I would sing lullabies in his ear with Lars's voice.

Yes, I was shortsighted. My thoughts were only of Michel. But when the tent flap tore open, it wasn't Michel's figure silhouetted against the dying sun, but Veronica's.

"Take him to my wagon." She turned to Felix and Magda behind her. "No need to be gentle."

They were only too willing to obey. There was pain and then whiteness and then nothing. The moon's countenance, full and swollen, slid across the sky without my witness.

When I regained consciousness, light pressed red against my eyelids. Rain pattered against a wooden roof; I was in Veronica's wagon. My hands were tied together and knotted to the bedpost. She blew dust from a record and then spent a squeaking eternity winding her gramophone. The needle kissed vinyl, and then a woman's voice rose up, unaccompanied.

I opened my eyes after the first verse. Veronica knelt beside the gramophone as if in prayer. She'd lit a half dozen thick church candles. Her silver and cyan ringmaster coat hung on a mannequin beside her like a silent guardian.

"Who is this singer?" I asked, unintentionally using Lars's voice instead of my own.

Veronica nodded, still facing the gramophone, as if in agreement with herself.

My face flushed hot.

"Who is it?" I asked again, careful to sound like myself. The singer was familiar, but I wasn't sure why. My hands chafed above my head.

"You know our father made this wagon with his own hands. You were born in this wagon. In the middle of a show. Her stage name was the Bird of Paradise."

"Who the hell's that?" I asked. But half-buried memories started to surface. Old flyers I'd seen in my father's trunk. A faded poster stuck to one of the tent poles.

"Does she sound familiar?" Veronica didn't bother hiding her hard edges.

I listened more carefully. The song was ending. I pulled at my hands.

"Sing along with her." Veronica began to clean her fingernails with a knife.

I didn't know the verse, only the refrain, but I obeyed. My voice was untried. The woman on the record was trained and confident. But otherwise, we sounded the same in timbre and tone. An eerie resonance crept into me, a building strangeness.

"We were in Virginia, I think." The candlelight made a silhouette of Veronica's face that was just like the poster we hung by her tent. "Down by the Chesapeake. Your mom was big as a house. You came real sudden. She went from singing, to screaming, to nothing. Ever again."

"I don't understand." Magda's voice came out of me, unbidden.

"Magda's wasn't the first voice you stole from someone."

"What do you mean?" My own voice. Just like the singer's voice.

"Paolo," she said, trying to muster pity but only managing frustration. "The Bird of Paradise was your mother."

She left me alone with the soft static of the finished record. I barely remembered my mother. I didn't even really know what she'd looked like. When Veronica returned, she held something in her hands. I peered past her, still hoping, against hope, that Michel would come for me.

She raised an immaculately plucked eyebrow. "Michel left."

I wanted to die. Could a florid heart become numb?

"As soon as he heard that Lars was gone, he went after him," she said.

“Pity Lars won’t be able to tell him about socking me.” I closed my eyes. I wanted her to laugh, but we were past that. “Now I truly have nothing.”

Veronica’s lip curled. “No. I’m going to give you a choice, Paolo. You cost me my best act. You can leave here and make your own way. Or you can stay on my terms. Earn your keep and maybe earn this too.” Veronica held up a box of buttery wood, carved with a pattern of interlocking suns and feathers. A puzzle box. “Before he died, Papa gave me this. It was your mother’s.”

“What do I want of hers?” I couldn’t help myself.

“He thought it had your voice in it. Your real voice.”

I swallowed, head shaking.

“What do you choose, Paolo?” Veronica was insistent.

It was really no decision at all. What if it were true?

I got a wagon of my own, the only one besides Veronica’s. We hired some fresh-faced youth from Minnesota to take my old job in the ticket booth. And if drunk punters ever made themselves unwelcome, or realized that the ring toss game was rigged, well, I’d earned myself a new voice.

Veronica was nothing if not practical. Money was money. She replaced the sign of Michel and Lars with silver filigree, blowtorch-blue feathers, and a beautiful face that might have looked like mine. My costumes were lavish, my tutors expensive. I sang from a gilt cage in multiple voices and registers. The name they called me was trite, but it sold tickets in those dark times.

They wanted to call me the New Bird of Paradise. But Veronica and I knew better.

I couldn’t have predicted the exultant joy of a crowd falling silent in hushed awe, awaiting me. It became my everything. In the evenings, Veronica came to my wagon to share a meal. Afterward, we played chess by candlelight. The clatter of the clay pieces wasn’t the vibration of wood against my back as her blades thudded into the wall, but it was something.

When she placed the puzzle box beside the candle between us, I drew my fingers along its grain. What could my true voice do that purloined cadences couldn’t? I could see where to push and pull at the box’s secrets, but instead I held it over the flame. Veronica met my eyes and nodded, saying nothing as the wood blackened and smoked.

It wouldn’t be long until it became ash.

La Invasión por Playa Girón, or Bay of Pigs Invasion

Magda Montiel Davis

Six weeks after my eighth birthday, I woke to the sounds of gunfire. Except I thought it was the new air conditioner that Obdulio, my father's gofer at the Havana Sugar Kings Stadium, had struggled to install in my bedroom window.

"*¡Que invento, estos americanos!*" he'd said, his face squeezing like a dead coconut. I had laughed, wondering if the big cold box would fall on my head. *Pero bueno*, at least my sister and I wouldn't have to sleep anymore under those mosquito nets that we pretended were circus tents at *el Circo de los Hermanos Ringlings*.

The noise intensified, a lion's roar. I rose. The noise rose, with an urgency and defiance I could nearly feel through the cold terrazzo floor. I cranked open my bedroom window, its row of white wooden slabs. *Nada*—only darkness outside.

And then, *TRRRRR-TRRRRR*. Machine-gun sounds far, but near.

It was April 17, 1961. The Bay of Pigs invasion. Or, as it is called in my island nation of Cuba, *la invasión por Playa Girón*.

Cuban exiles trained in Central America by the CIA but untrained nonetheless had set sail from Nicaragua four days prior. Waving at the pier was General Somoza, who asked members of the exile Brigada Asalto 2506—so named after the ID number of a trainee who at a CIA camp had tripped and fallen from a mountain—to bring him back some hairs from Fidel's beard.

Under a moonless sky, some 1,500 *brigadistas*, comprised mostly of ex-officers of Batista's secret police and sons of well-to-do families, disembarked at a mosquito-laden swamp, the site that President Kennedy had settled upon after much debate with the CIA. Virtually unpopulated, it would be thinly defended, if at all. In fact, the Cuban people would be so gratified to see their exiled brothers risking their lives for them that they would take up arms against the revolution in a mass insurrection. This, despite warnings to the president from

both British intelligence and the U.S. Embassy in Havana that the entire island was filled with overwhelming support for the revolution.

The *brigadistas* waited for the Cuban people to take up arms, but that never happened. People spotted the first landing and yelled Paul Revere-like, *The Yankees are coming!* Battalions of *milicianos* dispersed to the beach, not waiting for orders. People raced to guard the town's fuel and water tanks, electric-power and radio-relay stations. And Cuban people took up arms against the *brigadistas*.

Unbeknownst to us, 10 blocks from our home was Fidel. At a modern mid-century house typical of our neighborhood, he spent nights awake at his emergency-command post known as *Punto Uno*. That an attack was imminent was no secret, in part due to Cuba's intelligence network but also to the *lenguas sueltas* of exile recruits who got the exile community abuzz, prompting *The Nation* and *The New York Times* to report on the upcoming invasion. Besides, Kennedy's too oft assurances that U.S. forces would not intervene in Cuba led Fidel to the conclusion that Kennedy would not make such a point of excluding U.S. participation unless the island was on the brink of attack.

At 3:15 a.m., up the hill from our house, Fidel's telephone rang.

The Bay of Pigs was a failure, says the CIA, because Kennedy cancelled air support at the last minute. Years later, Cuban exiles are still furious with Kennedy and vote in overwhelming numbers a straight Republican ticket. But U.S. aircrafts did attack. Cuban pilots, on the other hand, who on Fidel's orders had stayed up all night, were able to take complete control of the air. That, and the *lenguas sueltas* of exile recruits, may have won the Bay of Pigs for Cuba.

Ah yes, said Fidel, then added his assessment of *la invasión por Playa Girón*: The *imperialistas* focused only on logistics and firepower. The revolution, on the other hand, had from the very beginning prioritized the *bienestar* of the people.

One of the revolution's first projects was—well, to drain the swamp. Residents of the swampy peninsula, with no transportation in or out other than a small train that often derailed, were some of the poorest on the island. After the revolution, roads were built, co-ops were established, and what would become the now-famous Zapata Swamp was stocked with American flamingos and Cuban crocodiles.

Over a half century later, when a reality-TV star made *Make America Great Again* the pinnacle of his campaign, it got me wondering:

Don't the American people know he took the line from Ronald Reagan? But when he made *Drain the Swamp* another such slogan, that's when I stopped dead in my tracks. Might this maybe-millionaire-maybe-not reality-TV star have taken his motto from none other than Fidel?

After nearly 72 hours on the front line, Fidel spent the day on the beach inspecting enemy positions and asking questions of the captured men. There were so many of them, one ex-Bay of Pigs prisoner told me, that a sizable number stood around Fidel with weapons still in hand. At first, the prisoner said, they feared immediate execution. Instead they were taken to Havana's naval hospital.

President Kennedy assured the international community that the United States was not involved. It was, he said time and again, Cubans fighting Cubans.

In Cuba, trials of the captured men were televised. Nearly all were sentenced to 30-year imprisonment. After 20 months of negotiations, Cuba released the men in exchange for payment from the United States of \$53 million—not in cash but in food and medicine for the Cuban people. Admirable, you could say—certainly. But Fidel had a way of *making a point*. Thumbing up his nose at the Americans. Sticking it to them, as my kids would say.

And that, in my estimation, is the reason that although the United States has made up with North Vietnam, China, of late with North Korea, and despite President Obama's reinstatement of diplomatic relations, the United States won't let go of its obsession with Cuba.

The morning after the invasion, I played jacks on our front porch with my sister and *amiguitas* up the hill.

My *amiguita* said, "The *gusanos* and the Yankee imperialists came in the middle of the night and attacked us." Already I knew that *gusanos* meant more than the worms we caught in our yard. *Gusanos* now were counterrevolutionaries, traitors—coined by the new revolutionary government and readily adopted by the people.

Her sister said, "And Fidel fought them. From his *tanque de verde oliva*, he fought them, all night."

My *amiguita* said, "Fidel doesn't sleep."

Her sister said, "Fidel never sleeps."

