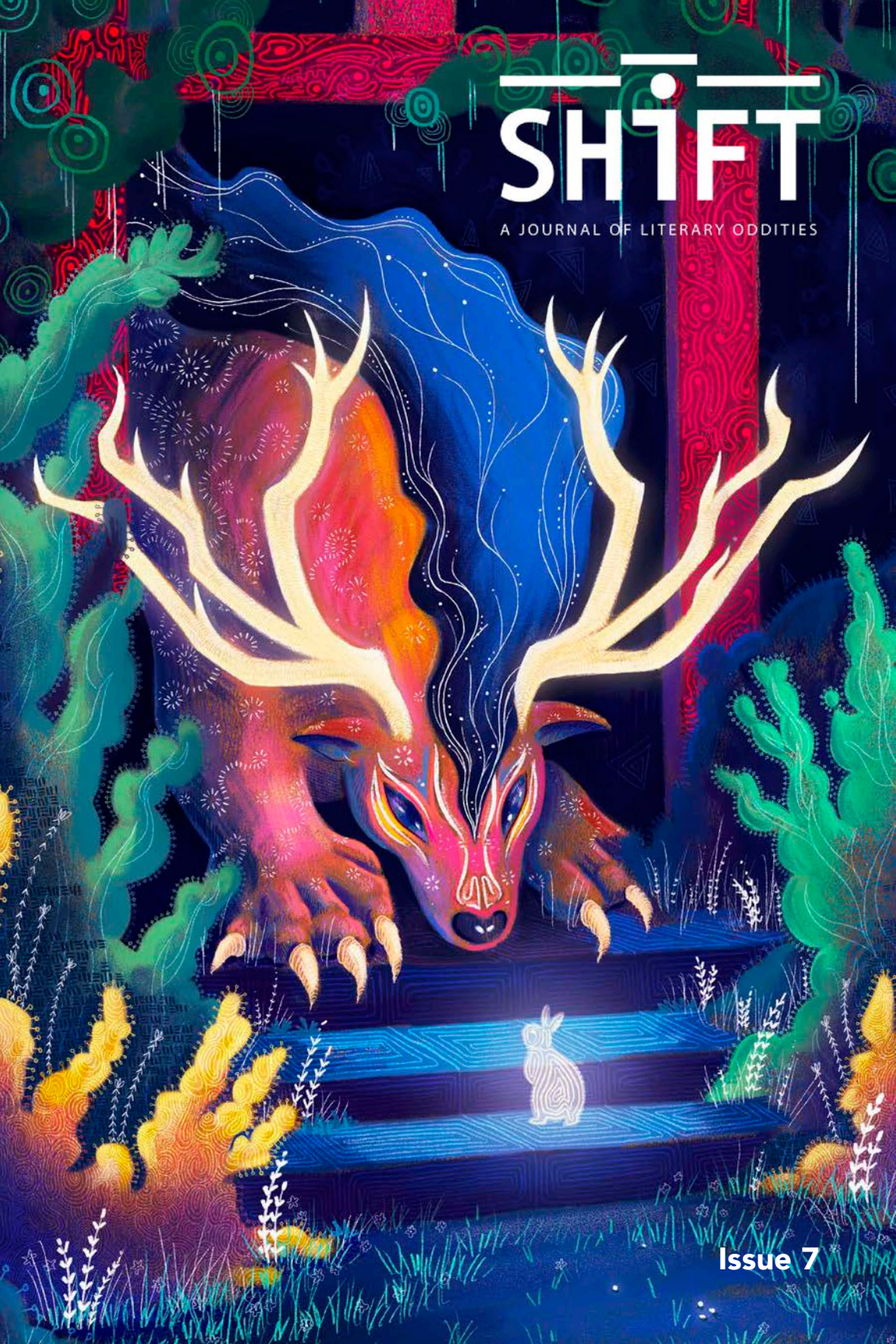


SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES



Issue 7



SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES

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Welcome, dear readers, to the world of *Shift*.

Shift is a multimedia literary journal giving a platform to anyone longing to be heard and understood. We look for pieces that speak from the heart and help us understand our world, its oddities, and ourselves. Here fantasy and folklore meet the raw and the real.