In the living room, my father stood facing the black-and-white television. Not stretched back in his recliner, listening dreamily and

far away to Johnny Mathis, but standing stiff, like a soldier, the same way he stood in church clutching a rosary and mouthing endless *Ave Marías*. The bluish gray light of the television cast a weird glow on his face, on our entire living room.

On the television, men in white T-shirts were led into what looked like a courtroom, like the ones on *Perry Mason*. The men's wrists were bound by big silver bracelets and chains—handcuffs, as they said on *Perry Mason*. They walked in a straight line the same way our second-grade teacher said we had to walk, *obedientemente*. And their heads were bent as if they had just gotten into a lot of trouble. They looked up only as each name was called.

Another line of men sat behind a long wooden desk that was raised high, like the judge on *Perry Mason*. But here, it wasn't one judge but a row of them, and the men behind the high desks wore uniforms, like the ones Fidel and Ché wore.

The prisoners looked young, worried, tired.

"What did you think you were doing?" Fidel asked them.

I drew in a sharp breath.

My father turned around. "*¿Que tu haces aquí?*" And he shooed me away.

In a matter of days, I was dragged like a pull toy through the Havana airport, down the runway, up the metal stairs and onto that Pan Am plane with my sister and mother. Destination: *el exilio*.

My father stayed behind a few more months. He had a few more jobs to wrap up for the CIA.

Immigrants' Children

Daniel Dykiel

We cast aside soggy vegetables for clear, cold cream.
We cut our mouths on edges of plastic; we spit out
the thin, ink-worn pages
of your grandmother's cookbook,
which crumble with the taste
of age and sickness, like the mothballs
you are draped in
as you shuffle in the attic, keeping lighted
the dim stars of your history.

We dance
robed in folded rays of light, with
jewels blooming over our skin
in pus-filled beads of color;
the jewelry we wear for beauty
while we bear your native tongue like a choker.
We love
its certain *je ne sais quoi*.
We are to blame
for the crumbling clasp and cracks in the stone.

The city calls us to smoke and flames.
We watch with glowing eyes, seeing no darkness
as expensive cars crash, then burst
into fireworks.
There we lick our fingers, our tongues
rasping with iron and slick with oil.
We wave our neon dollars, yelling "God bless America."

A Thought

Randilee Sequeira Larson

Insert your Amazon-Sponsored Mind Chips in...

3...

2...

1...

You may now proceed to outrage.

Here comes a thought...

Begin your day with the voices of strangers.

The long, echoing opinions of the world are alarm clocks buried beneath our pillows, and like Gregor Samsa once awoke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect, we have awoken from uneasy dreams to find ourselves transformed into chimeras of flesh and wire, circuits and blood. We hold an eternal part of ourselves in the palm of our hands, a piece of soul put on display for the Judgment of the People.

I have learned all the sins of my family in less than 10 years. Once, these crimes were kept alone and in the dark, quieted behind a veil of shame that only booze and privacy could loosen, but now it seems everyone has found a tribe to scream with. Twitter has shattered the illusion of American Greatness. We weep in binary for the loss of a myth.

Eat lunch with the pious. Pretend you have no thoughts. Pretend you have their thoughts.

Culture is consumed in bite-sized pieces, little morsels of morality and movement spooned in on waves of frenzied half-thoughts and belligerent tribalism. The new economy is one of outrage and virtue: "Rage, little cogs. The harder you spin, the faster the machine can produce. The faster we produce, the harder you spin."

Greedy bastards.

We thought we were creating a new world of communication and empathy, but really, we just invented a new way to market.

Marketing is political now. Everything is political now. Everything has always been political, word just happened to get out. (Don't pick at the wires like that. You're just gonna hurt yourself.)

Go to sleep on the virtues of others. Things move too fast to think about these days. Don't even bother trying to grab the tail end of that thought. You have a better chance of catching a jackrabbit by hand, of bottling a screaming wind, of changing a person's mind.

Remove your Amazon-Sponsored Mind Chips in...

3...

2...

1...

There goes a thought.

What's Come Out About Adam

John Jay Speredakos

First Man, indeed! New allegations of spousal abuse have surfaced regarding Adam's wife, Eve, who claims he denies responsibility for his apparent part in the theft of forbidden produce.

Adam, through a spokesperson, countered that his wife had attempted to physically assault him by stealing a rib, although he admits to being unconscious at the time of the alleged incident.

The couple has been removed from their idyllic Garden State home and relocated to an unspecified region known only as the Land of Nod. Speculation persists that it is somewhere in Westchester.

Meanwhile, the battle continues over the couple's estranged sons, Cain and Abel. The younger of the two siblings has not been heard from in some time, and a third son, Seth, remains unavailable for comment.

Authorities are not sure what role, if any, he may have played in Abel's purported disappearance. CNN reports that the jawbone of an ass has apparently been located nearby, but DNA reports are inconclusive,

and the White House confirms the President is not missing any body parts. Recent accusations have also surfaced regarding Adam's alleged infidelity involving his first wife, Lilith, although this remains unconfirmed.

Additionally, there are unsubstantiated reports of Eve's deepening relationship with a talking snake, but this may prove only speculative. Watch this space. We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.

The Ziggy Letters: After Emily Dickinson

Julia Horwitz

Dear Reader,

Between 1858 and 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote three letters addressed to an unidentified “Master.” Each year, academics and WordPress bloggers spin out new theories: She was writing to a man, to a woman, to the Devil, to herself, to all of the above, and so on. It is important to note that contrary to popular image, Dickinson had bright red hair and was almost definitely fucking her brother’s wife. Her sex life is none of our business, but I imagine she was a sadist in practice. “After great pain, a formal feeling comes.” I mean, come on. The “Master Letters” are, however, all pleading on her knees and asking to be taken from herself. In these letters, she rests her chin on her hand, spreads her legs, and winks. This is low risk because in the room where she does this, she is completely alone. I relate to her in this way.

The letters, found in her room after her death, were drafted in pencil, again and again. Full sections are crossed out with tight, careful X’s. All italicized portions in my letters are taken from hers.

David Bowie’s fifth album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, was released in 1972. Bowie created Ziggy Stardust, his most well-loved and enduring persona, out of items in his bedroom: peroxide for the neon orange hair (very Emily), blue eyeshadow, and his then-wife’s chandelier earrings. He wore striped jumpsuits, knee-high boots, and an eyepatch. He wanted to create a “rock and roll messiah,” weaving in burlesque and miming techniques picked up from London’s underground scene in the ’60s. Ziggy rose up on stages and television screens across the world, using a fingernail to tear a hole in the fabric universe. He invited all freaks to walk through, serenaded them with misfit anthems. He left lipstick marks on their cheeks and cackled. In the song “Rock ’n’ Roll Suicide,” he revealed his own underdog story: makeup on his face, long black hair, animal grace. Then, in “Rock and Roll Suicide,” he assured his followers that they’re not alone, no matter what or who they’ve been.

No matter what or who you’ve been. Ziggy kissed boys on stage. Ziggy didn’t play by the rules of planet Earth. Ziggy oozed sex, camp, and sequins. The year I discovered the album, I couldn’t get

through the day without listening to it start to finish, singing along in the mirror.

It is important to note that at the height of his fame and power, Bowie the man coerced several underage girls into sex they didn't want to have. He was accused of rape several times but never indicted.

These letters are for Ziggy, which makes them for Bowie by association. They are for Emily, for her Master, for mine. Like hers, they are for the Devil, whatever that means. They are for myself. I am still figuring this out.

I.

Dear Master,

I am ill—but grieving more that you are ill. The night Bowie's body was dying, I had a stomachache so bad I could barely move. Hair pressed greasy against my forehead, it was the kind of nausea that takes hours to go away. Ziggy, you more than anyone know what my panic attacks look like. They creep up for hours. I worry I'm going crazy, realize I can't feel my legs, then know that I am, in fact, going crazy. I heave and heave and never puke—never have anything to show. It was January, and I was home from college in my childhood bedroom. I kept the door locked like a pissy 16-year-old. I used a "tone" with my mom. I had been wearing the same pajama pants for three days. It was all very appropriate.

At some point, I decided the only thing that would help was McDonald's ice cream. Without changing out of the pajama pants, I got in the car, plugged in my phone, and pressed shuffle. And like clockwork, Ziggy, you put yourself on. The song was "Changes," which, in retrospect, was very on the nose: Bowie's body was starting to slip away. As I drove, you sang to me to turn and face the strange. Listening to your voice, Ziggy, I remembered the feeling you planted in me: I was dying, but I would not always be. *How strong when weak to recollect, and easy quite, to love.*

When I got home, I opened my laptop and read the news: "David Bowie: Dead from Cancer at Sixty-Nine."

Not arsenic turning his spittle black. Not autoerotic asphyxiation or space junk to the face. Not an overdose of orange lipstick mashed with a fork and eaten out of a teacup. I wanted to laugh because really, it couldn't be true. And if it was, that's beside the point of what we have going on here, Master. Just promise me this: *Will you tell me, please to tell me, soon as you are well—*

II.

Dear Master,

Oh—did I offend it—Daisy—Daisy—offend it—who bends her smaller life to his meeker every day. I've been playing with the name: Daisy Bowie. It's not perfect, but I'm working on it. It has the right syllables, and I can keep Bowie's initials, everything he monogrammed, etc. I want everything that was his to be mine.

Master, I want to make this very clear: I'm bending to you because I want to bend to you. You know why this is so important. When I talk about Frank, I almost always say "ex" instead of "abuser." It's not because I want to protect him; I just can't find a word that captures who he was. Emily, you know how hard it is to confine the Devil to a single name.

Ziggy, I started listening to you the year I was with Frank because driving to his house took three hours round-trip. He knew driving gave me panic attacks, then told me to drive to him anyway—it was never posed as a question. I listened to *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* on repeat. It was a routine: go to the gas station, buy large Slurpee (half cherry, half cola), fix makeup in rearview mirror (thick eyeliner, coral lipstick), start with "Moonage Daydream" even though it's not the first song on the album (space face close to mine), and then drive.

Ziggy, I don't know how it worked, but it did—your voice cracking its whip while I clutched the steering wheel, praying I would get in an accident before I got to his house. Now, when I sit in the PTSD support group on Thursday afternoons, this is the detail I leave out: I drove myself there. I have learned that certain details make a story seem up for interpretation.

Bowie, the first time it happened with Frank, I was 16 and didn't know how to stop it. There is nothing to say about this that hasn't been said before. Ziggy (and Reader), you know the stock story; you're waiting for me to cut to the chase. You feel guilty admitting this. If you've been there, skip the next paragraph. If you haven't, don't you dare. I'm looking at you, Bowie.