Contributors to Issue #7 live in seven different countries and assorted states. They bring to these pages a wide-ranging and profound awareness of the fragility, and mystery, of human experience. Through words and images, they temper pain and loss with connection and passion.

We receive more good work than we are able to fit in our journal. The editorial board read every submission blindly and picked pieces that touched, tickled, or surprised us. This year, we have a grant that enables us to recognize exceptional storytelling, the best of the best, with a small award. Look for the stars on the table of contents.

At Ringling College of Art and Design, we value the creativity of the human mind. Creativity holds us all together, reminding us that, at the core of existence, we are all one. It is our biggest hope, dear reader, that you will discover pieces of yourself scattered across this collection of works. May you find your soul in our poetry and your heart in our prose.

Sincerely,
Shift Editorial Board 2025

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Edward Michael Supranowicz

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Little Guardian
✧art award

MPDGF
✧overall award

On Mount Everett
✧prose award

I Hope I Call My Mom
✧poetry award

Admit It

David Romanda

If she were hot,
you wouldn't care
that she believed
the government
is run by lizard people.



On Mount Everett

Mika Seifert

Alvin Peak found death in a bookshelf. A Malaysian Airlines plane had just gone missing, and he had gone in search of distraction. But what to read? Which book to pick? It proved harder than opening a jar of pickles, which Alvin never seemed able to do, blaming soft hands that never found traction and always slipped off the rim.

More than 200 passengers on board, CNN reported. A minute later, it was 200 souls, and Alvin pictured reporters-at-large staring at the sky, counting the departed as they changed from lifeless, crushed bodies on the ground to something else as they regained altitude. *Two hundred souls*, he thought. *What if one of them had been me?*

His father had been a physicist, an adherent of the relative state theory of quantum mechanics, or Many-Worlds Interpretation. "Everything physically possible happens somewhere," he used to tell little Alvin, doodling trees branching off into infinity.

"What happens on this one?" little Alvin would say, pointing to one of the branches.

His father was never shy of an answer. Squinting at the branch, he would say, "Oh, on that one, I can clearly see you becoming a famous soccer player." Tasked with interpreting another branch high atop the tree, really nothing more than a twig incapable of holding a leaf, he might say, "Why, champ, that's our branch right here. We're sitting in this room chatting. Can't you see?"

Everything physically possible happens somewhere. Belief in a gazillion copies of himself had turned Graham Peak into a man of action with a giant appetite for life. It had made Alvin something else.

Which one to pick? Which was the right book for him at this moment in time on this branch? A humdinger if ever there was one. The more he looked, the more morose he turned. There was a new single-volume history of the United States he had been eying for a while, but it seemed like an enormous commitment.

Alvin owned close to 10,000 books, about a third of which he had read. New ones arrived all the time. In fact, almost daily. Without exception, these were all books he was intensely interested in at the time of purchase,

having read a blurb here or there, and though he knew he might not get to them for a long time, that never stopped him from buying. Alvin was hooked on hardcovers, and he lived in mortal fear of one selling out and leaving him stuck with a paperback for eternity. And so he collected hardcovers, filling up shelf after shelf and making a mountain range whose ridges stretched all the way from the living room to the kitchen by way of an expansive hallway.

As he contemplated a choice between an old thriller (Eugene Burdick's *The 480*) and the new Murakami, his eyes were drawn instead to a tome on the bottom shelf. *The List*, by an Icelandic author, Gunnsteinn Gunnsteinsson. Wherever had he picked it up? He couldn't for the life of him remember, hadn't looked at it for years and years. He slid it out now, perusing its dust-covered pages. Something landed on him like a heavy hand, and he knew he would no more read it today than next month or next year. In fact, he might never read it.

Same for its neighbors, the complete short stories of Clarice Lispector and Finn Pepper's *Antique Rust*. Would he pick them up on a whim in 10 years, 20 years? He couldn't fathom an earthly reason. So why were they here? What were they doing? Alvin dropped *The List* and bent to pick it back up. He caressed its cover, gazing at the painting, which showed a tower made of books, aslant and in danger of toppling. "Will I ever read you?" he asked it.

"There were 227 souls on board, 12 crew," the CNN anchor said, and for a moment, Alvin didn't know what to make of it. Were the 12 included in the 227, or were they somehow different, a group apart, soulless?