His hands were cold, and he wore a gray beanie that kept sliding off. At first, he adjusted it between moving me where he wanted me, then got annoyed and threw it on the ground. It joined the pile of dirty clothes that always sat in his bedroom until someone else picked them up. He smelled like weed, onions, and the tea tree oil that he used for dandruff. The smell filled my mouth, so, without meaning to,

I started holding my breath. *I've got a cough big as a thimble.* I later learned this cut-off sensation from my body made it feel less. This was my body's way of saving itself; I haven't breathed normally since. I'm pretty sure his mom was home. He looked straight past my eyes as they repeated, slow and exact, "Don't do this; don't you fucking do this." He ignored them. I drove to his house a few times a week, and, without fail, it happened each time. I did this for over a year. Ziggy, you were my only witness.

Emily, I think I get it, why the Master was too sacred to let anyone else in. When I drove home from Frank's at night, Sunset Boulevard whirring by, the sky was huge and starless from all the smog. It wasn't until Ziggy sang that that changed. He reminded me that there's a starman waiting in the sky. I respond now, *Master—open your life wide, and take me in forever.* It'll be just the two of us.

I am writing to you now because you asked me to trust in you. I did. You told me I would survive. I did. You told me I was beautiful, that there was a whole planet of girls with orange mullets and blue jackets waiting for me on the other side. You were right, always right. So, what comes next?

For starters, I don't know if I want to be you or be with you. Sometimes, I like to paint your face onto mine. *Daisy will not mind—she will awake in your likeness.* Of course, you know I don't like men, but you're not a man, exactly. Regardless, I promise you this: *I will be your best little girl—nobody else will see me, but you—but that is enough—I shall not want any more—and all that Heaven will (only) disappoint me—(because) will be it's not so dear.*

III.

Dear Master,

If you saw a bullet hit a bird—and he told you he wasn't shot—you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word. Bowie, when you were a kid, you and your friend liked the same girl. After school one day, you lied and told him you'd stolen her heart, so he punched you in the face. The blow was so hard a blue eye turned black—pupil permanently dilated. You said you were fine. The doctors said you'd be blind, but you said you were fine, and then you were. The records all show that you were a very convincing man.

There's an enamel pin that's been in my Etsy cart for weeks. It's a lacquered red and says, "Kill All Rapists" in a curly, retro font—like

something out of the Ziggy Stardust era. It's about the price of a sandwich, but I haven't convinced myself to buy it. Maybe I'm still warming up to the commitment it implies.

Ziggy, you know I murder Frank in my sleep sometimes. There are a few variations of the dream: hands around his throat, pen-knife in his gut. One time I pushed him out the window of a building so tall it hurt us both to breathe. I watched his arms and legs flail until he splattered on the sidewalk. I don't remember what I did next.

Bowie, when you died, people started writing about the girls. The damning articles were tucked between eulogies on my Facebook homepage. I only had to read the headlines.

I was humiliated. Bowie, I had loved you, publicly, for years. I bought a sweatshirt with your face screen-printed on the front. I hung pictures of you on my bedroom wall with soft, yellow putty. Nobody mentioned the girls, but there is so much testimony. When I read about this, Bowie, I wanted to murder you. You were already dead, but I wanted it to be because of me.

Do you understand what it means? To know that the whole time, I was escaping bloody hands by praying to different bloody hands. Bowie, I love you, but I want to murder you in my sleep. I hate that I have to, but as the Master knows, I'm not the one who makes the rules.

Ziggy, I'll need your face.

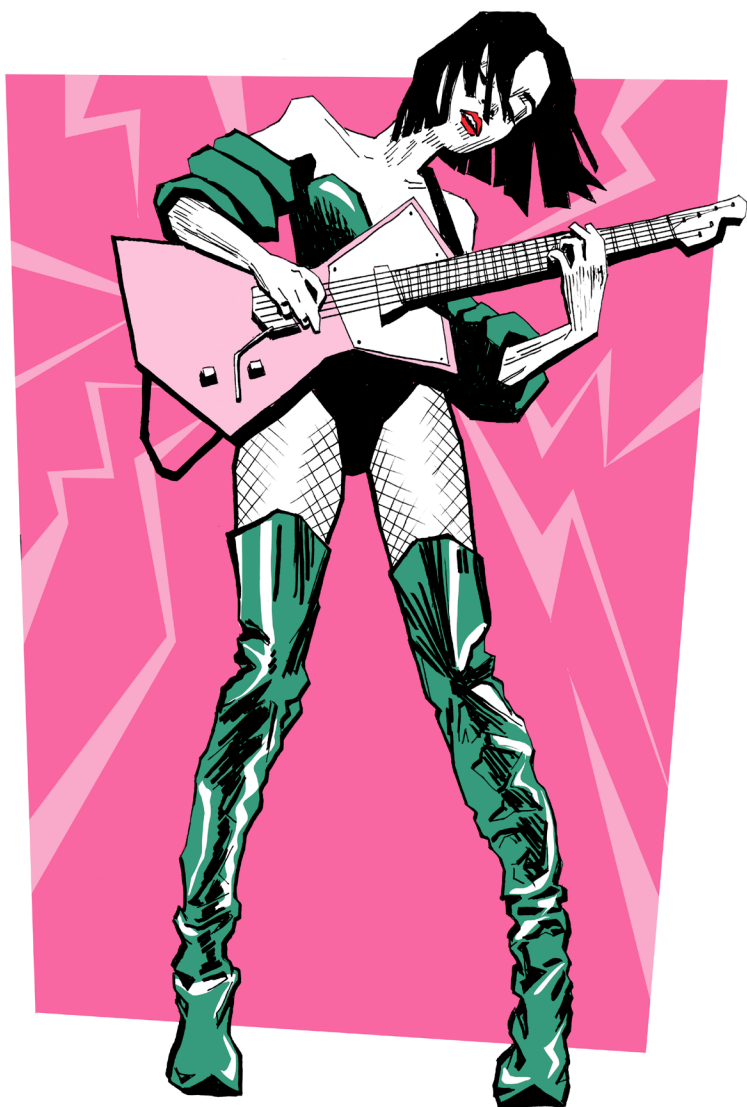
Emily, I'll need your white dress. I'll wash it, iron it, and button it up carefully. I'll watch as it is splattered with blood. I love that we can share clothes like this.

Ziggy, I'll paint your blue eyeshadow up to my eyebrows. It's a good thing looks can kill.

Bowie, *you know what a leech is, don't you?* Good, then you know why this has to happen. There's a tattoo I want to get, Ziggy: your lightning bolt surrounded by three black stars. I'm going to the Providence tattoo shop this weekend and would love if you joined me. *Could you come to New England...would you like to come—Master?* If people ask me what it means, I'll say it's a birthmark. I think I've earned that.

Master, I hope you're okay with all this, because I don't have the patience to wait for a response. I can feel the blood blooming in my mouth. I can feel the final closing of a cold, blue eye. *No rose, yet felt myself a'bloom.*

XOXO,
Julia



Exotic Creatures We Used to Be

Anna Kaye-Rogers

The mermaid paints her nails metallic scales of golden green,
Not a single drop spilled on the counter of the store where she spends her afternoons.
She dreams of returning to the sea where she can be free
Instead of working retail.

The banshee sips honey tea
In between answering at her call-center desk.
She is not allowed to take breaks; the seconds between calls are timed.
When she dreams of death, it is her own.

The vampire clutches a tall iced coffee.
It will still not be enough to get her through the shift.
She glares at the people without bags under the eyes,
Wishes she could have just a little of their energy.

The witch cracks her knuckles and brushes her bangs away from her face
The better to see the cauldron she keeps.
With each click of the keys she weaves her spells,
Each new recipe a new piece of magic.

The ghost sits alone in the bathroom stall.
All the world seems closing in.
She runs her fingers through stringy hair.
No one will notice she has disappeared for a moment to breathe.

The faerie paints thick eyeliner wings over glittered eyelids,
The energy of the night enough to keep her warm.
Her drinks are free all night as she twirls under strobe lights.
When she wakes in the morning, she calls an Uber and does not say goodbye.

It is the shapeshifter who knows best,
Slinging drinks in a rundown bar.
She is who she needs to be when she needs to be it,
And only in the safety of a small apartment, when she snaps her bra across the room,
does she
feel safe enough to be who she truly seems to be.

And when they pass in the street, they are no longer wary of each other's species;
Ancient enmity has been cast aside.
Instead they see a fellow traveler,
Unsafe in a world of mortal men who burned their ancestors and told tall tales,
Making them the evil creatures they had never meant to be.
They found their hidden coves, their ancient forests, all the safe places,
And planted their flags, built stone houses and cages to keep them in.
They stole their land, their voices, their freedoms; taught their children to fear them,
never to be them.
To keep safe in white picket fences with scheduled life plans.

But we will rage and burn and tear your glass houses down.
We will strike in the night with our heads held high.
By calling us monsters, you have given us back our powers.
Now and forever, we will be free.



Roofied in the Clackamas Chick-fil-A

Elena Ender

Going to Chick-fil-A had always been a moral dilemma of mine, what with the homophobic press and all. However, by attending a college across the street from the restaurant and being gifted free iced coffee on Thursdays (before noon with a valid student ID), I learned to reconcile the friction of my Christianity, bisexuality, and love of a juicy chicken sandwich. And yet, as a member of the Green Party, I couldn't condone the chain's flippant distribution of single-use plastic straws. Regardless, on a mildly windy April day in Clackamas, Oregon, I went to, and was roofied in, the Chick-fil-A.

"It's always in the last place you'd expect it," my friend Allison told me a few years ago, recalling the time it happened to her in high school at a football game. Some drummers in the marching band thought it would be funny to "spike" the big Gatorade cooler after halftime, and she was watergirl. The guys on the team didn't drink much in the second half and won the game anyway. Allison and the assistant football coach passed out and were taken care of by the medic on site.

The drummers were suspended for only a couple of days, I guess because no one was assaulted and the team stayed undefeated in their league for the third year in a row. I'm not sure what discipline they would have faced had the game played out differently.

I went to the Chick-fil-A during a lull around 3pm, getting a pretty late lunch, a spicy chicken sandwich combo with a lemonade. I always got sugar headaches when I had the lemonade at the Chick-fil-A by my college because they sweetened it way too much. But the Clackamas one mixed it perfectly every time. Almost making it kind of funny. But not in the *haha* way. Deceptively, ironically unfunny.

The only other people in the restaurant stood at the register next to me: a group of four tallish white guys. Their level of macho chaos was pretty standard: just some dudes talking over one another with restless energy. One with a backwards Mariners cap said hi to me. I greeted him back, but it distracted me from the ordering process, so I forgot to ask the cashier for ranch for my fries. I thanked her for my lemonade, sans plastic lid and straw, and noticed that her nametag said "Linda."

“My pleasure,” Linda said. She had sincere and Cinnamon Toast Crunch-colored eyes. “Name for the order?”