The fact of the matter was, there were books here he wasn't going to read in this lifetime, period. Whom was he kidding? *I Am Roger Mitchell*, by Roger Mitchell? *Bed of Roses*, by Melody Maxwell? No and no. *A History of Radical Carpet Cleaning* by Randolph Steiner? These were worthy books, no doubt. He would never read them. Because he was a mortal. Because he would die.

The thought was like an anvil on his head, and it birthed something odd. Timid Alvin Peak rallied. He felt it like a boost in his heart, or somewhere close to his heart. Superimposed over it. Was it a neighboring branch of the universe reaching out that produced that feeling? One dimension gently tilting toward another? Nudging, leaning in for a kiss? He felt giddy, laughter building down deep and bubbling up like magma.

A sudden idea, setting his branch on fire: What if he just did? What if he read all those long-forgotten books, for the pure heck of it?

For as long as he could remember, he had read only what he wanted to read. So cliché, so predictable. Any algorithm would have a field day with him, plotting his course. Piece of cake. He would finally turn things around now, turn them upside down. He would start with *I Am Roger Mitchell* and take it from there, read the second-most ridiculous thing, choose only the unexpected, the non-Alvin type of books. Pre-now, would he have been likely to read it? That would be the only criterion. If the answer was no, that book would shoot up to the top of the pile.

Alvin read *I Am Roger Mitchell*, and he read *Bed of Roses*, and he read *A History of Radical Carpet Cleaning*. He even read *The List*. He read *Mount Analogue*, a little book by René Daumal he had never so much as glanced at. A mountaineering adventure. It kept him spellbound for all of its 119 pages.

Reading the last word threw him back into crisis. There were books in his house he would never read a *second time*. That was anvil number two. Bigger, meaner than anvil number one. It dealt him a terrible blow. *There were books already in his house, sitting on his shelves, that he would never read a second time.*

He read *Mount Analogue* a second time. Then he reread *Bed of Roses*, and he reread *I Am Roger Mitchell*.

It had only just begun.

There are books here, came a voice, you will never read a third time.

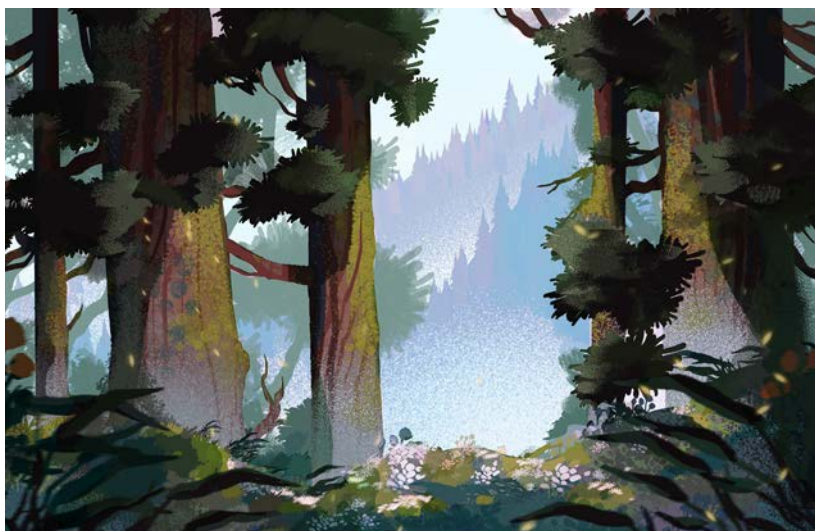
Alvin attacked *Mount Analogue* again, and read it an additional five times that week. He went through it seven times the week after that, and 10 times the week after that. He proved there were books in his house he would read 100, 150 times. Three hundred times. He was bringing the house down, beating the algorithm, death itself. It was exhilarating.

How were the odds he would never read *another* book except *Mount Analogue*? Infinitesimally small. In fact, was he not assured to read other books in his life? A voracious reader like him, there had to be thousands of books waiting for him. He read *Mount Analogue* for the 1,000th time.

They found the plane had made handshakes. They plotted its course. It led into the southern Indian Ocean. Father Sogol led the expedition. They sailed on the *Impossible*. The going was rough. They, too, plotted a course, looking for the mountain.

And Alvin plotted, kept count, never wavered. Fifteen hundred times, 2,000 times, and going strong. He felt he was really hitting his stride now.