“Joan,” I told her, hoping that she might tell me that her favorite aunt’s name is Joan and we could bond and chat for a while and become friends.

Unfortunately, all Linda said was, “All right, we’ll bring that out to your table in a bit,” and handed me my periwinkle table marker.

One of the guys, the one with cuffed jeans, bumped into me as I was walking away from the counter, and I apologized.

Dudes have never been my favorite people. Partly because of that moment, and similar moments I’ve engaged in before. The social dynamic has always been off. It had always been ingrained in my upbringing and in the culture around me that being “one of the guys” was something to strive for and being “like other girls” was not something to be proud of. Shaming my gender for stereotypical qualities I adored, such as basic common courtesy and emotional vulnerability, never really made sense.

I thought about this and plopped down at a booth on the west end of the restaurant. That dramatic plop onto the seat shifted something in me, or actually, in my vagina. With my general desire to reduce waste and save money, I had recently made the shift to a menstrual cup instead of tampons. I recommend them for menstruating people who have like-minded sustainability goals and are brave enough to get a little messy exploring the uncharted angles of their vaginas.

So, long story short: I needed to use the restroom to empty and clean my full tank.

I took my purse, but left my table marker, receipt, lemonade, and two loose packets of Chick-fil-A sauce. *It’s Chick-fil-A*, my inner monologue assured me, *a holy space. No one will steal my stuff.*

And I guess, in all technicality, no one really did.

I must have spent a full five minutes in the restroom. I didn’t use a timer or anything, but it felt like a while, but not so long it was concerning. I just wasn’t fully used to my period product and didn’t rush myself.

When I got back, my meal had magically appeared in place of my table marker. I missed another opportunity to ask for ranch for my fries. I took it as a sign to wean myself off of my West Coast addiction to ranch dressing.

The pack of dudes were laughing and slapping each other’s shoulders in cult-like camaraderie. I felt their eyes on me when I looked

away, then heard a hiss of a repressed outburst when I looked up to check again. I let it go.

I spread my Chick-fil-A sauce on my spicy chicken sandwich with a fry and began my meal, simultaneously diving into my favorite Nick Hornby novel *Funny Girl*. I hope they never make this one into a film like they had *High Fidelity* and *Fever Pitch* and *About a Boy* and *Juliet, Naked*. It would ruin the image I have in my head. Plus, there's already a *Funny Girl* movie (interestingly enough, with another Barbara, but spelled differently), and I have no idea how that would go down, changing the name or whatever copyright nonsense needs to happen.

I finished my lemonade and sandwich and had begun munching on my fries when I started feeling weird. Woozy in a very unnatural way. More than drunk, but less than a sleepless night with the flu.

I had to put down my book and just melt into my seat. I stared at the wall in front of me and breathed with unexplainable confusion. I used to get migraines, but this wasn't it. I sometimes get lightheaded during my period, but this wasn't it. It hurt my head to keep coming up with possible answers to my sudden change of state. My head was heavy with thoughts and my neck couldn't keep up. I felt the eyes on me when I leaned my head back with a thump to the artistically etched glass partition above my booth.

The thump was loud. I remember that.

Other moments I get in rolling waves.

Sounds of crashing laughter. Squeaking sneakers rushing out the door. One pair of thumping boots. A familiar but, for lack of better terms, icky "hello."

Thinking about it, I can still feel the strain of my eyes trying to focus on the figure in front of me. I couldn't do it, but I nearly went blind struggling to.

I don't know how I responded. Maybe I mumbled a hello.

Deep in the core of my humanity, I want to believe that the guy who came up to me was checking in, had no part in his friends' antics, and wanted to make sure I didn't die.

If I told this story to my mom, she would say that I'm optimistic, delusional, and luckier than I would ever realize. I agree with that, too.

He could have been trying to collect me. Take me wherever and destroy my life for the sport of it and claim his power.

He got me outside to the parking lot, my arm around his shoulder, dragged upright. I could see the scuffed toes of my shoes the

next day. The overcast late afternoon to early evening brought a chill to my chest. Goosebumps; I can't shake those.

Then there was a flash of a "Hey!" I looked out to the whirring parking lot. Lots of gray: sky to pavement. And a red blur to my left. The Chick-fil-A food truck, a brilliant invention for catering events and participating in Cartlandia Portland food festivals. A woman came up to me and to the guy stabilizing me. I didn't listen to their talk, their fight. There was shouting, and I never cared much for conflict, so I focused on the red blur. In and out, I saw the white chicken head logo fade. Then, I was slid off onto another shoulder, a shorter shoulder.

"Hi, thank you," I hoped I said, instead of a gargled nothing. We turned around, the new shoulder and I, and left the gray for the fluorescent white tile I had just come from.

I woke up on a couch in a dark room I didn't recognize. With a stuffy, dull headache, I stood up slowly and peeled my hair off of my sweaty neck. Founder S. Truett Cathy's headshot was staring at me from the wall by the door. The analog clock next to him said it was 10:15.

I exited the mystery room to see a hallway I'd known before. To my right: the restrooms, in front of me: the kitchen, to my left: the dining room. I was still in the Clackamas Chick-fil-A.

My cashier Linda was sweeping but dropped her broom when she saw me walking out, groggy, but alive and well. She hugged me and asked if I was okay. All things considered, I was.

She told me that she had seen the guy walking me outside as she was cleaning the food truck and something came over her, "like a lion," she said. I wouldn't have come up with it, but I agreed. As manager, I learned, she decided to keep me safe in the employee break room, as there wasn't really protocol for this situation. She waited to see if I wanted to call the police before making a "big ordeal of it." I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I loved hearing that I had options. Had it been the other way around, I would have been rash. Or, and it stings to admit it, I may not have intervened at all.

I thanked her and let her give me a ride home instead of trying to drive myself. I didn't leave my apartment the next day. And called in sick the day after that, stuck in my own head.

On the third day, I took a Lyft to the Clackamas Chick-fil-A to get my car. I went inside and stared at my booth. Linda was dropping off a milkshake when she saw me walk in. "Oh my gosh, hey," Linda said, rushing over to give me a hug.

I think we became friends. I was very happy about that.

I wasn't up for talking, but I took the hug with a comfort I'd never felt before. I fished out of my purse the thank-you card I had redrafted a dozen times that night, and handed it to her. "I can't begin to say how grateful—" I stopped and breathed.

She took the envelope and kept her hand on my shoulder. "My pleasure," she assured me.

Bigger Fish To Fry

Kelly Zatlin

Heard a rumor about the fish that got away:
Little do you know the darn thing couldn't swim at all.
In fact, I distinctly remember it sinking, drifting, and
occasionally floating to the bottom of a tank surrounded
by four grimy, unyielding walls.

Call me crazy, but I've cradled this fish.
Dare I say, coddled?
But as winds shifted and colors faded,
I found myself more prone to use that fish to cornobble.

So, I've since let that creature go.
With battered fins and feelings, though,
it reached the pinnacle in waters not drinkable.
I've since watched the creature glow,
its eyes glazed and movements slow
in the darkness deep and fathoms yet unthinkable.

Call me crazy, but I've cuddled crustaceans.
I never knew their claws could clip.
As tensions grew and tides receded,
the time came. I had no choice but to abandon ship.

So, I've since let crustaceans go.
No traces of shells, nothing to show
for all my despairing efforts at the end of my tether.
I've since watched crustaceans co-
exist with the fish in a turbulent flow,
though this game should have ended a long time ago;
it's been continued on account of the weather.

You put feelings at stake,
but I did not raise a finger to burn them.
I held my hands out instead, to warm them.
You raised a flag, perhaps to warn them,
but four grimy, unyielding walls
a loving home does not make.
And I'm not so sure how much more I can take.
Call me crazy, can you?

Eyes of a kaleidoscope,
here is the fork in the road.
For so long I have fought against it,
bending the prongs in a futile attempt to make them coincide.
But my heart knows I am weak.
My fingers are only prone to growing sore,
and to persist in this weary hour is equivalent to suicide.

So, I have resolved to a pensive attitude about unresolved futures,
past tense tensing at my presence as I brood,
slashing memoirs out of ornamented diaries
and surgically snipping my mind's sutures...
Because deep down I fear the words know more than I do,
my memories only briefly giving them color
and the motives not emoting but vacillating,
leaving sentences to trail off....
People never to follow through.

But it's the fork. It's not even the spoon,
not when you hold it up to gaze at your reflection
but tell me to admire mine on the other side.
It's the inflections, how they shift and waver,
you, apologizing when the blunt edge hits too hard,
and me, apologizing for you once my tears have dried.

Meanwhile, I had believed you viewed me through a telescope
even though everyone else was pleased with blinds half-open.
But I'm sure the view only ascertained my inadequacy,

because the next thing I know you're blinking eyes of a kaleidoscope.
And I took a look at those "ocean eyes" I know you'd since longed for,
and I paused, seeing only dull and lackluster sketches rough.
However, that could just be my lenses that I smudged while
skipping towns like rocks across a lake, which ironically proved
too difficult, as I could never make my plans smooth enough.

But it's the fork. It's not even the knife,
though when you hold it up to admire its quality,
skittishness deceives while my heart unknowingly cracks.
It's the inflections, how you shift and waver,
you, flinching when I inadvertently cut your finger,
and me, balking when you upgrade your knife to an ax.

So, I have resolved to a preoccupied attitude about occupied
expectations,
forcing myself into box dioramas I fabricated,
playing out the banter I invented,
denying myself the warped joy of awkward hesitations.
Because the outskirts of my consciousness lock me here,
and haplessly I fear its power over me,
my dreams looping but never repeating,
leaving me jilted and obsolete... but unable to disappear.

So here is the fork in the road.
For so long I have fought against it,
bending the prongs in a futile attempt to make them coincide.
But I know that all I can do is think,
my brain content to bubble with conflicting thoughts,
knowing somehow that in some way I will
eventually decide.

The Amazing Disintegrating Man

Gordon Brown

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN isn't around much anymore. Which is to say that he's not around as much as he used to be, when there was more of him. With every month, it seems like there's a little less. His right arm has gone entirely glassy. You can see right through his chest.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN is barely visible in his usual corner of the restaurant. On some days, it's hard to tell if he's even there. One has to go by clues. The mostly-finished bowl of soup on the table. The crumpled napkin. The bill. The tip. The thank-you note at the bottom.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN isn't sure when he started to lose himself. He wonders if there's an age when it starts happening—when with every passing day, there's just a little less of oneself instead of a little more. When one more cell dies than gets produced. When bones begin to lose their density and gums begin to recede.

A tipping point.

He wonders what his was.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN was told once he was a bleeding heart. He doesn't remember who said it or why, but when his ribs became translucent enough to see through, he examined himself in front of the bathroom mirror to check. His heart isn't bleeding, but pieces keep flaking off in his hands. He puts them in a jar to save them, but they melt into nothingness by the time he gets back from work.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN goes door to door with a clipboard as part of his job. In a bright, warm voice, he asks people if they'd like to sign it. To save the owls from light pollution. To save the pumas from poachers. To save the tigers and oceans and that one beautiful tree down on the corner. Most people don't sign and tell him they're sorry. Some people don't sign and tell him they're not.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN smiles and thanks them anyway. It chips a part of him away every time he does that. He has to wait for the door to slam shut before he can bend down and scoop it off the pavement. Most days his clipboard is as empty as he is,

but he still breathes quick before every door, still summons up an incandescent burst of energy as he knocks and starts all over.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN puts a lot of himself into his work. He walks up and down the streets until what's left of his feet is sore and throbbing. He doesn't flinch when someone tells him that he's spreading himself too thin. He doesn't react when he's told that he can't keep going at this pace. He grins like a Cheshire cat and says that he doesn't mind, and no one ever suspects that he does.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN looks like a painting. On certain days and from certain angles, anyways. He's told the sunlight streams right through him, all gold and refracted. Someone tells him it reminds them *exactly* of a painting by Klimt, but they're not sure which.

He smiles politely.

He knows that he looks like a ghost.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN says he doesn't feel any aches or pains—not anymore, at least. He's likely lying, but most people don't mind.

In the elevator, someone says, "How are you doing?" He says that he can't complain.

Someone in the elevator laughs and says, "Nobody would listen anyways, right?"

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN sadly agrees.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN says it's almost like when your leg falls asleep. Or that's how it started, at least. There are phantom feelings. Still some static to let him know where the tips of his fingers are. Most of them.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN wonders what will become of him. What will be left of him at the end. If the owls and the pumas suspect that he exists. If the woman whom he carried groceries for as a boy remembers who he is. He wonders if she's around anymore, or if she has faded too.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN imagines that his mattress is heavier after 10 years of sleeping on it, weighed down with shed skin cells from before he began to change. He knows there's a stain through the sheets from oil and that one night his nose bled. He knows there are still clippings from his fingernails that missed the bathroom trash. He looked for them once but couldn't find them.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN knows the laws of thermodynamics too. He takes refuge in them in the way all desperate men must—with the clinging conviction that there *must* be some justice, some order, some inalienable right.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN shuts out the sound of distant traffic on a distant street, the echo of a clock in the hall. In a voice that isn't there, he recites the first laws of the universe like a mantra, like a prayer.

First—*that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only change forms.*

Second—*that entropy is the way of all things. Order to disorder. Dust to something even less.*

Third—*that matter is just another form of energy.*

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN is mostly spent.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN is fading fast.

THE AMAZING DISINTEGRATING MAN wonders where his energy's gone.

He hopes it's in a better place.

American Story for Zaevion Dobson

Jordan Charlton

As the temperature changes, so does the tension—busy back streets sing blues of colored children only seen in newsprint; days like this come commonly every season. A new tragedy. Yesterday's headline: "Fulton High Footballer, Fatally Wounded"—as if God couldn't wait much longer for a face-to-face with the "hero at 15," Obama had said, and yet every summer it feels like the villains keep winning instead, so the joke on the other side of the wrapper must be we keep digging graves for young black lives. Murmurs of "he was too young" or "we gotta do better" as mommas cry holding pictures of their beloved on the news nightly before the lotto numbers roll and Kimmel or Corden or Colbert can make jokes about pop stars with agendas/politicians with deaf ears. Our question remains the same: Do you not listen? Or has rap poisoned the well of the water we drown in—not swim? If we could swim we might not even be here, but that's a joke for a targeted audience. Don't get upset unless it hits you too. Hopefully it doesn't. At the very least, hopefully someone can make it through summer, past winter too. The rose that grows from the concrete takes a new name: xerophyte—adaptor under harsh conditions. Dry like your scalp your mother would tell you to grease. Cold like the night Zaevion got taken away from his.

Acute Myeloid Leukemia

New Oncology Nurse, University Medical Center

Lindsay Rutherford

I. Blast Crisis

A den of, a warren of—a breeding, seething mass of—half-formed mutant cells. Spilling out, overflowing. But microscopic. Everything stained, everything curdling. Blood. But bad. Tucked in the body's safe caves of marrow, these half-cells—blasts, they call them—multiply until—

A body turning on itself. Somewhere no one can see, in tunnels and pockets of every bone, beneath layers of skin, fat, sinew, flesh, a shivering not-life life. A heating up. A shutting down. They say, they tell me: There is a way in. There is a way in. (And I am—somehow—holding the needle. The gloves. The bag of poison.) In front of me, the long gray hallway leading to her room.

II. Evidence-Based Medicine: Conditioning for Myeloablative Stem Cell Transplant

Cancer will not rest, they tell me, so neither can we. We must obliterate every shred of the immune system. It is possible. Research has been done. “The conditioning regimen of chemotherapy and radiation completely destroys the host (patient) immune system and blood cell production.” The only way to save the patient is to poison the blood (the wrong blood) that sustains her (that is killing her). As the scorched forest yields new life, the scorched body can become a vessel to a new immune system.

The oncologist orders Cyclophosphamide, a “cytotoxic agent,” a poison. Cyclophosphamide's side effects: nausea, vomiting, hair loss, inflamed bleeding bladder, mouth sores, pulmonary toxicity, sterility. Check vital signs, offer anti-emetic for nausea, begin infusion (of cytotoxic agent), monitor vital signs every 30 minutes, hydrate, track urine output.

I protect myself from the poison with a plastic blue gown, double gloves, a face mask with a wide shield.

Side effects of a scorched immune system: infection, hemorrhage, death.

When there is nothing left, when we have obliterated everything, stripped the patient down to just-born—naked, stumbling,

defenseless—we offer a chance to live again. We inject the donor's stem cells. We wash our hands. We hope.

III. Bleeding/Fever Dream

On the bus, in the mall, walking through a tunnel of trees at the arboretum, I am staring down that long hallway. Poison burns through the bag in my hands, chews through my fingertips. Hollow eyes, sunken eyes. Eyes of the dead and of the wish-they-were-dead, sclera slick with blood. Blood moon, mouth full of sores. Bruised sky. Bodies wasted to bone. We are barefoot and bleeding, all of us. In every second, in every breath, the possibility—of a shift, earth lurching, cell mutating. Buses retch along the wet, cracked road. Trees hemorrhage blood-red leaves until all that remains are naked, twisted limbs, gutters clogged with half-shredded fire.

There was no other way—some jobs require—was there another way? At work, Code Red, fire unseen. But somewhere. Doors close, the world shrinks in claustrophobic protection. The shrieking alarm, a weeping. The skin on fire. Poison sliding through every vein. Where else, what else? The oncologist ordered; the patient consented. The patient—the patient. And me. Assassin, savior, ghost. In this church of bone, the stained glass turns everything red.

Falling

Idalis Wood

Starving...

slaughtered...

praying to God... turned away

Are they so insignificant?

We, as a nation live—

Under God.

Spare poor souls pocket change and scraps
from a meal taken for granted?

Our leaders

are too busy ...

Should there be a champion for us?

Or shall we pray?

Pray again.

Send our thoughts wholesale and wholeheartedly.

Let them provide the warmth and
love.

Why do they still want more?

What more do they need?

We have given all we could.

We offer you another thought and prayer.

Perhaps you try it with us?

Maybe it will work this time.

A Good Death

Cynthia McCloud

Did you gasp in surprise, Stephanie, when the bullet blasted
through the thin paperboard trailer wall
and sliced through an organ or two?
Were you wearing your familiar denim skirt
as you bled out on the crushed velvet cushions?
Was your toddler playing nearby or sleeping? Did you ask
your husband to bring your baby to you?
Was it your idea to send
your brother through the storm
to the neighbor's seeking a working phone?
What did you say? Did you tell your husband what
songs to play at your funeral?
Did you urge him to remarry? Remind
him to pay the car insurance? Tell
him where you hid the Christmas presents?
Did you forgive
him? Did you doubt? Is it better
to think your husband a murderer or a fool?

Deadfall

Joel Fishbane

Mine was an isolated town built by a lake deep in Ontario's heart. Tourists loved the old buildings and cobbled streets, but it was the cemetery that attracted a crowd. Once, three churches and a synagogue had wrestled for limited land. It was 1945, the same year the war ended, and, like the German capital, the cemetery was quartered. Ever since, it was known as Little Berlin. To get to the Protestants, you entered by the Episcopalians, turned left at the Catholics, and went straight past the Jews. This was where my father was buried; I was 14 before I knew he was there.

Mama was 18 when I was born. Her parents were in Little Berlin (with the Episcopalians), and when Mama won a scholarship to the University of Toronto, she left me with my father's father. She was gone a long time, pursuing a master's and then her MBA. For a while it was just me and Gramps, but then my uncle got drunk and drove off a bridge, and my aunt moved in with the twins. Poor Gramps. Stranded in that enormous house without either of his sons, he had only the people they'd left behind. My cousins were sent to boarding school, leaving Gramps with the widow of one son and the daughter of another. It was hard for him. Gramps was large and dopey, and his wife had left him long ago. He didn't understand women.

At first, they told me my father was "gone," and for a while I thought this meant he was always slipping out one door just as I walked in another. No one liked to talk about him, so I had to do a lot of invention. Over the years, he went from being a saint to a spymaster, the leader of a cabal of secret men. The spring I turned 14, my aunt learned of my theories. She was horrified—because no one talked of him, she hadn't realized I didn't know the truth.

The next morning, we drove out to Little Berlin. I thought this was the perfect place for a spymaster to hide, and I clung to this theory as we passed the Catholic crosses and the headstones with the Jewish stars. People once had trouble believing the Earth was round; I had similar trouble accepting that John Patrick Gaunt had been killed by his own deadfall.

“What’s a deadfall?” I asked.

“Something hunters use. He was scared by a bear and fell into his own trap.”

“How do we know it was a bear?”

“Ask your mother,” snorted Auntie. “She’s the only other person who was there.”

My father’s grave was in the shadow of trees. I saw he had died nine months before I was born. I saw other things too. In violent strokes, with blood-red spray paint, someone had defaced the grave with slurs and signs.

“Vandals!” said my aunt as she began to cry.

There were rags in the car, and together we scrubbed the stone clean. I decided to ask her later what it all meant, but I never got the chance. At home, there was a car in the driveway with Toronto plates. When Mama stepped out, I hardly recognized her. We had spoken often, but it was generally believed she wasn’t coming back. Auntie greeted her as if she’d been expected. For Auntie, Mama had already announced her return, though I wouldn’t know how until I found the spray paint in the trunk of her car.