Underwater vehicles were scouring the ocean bed for signs of the missing plane. *The Seabed Constructor. Bluefin 21.* They combed the seventh arc. Arcs like branches. This was a concept Alvin understood. They found nothing on the seventh arc, but still they felt sure the plane was there, had to be there. All the pundits agreed, and so did Alvin. *Its summit must be inaccessible, but its base accessible to human beings*, Daumal had written about the mountain. Same as the heart thing. That strange tugging. It affected Alvin in the heart region, but from where did it emanate? What were the coordinates, the exact location? Was it even possible to know? Pieces of the plane washed up now, on Réunion, in Mozambique. A horizontal stabilizer panel, a flaperon. They found the foot of the mountain. There was a bay where they laid the *Impossible* at anchor, preparing for the perilous ascent. They found a peradam on the seventh arc where the plane dipped into another branch and the mountain could be seen in all its majesty, and Alvin, who briefly wondered if *peradam* could also be the word he was looking for, the word for that heart-adjacent region, the one that sent him atingle, remembered what his father, his larger-than-life father who never knew fear, had said about the infinity of branches. Noticing his son's disquiet, his father had said, "My boy, not only do all branches share a common ground and a trunk from which all of them grow and that they can call a mother, but also, they are surrounded by the same sky, any and all of them, even the littlest. Surrounded by sky and growing into sky and feeling sky reach back out to meet them."



Magic Forest

Alisa Nikishin

The Raucous Raven

Mark Wyatt

So now,
with downy
plumage I soar,
an outcast, a has-been,
a heartless betrayer of whispered
confidences, a soulless hunter of illicit
liaisons to cruelly cackle about. With hindsight, I
suppose I was always going to get hammered, scalded
and scolded, should my surreptitious revelling in
indiscretions prompt not careless amusement but
deep pain. Preening and pouting, so glitizily
garbed like a sophisticated star, I found
the whole adulation thing intoxicating
as titillating gossip bubbled like
champagne, but all the time
I was never far from
disaster. I know
now I should
have listened to
the crow warning
of crow's feet
and of playing
with fire.

MPDGF

Madisyn Parisi

Down at the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Factory, past the strands of dyed hair and spilt bottles of fairy dust, there was a workbench. The workbench was eclectic and messy, just like the girls he made. In it were the wooden, broken dreams of a million girls. A lone red scrunchy sat atop it.

There, the man at the workbench made his masterpieces. He made girls cut from fine cloths who engaged in poverty tourism. He made girls you could set in snowglobes and shake up; watch them stumble into cocaine-colored dust! He made them in his image, broken-mirror girls, giving off the optical illusion of wholeness. There was an artistry to it, a craft. He was not a genie. When he granted young men's wishes, it came with no cost to the gentlemen, other than the occasional hard lesson. It was his charity, the only thing that took the man away from his mundane life of teaching ungrateful children and waiting in lines at the grocery store.

It was a simple process, really.

1. You make a girl.

2. Give her soft skin and bright eyes, but eyes that carry melancholic knowledge, too. These girls haven't lived easy lives, even if they were—by design—easy.

3. Give her a Quirk. She has to have a *thing*, lest He grow bored of her. Girls aren't like men; they need things. A strange little habit: the click of nails, mismatched socks, a deep love of the literary epic. Whatever would draw Him in.

4. (Remember, He is not a god, not in the traditional sense, only in the way that young men and their desires are always, on some level, God. No, He is a loser boy who's only ever cum into gym socks, who has never had true romance, only sneers and fantasies. Until *she* comes in.)

5. The girls should always be young, or at the very least younger than they look. Always younger than Him, and always far younger than the man himself. He thought distance made for good art, and women of his age were an entirely different genre of creature: old and married, sad and cat-ridden.

5a. Sometimes he built bomb wires into them instead of veins. That was the convenient part! When the boys—newly men—were done with them,

they would be gone. No cleanup, no suspicious story about moving far away, never to be heard from again. Just . . . *kaboom*. The timing mechanisms were exquisite and often gave the boys the final push they needed. A well-placed car crash could build such character.