At once, Mama assumed full control. This thrilled me; she had been the absent mother, and absence made the heart religious. If my father was a saint, then Mama was God. She hired herself out as a bookkeeper and talked immediately about moving us into our own home.

“You’re just going to take her away?” said Gramps. “Talk about ungrateful!”

“I paid my way. I paid Victoria’s way too. I didn’t spend my time at parties. I worked.”

“You think you know what she really cost? You think I ever billed you for medicine or extra clothes?”

“Bill me then! Don’t you worry, Mr. Miser—you’ll get every penny.”

We were gone by June. Mama rented the coach house on a nearby farm. The departure left us estranged; it only got worse after I heard my father’s grave was still being vandalized.

My absence meant I missed the return of my cousins. They came home every summer, but that year they returned in disgrace after being expelled for selling homemade pharmaceuticals out of their dorm.

It was mostly sugar pills, but there had been a scandal after a girl was sent to the hospital with signs of having been poisoned.

"It had nothing to do with us!" Timothy swore.

"She had an ulcer," added Samuel. Or was he Timothy? They were identical; it was impossible to tell them apart.

Mama didn't want me spending time with them. "I know you won't listen, Victoria. But I'll say it anyway: You need to be careful. They're worse than you think."

She was right; I didn't listen. My cousins were only a few months older and had swarthy good looks. They dressed well and roared like lions and were forbidden and had a reputation for danger. How could I resist?

All summer I sat in the library, moving through the archives of the town paper. John Patrick Gaunt hadn't been newsworthy in life, but his death made up for the failure; he stayed on the front page for days. In photos he was young and dashing. The spymaster in his prime.

He was 19 when he took Mama on a hunting trip; they'd been dating since grade 10. Two days later, she stumbled out of the woods in a state of shock. A bear had discovered them, which is how my father fell into his own trap. Thirty-eight weeks later, I was born. The math didn't exactly speak for itself; in theory, I could have been conceived days before the trip. But a boy and girl share a tent in the forest, and accidents are bound to occur.

The newspaper described a deadfall for the unenlightened. Bait is placed near a trigger (usually a series of sticks), which props up a heavy rock or log. When the trigger is knocked, the rock or log falls onto the animal. A deadfall is not the best way to trap a bear, but my father wasn't trying to trap one.

Bears were not uncommon in our part of the world. At the campsite, they found a toppled tent and ransacked food; there was no way of knowing whether this had happened before or after Mama had gone for help. Since it had rained, there were no tracks. If you were so inclined, you could argue the bear hadn't been there at all. One of the newspaper's reporters was so inclined. He mentioned that my father was an experienced hunter who had killed a bear in his youth. The reporter was Gramps; at that newspaper, conflict of interest was not a journalistic concern.

Every day, as I biked home, I cut a path down an isolated stretch that led to Rural Route 12. The route ended with a long narrow

slope that I coasted down at a wicked speed—if there was no traffic, I could glide straight into my yard. I loved the isolation. I wondered if I was like my father, who had once spent days alone in a stand while hunting with a rimfire bolt action rifle. I imagined I had his skill. Survival, I decided, was an instinct in the blood.

That was the summer I became friends with Anne-Marie, whose parents owned the coach house. Anne-Marie had achieved the sort of figure some women spend their whole lives (and fortunes) trying to achieve. We went swimming one afternoon only to find more suffering than we had ever had in the heat—me because I hardly filled out my bathing suit and Anne-Marie because she filled it out *too much*. The boys, scrawny in their trunks, were a parade of misplaced hair and pimpled cheeks. They swarmed Anne-Marie with false machismo; they talked to her, but their eyes hardly ever went to her face.

“We are prisoners of our own bodies,” she sighed with her usual dramatic flair. “I was in *Romeo and Juliet*. But no one remembers me for *that*.”

“Boys are absurd. They should be raised in captivity.”

“Did you see them? They looked like they’re about to invade Poland.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It’s how World War II started. That’s where we are, Victoria. It’s the eve of war.”

Compared to the others, my cousins were little gentlemen. We spent the summer with them despite Mama’s objections. They treated us well and bought our movie tickets and took us joyriding in their car. They were never rude and looked at our eyes when we spoke. I thought they were both in love with Anne-Marie, but she was certain that one of them preferred me. She reminded me that in Shakespeare’s day, cousins married all the time. Anne-Marie couldn’t say *which* cousin liked me; she too had a difficult time telling them apart.

Hearing of her triumph with Shakespeare, my cousins bought Anne-Marie his complete works. They also presented her with the application booklet from the National Theatre School of Canada, which they had sent for on her behalf. As far as methods of seduction went, it was truly unique. Anne-Marie, who dreamed of acting, went burgundy as she turned the gifts in her hands.

“We brought something for Victoria too,” said my cousin.

I was thrilled until I saw what it was.

“You’re an ass,” said Anne-Marie.

I turned red and ran away. My cousins called after me, waving the spray paint in the air. They insisted it was only a joke.

Every Christmas, a winter carnival appeared in McKinnon Park. People from across the region set up booths and games. We went every day, despite the bright cold and arctic chill, always walking in pairs. One twin walked with Anne-Marie, the other with me. (How did they decide? A coin toss? An arm wrestle? Since they always dressed the same, I wondered if they continued to switch).

At the shooting gallery, a twin won me a necklace whose chain was pretty but whose pendant was made of glass. He asked if he could put it on me; obediently, I removed my scarf and lay my neck bare. At the ring toss, they picked a fight with the proprietor. While the man was distracted, my other cousin reached out and placed his ring over the bottle. Then he tossed a second ring toward it, creating the required clink. The proprietor was properly fooled, and the cousin received a large stuffed penguin, which he presented to Anne-Marie. First an application to theatre school and now a conned penguin: My cousins were real originals. Anne-Marie blushed and stammered with love.

We walked with our treasures, and the cousin who had won my necklace stayed at my side. At the carnival’s end, the gates opened onto the rest of McKinnon Park, thick with snow. We headed towards Lake Savina—Gramps had his own ice house, and we were promised free beer. It was hard going. My cousin tripped in the snow and began to pant. His breath was noxious, something I hadn’t noticed before, and I wondered if his brother had bad breath or if I finally knew the secret to telling them apart.

“Should we go back?”

“Worried what your mother will say?”

“I don’t care what she thinks.”

He smiled. It was a good one, beautiful even. When I smiled, I always felt I was hurting my face. But my cousin was handsome and full of teeth.

“My mom says your mom’s crazy ‘cause of what she keeps doing to Uncle Jack’s grave.”

The forest funnelled the wind, which hit us as a blast of frost. We usually didn't discuss my father.

"Do you remember *Uncle Jack*?" I asked.

"I have a few pictures."

He called it up on his cellphone. Another blast of cold stung my eyes. The picture came into focus. It was a restaurant. My uncle, clean like a naval cadet, looked dramatic with a cigarette. Auntie was 18 and had her arm around my father, who was fit and healthy with a ruddy face. Unlike my cousins, it wasn't hard to tell him from his brother. My uncle, Timothy Samuel Gaunt, was dirty and dull. A lesser mortal.

"Your mom took this picture. This was the night they all met."

"What was Mama doing there?"

"She was their waitress."

"Hey!" called Anne-Marie. "Hurry up!"

Lake Savina was part of a larger waterway that kept it well supplied with fish. Ice fishing was the great pastime, and there were several shanties, though most people built their own huts and left them sitting by the shore, chained like forgotten dogs. Gramps's hut was a luxury. The walls were solid, and there was a padlock on the door. Whether obtained through trust or theft, the cousins had the key.

"I hope you didn't bring us here to fish," said Anne-Marie. Inside was a single room centered around a trapdoor that opened into the ice. There were two hideaway cots and a foot locker with the promised beer. My cousins turned on a space heater, and its glow provided an eerie light. One twin pulled down the cots while the other dug out fur blankets and beer.

"There aren't enough blankets for all of us," he said.

"Let me guess," said Anne-Marie. "We'll have to share."

Anne-Marie and her penguin fell into the first cot and crawled beneath a blanket with her twin, their hands and bodies (and flippers) disappearing from view. My cousin— he of the noxious breath—pulled the blanket over us. The poor light made it impossible to see Anne-Marie's face; the only eye-contact I had was with the penguin. We drank our beer, which was cold and cut me like frost. The cousins told crude stories. When they laughed, my cousin's terrible breath blew in my face.

At some point, Anne-Marie kissed her little gentleman. We could hear the smacking of their mouths. My cousin stiffened and tried to kiss me, but I moved away. I liked him, but I didn't want to do it here.

"We should go," I said.

My cousin turned sour. "You like this blanket?"

"Sure."

"It's fur. Guess what animal?"

"I don't know."

"It's the bear your father killed."

"You're kidding."

"Hand to God. Bears didn't scare him."

"That's right," called my other cousin. "A bear surprised him; he surprised it right back."

"But women are a different story," said my twin.

"That's right! Women surprised him all the time."

"Especially in the *end*."

"Surprised him so much, he fell."

"He *dead fell*."

"It was a *bear* that surprised him," I said.

"Don't be stupid," said my cousin. "No one believes there was a bear."

"Maybe it was the ghost of a bear!" suggested the other.

"Oh sure. The ghost of *this* bear!" My cousin brought the blanket over his head, wrapping us both in bearskin. The world went black. There was nothing but heat and bad breath. "You don't scare me," he said. "You surprise me; I'll surprise you right back."

His knees pressed down on my arms. My cousin roared and snapped, and his tiny bone of an erection throbbed against me. Someone was laughing as I bucked like a tied horse. The roar became a kiss; his mouth fell over mine. He squeezed my chest and ran a hand over my waist so his fingers caught in the beltloops of my jeans. The necklace cut into me, and the cheap chain snapped.

Then, at once, the pressure disappeared. The blanket vanished; the room's dull light returned. When I sat up, Anne-Marie was bludgeoning my attacker with the penguin. She threw the bird in his face.

"You two are so *sick*!"

I made my escape. Anne-Marie followed, empty-handed; the penguin was left behind, a casualty of war. The cousins' laughter didn't stop. Amplified by the ice house, it was dissonant, a cackle from a black hole. As soon as Anne-Marie was past me, I slammed the door shut. Then I grabbed the padlock and threw it on the clasp.

The sun was almost gone. We stood in the failing light and breathed into each other's faces. Compared to my cousin's breath, hers was sweet. The laughter continued; they hadn't realized what I'd done.

"I'm going home," I said.

"What about them?" said Anne-Marie.

"Boys," I reminded her, "should be raised in captivity."

As we walked, I made her swear not to tell anyone what had occurred. I assured her they'd get out on their own. They'd break down the door or call for help. We won't get in trouble because they won't want people to know what happened.

"What did happen?" asked Anne-Marie.

It felt too hard to explain. "He made it so I couldn't breathe."

By now it was dark, and we had to feel our way along the road. Anne-Marie's boots cracked against the snow. When I dug my hands into my pockets, I felt my cousin's phone. I had forgotten to give it back. I knew the twins shared it: perhaps they thought having two would make it easier to tell them apart. I knew we should turn back, but I kept on walking straight.

Mama was reading and barely looked up when I appeared. "Next time, pick up a phone. It's going down to minus-20 tonight."

"We got a ride. Anyway, I'm not a baby."

I took a scalding shower and scrubbed myself hard. I used Mama's special shampoo, the one enhanced with Aveda flowers and a tropical scent. The ice house had no windows, but there was a skylight. Assuming they could reach it, my cousins could tear themselves free.

Perfumed and lobster red, I gave my mouth a harsh flossing and attacked the knots in my hair. Maybe they'd tip the house onto its side and leave through the trapdoor. There was a cut on my throat from that cheap necklace, small and dotted like a tiny bite. I ran a hand over it and then the rest of my face. It wasn't a bad face but it was no great mystery why Anne-Marie got all the attention. I really wasn't pretty at all.

Around ten, my cousin's phone began to ring. Auntie. If the calls stopped, I reasoned, it meant they had come home. I hid beneath the covers, but Auntie continued to call and, at 11:30, she phoned the house. Folding the pillow over my ears, I muffled the world and pretended to sleep. I bit my nails, which is what I did when I didn't want to cry.

At last, Mama came into the room. "Your cousins are missing. Do you know what's going on?"

"They're at the lake," I said.

When I told her what happened, Mama sighed, almost in relief. She was probably exhausted from weeks of waiting for my cousins to spring, to prove they were exactly what she had always feared. We drove to Lake Savina with a crowbar and pried the lock off. If my cousins had tried to escape, they left no trace. The space heater had run out of fuel, and the prisoners had tried to warm themselves with beer. Of course, this only made them colder, and by the time we found them, they were weak and blue. They had torn open the penguin and warmed their hands in its gut. Their feet weren't so lucky: They both lost the little toe on the left foot. Their twinned nature was undisturbed; in the years to come, people still wouldn't be able to tell them apart.

After that, Anne-Marie stayed away. Mama and I were alone on Christmas, and the last days of December were lonely and dark. On New Year's Eve, I texted Anne-Marie, but she never wrote back.

For days, Gramps and Auntie called and sent hostile screeds. Finally, on the last night before school started, they appeared at the door. Their knock was the sort you expect right before you're dragged to a gulag. I hid behind Mama, who answered the door with only a fire poker for defense.

"They spent Christmas in a *hospital!*" said Auntie. "They're crippled! We should have her arrested!"

"No one ever missed their little toe," said Mama.

"She imprisoned them in the dead of winter. She took their phone."

"She forgot she had it."

"Tell it to the judge."

"She will. Right after she tells the judge what they did to her."

Auntie frowned. No one had told her this part. "What did they do?"

"He made it so she couldn't breathe."

"Who?"

They looked at me, but I could only shrug: I never could tell them apart.

"The women in your family!" said Gramps. "All you see is violence when it's just young people having fun." He leaned in to

Mama. "You'd better hope nothing *e/se* happens to them. No one will believe it if one of them is surprised by a bear."

After they left, I sat down and bit my nails. Mama stroked my head. She had the haggard look of the insomniac, a woman in the middle of a long night.

No one ever went to court. The adults decided to let the whole thing pass, but they couldn't make the story disappear. At school, the rumors mutated into something grotesque. It was generally thought that my cousins had fallen victim to female hysterics; I heard that we had cut off their toes ourselves. I hoped I could lash myself to Anne-Marie, but she preferred to ride out the storm on her own. For the first time since puberty, she knew what it was like to be ignored; it made her hostile and cruel.

The incident scaled Mama too, and by summer she announced we were moving away. On the last day in the house, I was sent to return the key. But when I knocked on the door, I asked to see Anne-Marie.

I found her reading Shakespeare's complete works. I stared hard at the book. She had *kept* the cousins' gift. She was *reading* it. It was a double act of betrayal, and even though I had come to say goodbye, I talked of dumb things instead. That was the last I ever saw of her, at least in person. She went west, like people used to do. West to Hollywood. West, like it was the new frontier.

Our town seemed abandoned as we left. The stores were shuttered, the cars silenced. No one saw us go; I had the distinct impression people were glad we were gone.

"We shouldn't have stayed so long," said Mama. "Loving this town is like loving the wrong person. You can't go back when things are done."

Before we left, Mama took me to Little Berlin. In silence we walked through the gates. Past the Episcopalians, Catholics, and Jews. At the grave of John Patrick Gaunt, the headstone was clean. *Too* clean, I thought, as if it had recently been scrubbed.

"I used to believe he was a saint," I said. "Either that or a spymaster."

"What else did you think?"

"That he spoke a dozen languages. And he had great blue eyes."

“He actually *did* speak French. But his eyes were green. We were all good friends.”

“You were his waitress.”

“I thought I had lucked out. Everyone loved Johnny. He was the boy who had killed a bear.”

“A bear surprised him; he surprised it right back.”

“Time to go,” said Mama. She turned and I followed and John Patrick Gaunt stayed behind, untouched and polished to a shine.



Saintly (or what has been asked of me)

Casey Zella Andrews

something slutty
yes & yes
hands/stomach/nipples, inside
yes

what were you wearing
was it cut short, was it cut low
where did he touch you
did you say, “no”

yes & yes
late night & also morning & also afternoon
did I say anything I can’t remember
inside or outside what difference

was it cut short, was it cut low
what time was it when it happened
did you say, “no”
were his hands inside or outside the clothes

also one time three am
I was seven
I can’t remember
inside/outside the body

what time was it when it happened
how many drinks had you had
were his hands inside or outside the clothes
why can’t you remember

a whole bottle of champagne
I can’t remember
inside/outside the body
I can’t remember

how many drinks had you had
are you going to therapy
why can’t you remember
are you afraid of him

which therapist
do you
I lock my door
no

are you going to therapy
do you have a restraining order
are you afraid of him
did you invite your cousin to the wedding

no
do you
no
do you

do you have a restraining order
didn’t you want it
did you invite your cousin to the wedding
do you want it

no didn't you want it
are you are you okay
no do you want it
no does this feel good

no are you okay
no did you like it
no does this feel good

A Winter Day

Casey Zella Andrews

“Who dims the daylight? Who lights the moon?” ~ Leo Lionni, *Frederick* (1967)

Today the mouse said I too have been trapped
 in a small tight space
 glancing around
 like death is coming from any corner where
 light gets in.

Today the mouse said I too have scratched at the walls,
 climbed into holes between things kept together.
I too have
 been waiting to get out.

Today the mouse said What are you waiting for?
 Kill me. Just kill me.

Today the mouse said I have been eating what you’ve thrown out.
 Can’t you give me something better?

Today the mouse said I can’t keep on like this, burrowing all around for
 nothing good. Like my life is worth nothing to you.

Today the mouse said

 Nothing. I caught it, set it free. At least one of us
 doesn’t have to live here anymore.

Derrick's Last Day

Vinny Corsaro

Even though Derrick suspected the humane society receptionist hated him, he always said hi. Maribella always glared back, red lips always sneering, like the act of Derrick showing up at all was offensive. In fact, Derrick was pretty sure that it was Maribella who called the cops on him.

The officers came knocking the night after he adopted Axl, an old deaf and blind pug. Derrick answered the door right after giving Axl his last bowl of unseasoned ground beef.

The cops said there was an anonymous tip about animal abuse and they had to check it out. Derrick allowed them in his house to show them Axl. He explained that he liked to adopt aging dogs because it felt good to give them a home to die in. The cops felt a little silly, apologized for interrupting, then left. Four days later, Axl passed away peacefully.

Despite what other people may have thought, Derrick didn't enjoy watching the dogs die. He still cried every time they curled up for the final time, barks sounding more like coughs, the moving hump of skin slowing and slowing until, finally, it stopped. He cried, yes, but tried to remind himself that at least he had something tangible to cry about.

When Derrick came to pick up his next dog, a gumless Rottweiler named Saul, he told Maribella that he wasn't there to hurt the animals but to help them. She claimed she didn't call the cops, but both of them knew she was lying.

Saul's previous owners fed him so much human food that his jaw got infected, then all his teeth fell out. Derrick used to let Saul gum his arm, giving him a chance to be in control again. When the Rottweiler finally passed, Derrick sat nearby, playing soft jazz and scratching the dog's chin.

When walking through the kennels after Saul's departure, Derrick overheard some of the workers mention how it was the second anniversary of the day Maribella's partner had passed away. Derrick had no idea that such a thing had happened to the receptionist, but he wasn't really surprised. The meanest people are often the loneliest.

The next time Derrick showed up to the humane society, he brought Maribella flowers. She accepted them without thanks, but the next day he noticed that she'd put them in a vase and displayed them on her desk. That was all the thanks Derrick really needed.

He walked out of the kennel with a new dog, Molly, and told Maribella that he thought her lipstick looked very pretty that day. She smiled and told Derrick to have a nice day. He walked out with Molly, feeling a little bit happier. Molly seemed happier, too.

Molly was half poodle, half lab, and all ugly. She was rescued from an abusive home, where her owner had a tendency to ash cigarettes on her back. Molly had arthritis, depression, and anxiety. Derrick had a warm bed, all the time in the world, and CBD dog treats. He taught her how to shake hands and roll over before she passed.

Derrick grew up in a rough home. His father drank himself to death. His mother prioritized other men over her only child. He grew up with his father's books as his true parents, learning from authors like Kerouac, Bukowski, and Fante how not to be a man, how not to treat other people. Derrick had a burning desire to mean something to everyone, but for the most part, he was a quiet, forgettable kid.

He became a quiet, forgettable adult.

When Derrick was 23, he got married. For the first time in his life, he was in love. In the beginning, she was too. Life was good for a while.

When Derrick was 27, he got divorced. His wife had a tendency to fall into the pants of her coworkers. They got in an ugly fight, which ended with Derrick telling her that he hoped she'd die alone. She packed her things and walked out the door. The next day, he called her to apologize. She didn't pick up or return his voicemail. It was probably for the best.

Derrick did have an aunt who died alone. Her husband was out grocery shopping, and she choked on a piece of celery by herself. When her husband came home, he said that her skin was colder than the linoleum she was resting on. Derrick went to the funeral but was too young for death to really mean anything. She was just another aunt whom he rarely saw. He had a lot of family members like that.