6. Consider the name. He picked nouns or obscure places, sometimes stroking the wiry gray hairs that sprang haphazardly from his chin as he contemplated the perfect one. It has to be a symbol. Direct. A girl with a frigid state's name has to be a real bitch. A girl with a flower name would have them laid on her grave when she died.

7. A dash of Daddy Issues never hurts. This one's name is Poppy. She wears rain boots even when it's not raining. She gallivants around in her galoshes until she meets Him, and then she teaches Him about counterculture, about existing, about the fundamental human sadness in all of us. She dances coquettishly in the rain, and He calls her a madwoman. Her parents named her that because when she was born, she came out all shiny with her mother's wetness, red-faced like a poppy. Also, her mom had an opioid addiction. Her father used to hit her, but not that much.

8. Sign your work. The man would take out his pen and sign the left foot, like a child would her dolls, laying claim to his creations. He would sit back in his workplace, admiring his finished product: a girl who could turn a boy into a man in as quickly as two weeks! As long as a semester at boarding school. (Boarding schools were harder—sex-segregated dorms, an actual desire for education. . . . It took a sturdier, more persistent girl to get through to Him, not the laissez-faire creatures he made for the public school boys.) Either way, the girls were made complete, ready for Him, ready to serve their purpose.

9. Then, the magic happens.

#

His pen was running dry. The man lamented the loss of the ballpoint pen that he'd used to mark each and every finished project since he began his factory a couple years ago. He sighed and dropped it into the tidy waste bin that sat near the workbench. There, it would fade into obscurity with the other trash—dozens of bond-paper designs of girls, crumpled and crushed into balls. Girls that hadn't made it past the blueprint phase. An odd eye whose oddity fell on the strange side, rather than the pretty or intense one. Once, he'd made one with the pupil located inside the sclera. It blinked at him horrifically from the trash and shed a mucousy silver tear when his discarded pen whacked it.

He would need a new pen now. A quill, maybe. He'd certainly earned the majesty of the tool. He wandered through the factory, listening to the regular cacophony of off-key songs in Swedish. The girls brought so much joy, even in the brief time before they were shipped off. He smiled and nodded as he passed each of them taking their daily free time to wander the factory floor. He was of the opinion that the time off of the racks would give them that realistic feeling, like when Civil War reenactors yellowed "historical" documents with coffee. He noted Virginia, Lola, Opal, Poppy, and . . . no. There was no fifth girl!

He had made five this past month, though he hadn't deployed any of them yet. She should have been ready and waiting, daydreaming about Picasso and Dalí.

He rushed from the factory floor, past the conveyor belts of Doc Martens and dainty wrists, to the industrial metal racks where the girls spent most of their time. Maybe she'd grown overwhelmed by the tragedy of her era of creation and retired to the rack early today. He himself had once mourned being born into an era in which all creation was recreation, in which all attempts at novelty were folly. Surely, the idea of being so temporally separated from her long-dead artistic idols could have distressed the girl. But all five racks hung from the wall, empty.

One of the girls had escaped.

#

Her name was Autumn.

She was a half-done girl, all Quirk and no lesson. Her left foot was out there, unclaimed, painted a pearlescent white with no interruption save for the weird mole he'd given her there. She was terribly self conscious about it.

She did not want anyone, and not in the way that some girls didn't want but secretly wanted. Not in the *right* way. He hadn't given her Desire yet. Hadn't given her a slut pre-directive, or a feminist man-hating bent yet.

She was a Nothing, a poor lost soul out there in the world.

More specifically, in New York City. It made sense she'd fled there. He had built her as a city girl, so she could teach an idealistic boy from Bumfuck, Nowhere, about the ways of the modern world.

The man stared intently at the map before him on the workbench with its single, burnt-orange leaf marking Autumn's position in the state. He would find her. He would right this wrong before she could do irreparable damage. He would save the poor boy she was meant for.

The man rolled up the map into a prim scroll, tucking it away into his brown leather messenger bag. It was not, as Virginia had so rudely suggested last week, a purse.

#

He narrowed down the search easily enough, since he'd made her a college girl. Autumn's Quirk was the history of football—soccer to Americans, but she insisted on the British name. She could rattle off win-loss records from any English game in the last 50 years, though she knew nothing of the players' or the teams' stories. Only ever the scores. The draws were her favorite.