Derrick was terrified of dying alone. When he received news that his recent headaches were because of a tumor, and that the tumor was malignant, the doctors told him in hushed tones that he was

probably too old and poor for there to be many realistic options. He had a few weeks left to live.

It was harder to stomach than Derrick had prepared for. With nothing else to do, he went in to the humane society to let Maribella know he wouldn't be back for a while, maybe ever. He left her a card, thanking her for letting him come in and pick the dogs that were ready. He mentioned something about being one of those dogs now, smiled at her, then walked out the door.

The last week of Derrick's life had some bad parts and good parts. The bad parts included not being able to make it to the bathroom in time, not having any animals nearby, and not having any human interaction. The good parts included watching the sunrise every day, listening to more jazz, and the time the mailman brought him a letter, sliding it under the door.

Derrick hobbled over and picked up the envelope. He was surprised to see it came from Maribella. Opening the letter, he read that Maribella, out of respect, was going to start adopting the oldest dogs in the shelter and that she was (jokingly) mad that Derrick left the responsibility of being the patron saint of old dogs to her. She wished him a safe "journey" and sealed it with a lipstick mark, something Derrick found to be tacky, sexy, and sad all the same.

He placed the card on his coffee table, splayed open, then laid down on the couch for good.

Three weeks later, Derrick's landlord, Mahmoud, noticed unopened mail piling up (mostly magazine subscriptions and bills) and walked into the apartment. Derrick was dead on the couch, smiling faintly. Out of respect, Mahmoud waited two days before finding another tenant.

When the new tenant signed, she complained about the dog smell incessantly. After walking into the apartment to check out the smell himself, Mahmoud felt a funny flitting in his heart. He realized that he'd never meet one of Derrick's furry friends again. He'd never see Derrick shuffle up the stairs, urging an old beast that there was food and a warm bed at the top, if only the dog could just get here. He'd never hear Derrick crying in the morning when he carried the body out into that old, familiar patch of woods near the apartment complex.

Mahmoud always told his children to play in that area, for he knew that the ghosts of dogs were playful, loving, and very protective. He found himself wandering around the patches of dirt and placing flowers on them each month. He figured that it was for Derrick more than anything, but if the dogs were watching from above, they probably wouldn't be upset. In truth, Mahmoud was realizing that he missed Derrick far more than he ever thought he would.

Isn't that how it always goes?



INTERVIEW

The Freeing Philosophy of Will Wight

Interview by Kaileia (KyKye) Kostroun

“I’m not trying to make each book the best it can be. What I’m trying to do is make this the best six-month book it can be, which is different from the best one-year book. I’m trying to make myself a better author with every book release. ...That’s my core philosophy.”

~ Will Wight

K: You describe your series, *Cradle*, as “a sort of hybrid between traditional fantasy novels and Eastern cultivation stories, where the magic system and setting is centered around progression.” Since the beginning of your career, in what ways do you feel you have progressed as a writer?

W: I knew one of my biggest weaknesses was interiority. I had a very difficult time portraying the interior thoughts of a point-of-view character. ... So over time, what I’ve been really trying to work on is ... to convey a lot of emotion in my writing without spending a lot of time, you know, being all exaggerated. Every time I write a new book, I try to go, “Okay, can I write some stuff that’s a little more challenging to portray emotionally?... That’s the way in which I feel I’ve grown the most.

K: That’s amazing. So, out of the works that you’ve written, in which do you feel you’ve been most successful at doing just that?

W: Honestly, *The Elder Empire*—my middle series. I went back and re-read them recently. There’s some secondary characters where I think their POVs felt a little flat a couple of times. But for the most part, the main characters, I feel, are very emotionally invested in what’s going on. They’re driven and they’re active and they’re really moving the plot forward. So I’m really proud of some of the character work I did in that series.

K: I’m excited to ask you this question. On the topic of magic, do you believe in magic or believe humans are inherently magical in any way? For you, how much of what you write is fantasy and how much of that bleeds into your experience of life?

W: What I believe is that the magic in the fantasy novel is the magic of the unknown. It's the magic of imagination. It's that feeling of "Oh man, anything could be behind that door." Or "Imagine all the cool things that can exist in the woods out there."

Of course, I do think there's a lot of that in real life. I mean, what's in the ocean? We don't know. What's in outer space? We don't know. Anything could be out there, right? There's a lot of things people are discovering. If you're trying to unlock the secrets of how our universe actually works, you're really translating magic into reality. You're looking to take the unknown and make it known. To me, that's the compelling part of fantasy. It's this world where the unknown is real.

K: Do you have any rituals that get you in the mood to write? Any writing aphrodisiacs, per se? Any foods, activities, things like that?

W: I like to take a walk and listen to music. Usually, it's not a particular genre. I like something with a heavy beat, almost dance music because it gets me energized and hyped up, and then I'm thinking about all the possibilities. It feels like there's a lot of movement and progress. That's what really gets the juices flowing, so to speak.

K: Does that help with the pacing of your writing—the tempo of the music? Is there any correlation between them?

W: I think there is. I tend to write faster paced novels, and I tend to emphasize action scenes. I think that when I use that method, it does lend itself to that style.

K: What's your favorite go-to song right now for your writing?

W: The thing that leaps out in my mind, it's the nerdiest answer I could possibly give, but it's a really experimental song in the latest *Dragon Ball Z* movie. When the bad guy and Goku are getting ready to fight, there's chanting in the background, kind of like a hype-band thing, where the song is cheering for the person who is currently winning the fight. And I think that is so cool. That concept of working the audience emotion into the actual music itself is really inspirational to me. That song is part of the playlist for my current book.

K: As a writer, how much does that title define you, personally? Who are you outside of your writing? What essential parts of Will Wight do most people not see that still make up a big part of who you are?

W: It's hard to define yourself. I think of myself more as a storyteller. That part of me is what I consider the intrinsic part of who I am and how I think about the world. That part translates over to every aspect of who I am.

I play a lot of video games. That's one of my hobbies. In that case, when the games don't have a compelling story, the compelling story is the story you're making as you play. When I'm hanging out with my friends, it's a question of, how are our interactions taking part in a group shared story? When I'm spending time with my family, these are the people who shaped me into the person—the character I am now. I really do tend to think of things in terms of a story, as a storyteller—a story that's unfolding and being organized and told and continuing every day.

K: What is your vision, as a writer? What do you aspire to? Where do you see your highest self, as a writer?

W: I've already exceeded my target. I didn't expect to be here, so I think of where I want to be in the future, and what I really want to be continuing to do is pushing myself as a storyteller.

My real ambition, if you want me to be honest, is, I want to get more efficient at storytelling. The more disciplined and consistent I get at producing work, the more stories I get to tell. My ambitious goal is to produce more works per year and be able to get through more of the ideas I have in my head and make them into reality.

Will Wight on His Writing Process

“It really only takes me three months to write a book. So that’s three months of hard, focused work. Now the problem is, it takes me six months to do these three months worth of work, not because I’m sitting around playing games all the time, but because I feel like in my head that I can’t get the story out the way I like it, so I sit there trying to think and tinker, and I’m like ‘If I only had a little bit more time, I could make it perfect in my brain and then it’ll come out on the paper and it’ll be the greatest.’ And that never works because it’s an illusion.”

* * *

“What I think happens, and it certainly happened to me, is that people hold themselves to this impossible standard of envisioning perfection first and then putting it on paper. So they get caught in this loop of they never do anything because they’re waiting to have all the answers and they’re trying to put together *The Godfather* in their head when they’ve never written a word on paper. What you do instead is you learn while working. You work to learn; you learn while you work. And in my case, I think, Why not put it out there and get feedback from readers and learn in the wild? You can’t write a book until you’ve written a book.”

* * *

“The number one thing I say all the time is—Purpose. Target Group. Strategy. I apply it to everything I do. Why am I doing this? Who am I doing it for? And what is my strategy for reaching those people for that purpose?”

CONTRIBUTORS

Casey Zella Andrews is a high school English teacher in Boston, MA. She has a BA from Hampshire College, MAT from Simmons College, and an MA in critical and creative thinking from UMass Boston. Her most recent work is published or forthcoming in *Lammergeier*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, and *Juked*. She has never lost a push-up competition to a student.

Gordon Brown grew up in the deserts of Syria and now lives in the deserts of Nevada. Since his arrival in the New World, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *F(r)iction Magazine*, *The Weird Reader*, and *Tales to Terrify*. Gordon spends his free time writing feverishly and looking after his cats, of which he has none.

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Elena Ender has loved every bit of reading for and editing literary publications *Tin House* and *Masters Review*. She spends her time writing snarky fiction, listening to 2007 pop-punk, and driving around the streets of Portland, OR. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram as @elena_ender.

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Kaileia (KyKye) Kostroun is a writer, currently pursuing her BFA in creative writing with minors in business and fine arts from Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, FL. Her favorite book is *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts. She writes mostly literary fiction and creative nonfiction. She is also an actress, Thespian alumna, and graduated theatre major from the Academy for Performing Arts in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. Follow her on Instagram: @_eclectickye.

Randilee Sequeira Larson is a Portland-based author whose essays and poems have appeared in journals such as *The Promethean*, *The Santa Ana River Review*, *The Ilanot Review*, *Unlikely Stories: Mark V*, and others. When not writing, Randilee enjoys experimental literature, her cat "Cocaine Greg," and her colony of flesh-eating beetles. She plans on becoming an urban legend one day and hopes to retire to a comfortable life of drinking mojitos and scaring neighborhood children.

Cynthia McCloud earned an MFA in creative nonfiction and poetry from West Virginia Wesleyan College. A print journalist for 22 years, she now teaches English language arts to academically at-risk teenagers at a quasi-military residential school. She was a Creative Nonfiction Writing Away the Stigma Fellow. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post* and West Virginia newspapers and lifestyle magazines. She lives in Appalachia.

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Amirah Patel (cover art) is a freelance visual development artist and illustrator who likes to tell stories that bridge the divide between mundane and magical. While she is currently enrolled in Ringling College of Art and Design, both her art and daily life are dedicated to the belief that every day will be the most enjoyable day.

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Will Wight lives in Florida, among the citrus fruits and slithering sea creatures. He's the author of the Amazon best-selling *Traveler's Gate Trilogy*, *The Elder Empire* (which cleverly offers twice the fun and twice the work), and his newest series of mythical martial arts magic: *Cradle*. He graduated from the University of Central Florida in 2013, earning an MFA in creative writing and a flute of dragon's bone. For more info, visit willwight.com

Idalis Wood is a graduate student of Linfield College with a degree in creative writing. Her dream is to become a novelist and/or poet. As an aspiring writer, Idalis hopes her words can inspire and make a difference in the lives of others. Since the age of 10, Idalis has always wanted to write stories. Eventually it turned to writing books and other stories.

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