So when he first found her, as he stared at her through both his gold-rimmed spectacles and his binoculars, she was in the stands of NYU's soccer field. He took notes frantically. She had tied back her auburn ringlets in a sporty ponytail, not a bandana as he'd planned. She wore a crop top that bared her midriff, not a tie-dye shirt she'd stolen from her dead dad. It was all wrong.

The worst part, though, was that she wasn't alone. She had made a friend, and not some benign "boy-friend not boyfriend" type, either. The girl had found herself another girl.

#

Over the next week, he followed the two of them from place to place, looking for his opening. The girls got coffee together at hole-in-the-wall cafés, and they told absurd jokes. They talked about *Sex and the City* and who was a Carrie and who was a Samantha, which made no sense to him. He felt oddly excluded from their conversations. The man sighed. Pulling his newly acquired quill out of his bag, he wrote a check to the café owner. Thanks to him, the place would be closed for the next few days, so no one would think it strange that Autumn, the regular who smiled too much at the barista, was missing. No one would care at all.

#

The man followed her back to her apartment. Autumn was on her cellphone, rattling off something trite about capitalism. She was enraptured in the discussion; she must have made *another* friend. She didn't seem to notice him, her own creator's gaze going entirely unappreciated. He took a shaky breath.

He dared to follow her closer, sliding into the building's old-fashioned, ornate elevator just as the doors slipped shut. Art deco must've

been the inspiration judging by its bold brass ceiling. The buttons, numbered 1 to 100, stared at him like a million tiny silver bugs. He held a newspaper up in front of his face, ignoring the headlines about school shootings and sexual assault scandals. He had more important matters to contend with.

Autumn chose the 77th floor—7-7, like a tie match in soccer, he thought to himself. Some things would never change. Even out in the world completely unprepared, she'd adhered to his designs. Perhaps she was salvageable, if he scrapped her for parts. Started again from zero.

"What floor?" she asked him, her tone sweet as tinkling Christmas bells. Oh, he had given her such a pretty voice.

"One hundred," he said with uncharacteristic confidence.

She smiled at him. "Top of the world. Must suck when the elevators break down."

"I wouldn't know; I'm just visiting," the man said. "A little day trip."

"I'm Autumn." She offered him her hand, and his pulse quickened. He'd made the sort of girl who shook hands with strangers, who didn't know the sorts of things strange men in elevators wanted to do to her. The way bad men would want to fuck her and hurt her and use her. Luckily, it was just him.

He took her hand, briefly relishing the softness of her palm, and lowered the newspaper. Instead of shaking her hand, he kissed the top of it. The girl's eyes lit with surprise, then horror, as she recognized him. She hurriedly pulled her hand away, but they were only on floor nine. They had a long way to go.

"Come home, Autumn," he said gently, like a father explaining to his son why the dog just *couldn't* come back from the farm upstate. "You're not finished. You're not right."

"Stay the hell away from me," she hissed, looking to the panel of buttons on the elevator. "I *am* right, I'm happy, I'm not a prisoner anymore—"

But a prisoner she still was. As she lunged for the elevator buttons, he stepped calmly in the way to block her path.

The man smiled sternly. "Now, now, let's just calm down. I'm sure this has been a fun vacation, and I made you as a free spirit, so maybe this will build character for when you're shipped out. But it has to end. There's a boy out there who needs you. He needs you more than air, Autumn."

"Please don't do this," she whispered, her icy blue eyes frantic and wide. "Please don't make me go back. Take someone else, make a copy of me, I—I have a life here, I have friends."

"Those aren't really your friends, Autumn. They don't know you like I do." He set a hand on her shoulder. In an awkward maneuver, his other hand pressed the 1 button on the elevator panel behind him. "I made you. I'm . . . I'm your father." Even as he said it, it didn't come out right. It was a half-formed attempt to put love and force of creation into words that would never do them justice.

Autumn's eyes darkened, and he found himself glancing down at her chest, the crop top with a band name he didn't recognize. She was smaller-chested than most of the others, but it was cute.

"My father is dead," she snapped, seizing her arm back from him. "And you killed him. I don't even *have* a father! Leave me alone!"

The man shook his head. Such damage and cognitive dissonance would be difficult to undo. He'd have to put her in the bin, mostly. Maybe he could salvage an elbow or her nipples for a future girl. He stepped closer to her, placing his hands on the sides of her head and running his fingers through her perfect red hair. He shushed her, soothing her like a startled mare. "We'll make this right," he murmured. "We'll tell a better story."

She stamped hard on his foot.

"Motherfucker!" he gasped as he felt the sickening crunch of his phalanges shattering under her combat boot. This was more wrong than he'd realized. He hadn't put a violent bone in her body, but she was downright nasty. He mourned at the thought of having made such a wicked creature.

Luckily, he had been smart. Each girl had a built-in fail-safe. "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you, I promise." He took a tepid step towards her, and then Autumn's ending began.

But she was already lost to an animalistic rage. She dove for the elevator buttons, and when he grabbed her waist, she changed course. She threw herself desperately over and over again at the elevator's metal doors. She jabbed her bony elbows into his torso and clawed him with her nails, banging her head against the metal wall. But it was all for naught. He hadn't made her to be a fighter. She was an artsy, melancholic girl. A fighter wouldn't have gotten date-raped on the way home from junior prom like Autumn had. A fighter would've been able to stop that villain from having his way with her. All for the purpose of making her who she was meant to be for Him, carving out the Proper Backstory, a perfect cocktail of femininity and sorrow. Still, she yowled even as he managed to restrain her.

He jammed his fingers into her pants, his palm slipping past her thin waist and soft ass, feeling under the dark-wash denim of her jeans until he found it: the butterfly tattoo on the back of her left leg—and *pressed* it as the girl screamed.

Autumn exploded into a puddle of ink and viscera.

It would be quite the mess for whoever was on custodial duty today, the man thought, sparing a moment to pity the guy. Still, the man let out a sigh of complete relief.

Then he saw Him. Somewhere in all the chaos, the elevator doors had opened to reveal a college-age boy. He stared at the man in abject horror, and the man adjusted his collar awkwardly.

"You weren't meant to see that," he muttered.

The boy stared, His eyes flicking stupidly between the man and the pile of ink-stained guts He'd maybe had a crush on. This floor was Autumn's floor. He must have been a neighbor. Someone she flirted with in stairwells and made shaky promises to.

"I . . . uh. Don't worry. She wasn't right for you." He tried to comfort, the words stiff. The poor kid had just lost the supposed love of His life. Of course He was upset. Her detonator had been set so far out; it wasn't meant to happen so soon. He wasn't ready.

The boy backed away slowly. He was breathing quickly, too quickly—asthmatic, perhaps. The man mentally filed that away as a possible new Quirk.

"What the *fuck* was that? You . . . you killed her!"

The man let out a breathy laugh. "Oh, no, I didn't kill her. She was never alive, after all. Just a figment of hormonal male desire. Don't worry, son. There will be other, better girls. Autumn was more of . . . a lesson."

The boy turned around and ran for His life.

The baroque elevator doors slid shut with a gleeful *ding*!

Under Painted Grace

Michael Roque

Impoverished child—

for nickels, dimes
bought by beauty.
Taught grace,
not from love
but from life confined.

Glamor-touched teen—

trained to speak,
to walk
for lust-filled eyes.
Stripped of name,
wrapped in robes—
to the highest bidding price
child purity sold.

Woman fully realized—

through fog of an aged mind
drifts upstream
from cherry-colored Kyoto
to childhood slum.
On a seaside,
the missing sister,
the parents long passed.
All gone—
without goodbye.

Fat Men Brawling in Key West

Hugo S. Simões

On a damp summer night,
I sit in my empty living room
and treat myself to a cold
bottle of beer.
I cannot sleep.
I pry the cap off and enjoy
that thirsty hiss.
After a large gulp of iced malt
I gasp, the way you do in commercials.

From behind the TV cabinet,
a single lightbulb pours yellow
on the ceiling.

Somewhere, a big red spider spins its web.
I get to thinking of the poets—
fat men brawling in Key West.

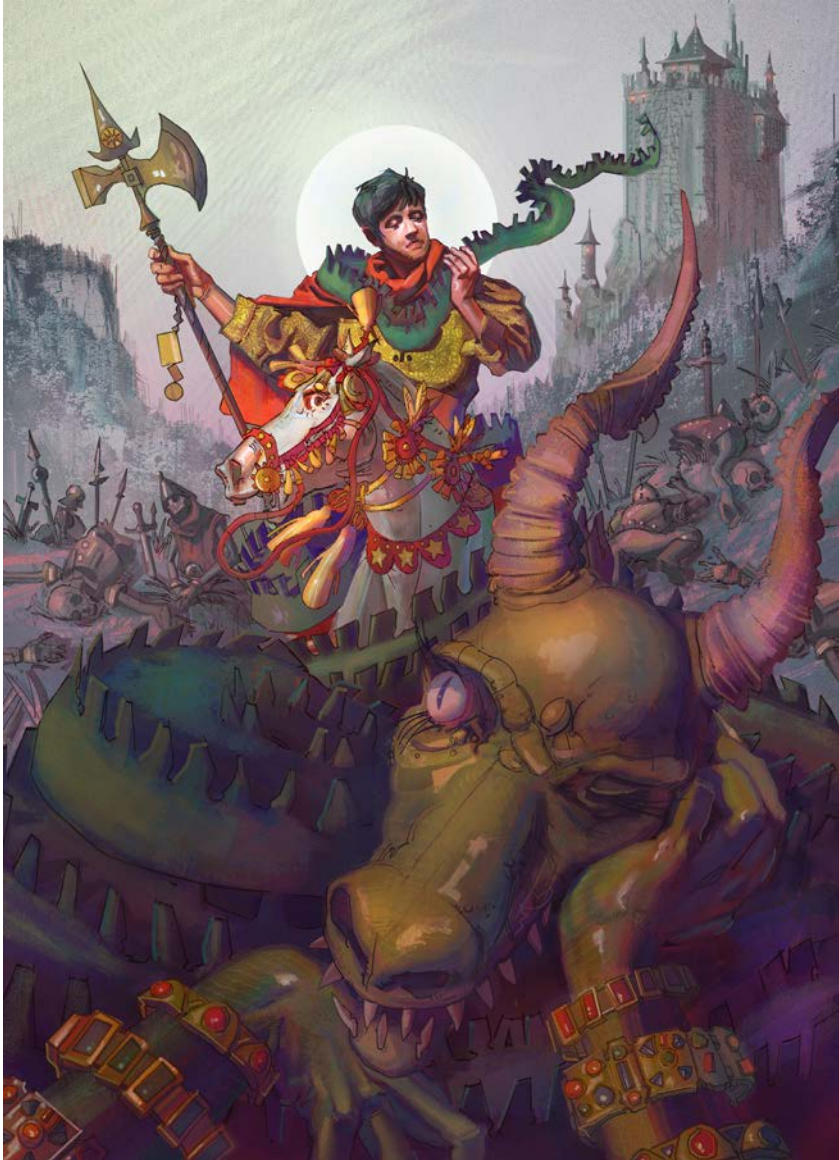
I picture them aiming at each other,
fists swinging wide.

They run their fine linen suits
into the ground.

As they splash around in dirty puddles,
rain dripping from their cuffs,
I weigh their predicament
against mine.

I think,
and the more I think,
the more I want to
bring them to my side,
sit them on my lap,

lay my arms on their shoulders,
wrap my hands around their heads,
scrunch the bones of our cheeks
together, say,
Help me, friends—
I'm dying.



George and the Dragon
Finn Wilson

What Lies in Fathers' Dreams

Angelina Leaños

[Dream:]

You're 20 again and never meet the girl
Who came back to ask for your landline
During your shift at Food 4 Less
You decide to trade your fists for a pen
But still, the gangs find you that night
You broke your promise to stay home
When you join the fight in the alleyway
You feel the switchblade pierce your chest
Breath slowing until—

[Dream:]

Here you age backward until you are 12
And ~~dragged~~ encouraged to join your father
En el valle, work comes before school, and you
Remember how los campos calloused your child-
Hands until the sunset bled onto the horizon
In this world, you forget to attend the party
Where your future wife asked you to dance
Instead of coming home to a family, you work
And work and work and work and—

[Dream:]

Your only child is never born in this one
Your father never looks at her with indifference
You and your wife still cannot have another
And you will never know that daughter
—She alone—would have been enough
To save your marriage from the silence
Of never knowing how you could be
A better father than your own
A father who—

[Dream:]

This is the dream you hate the most
Tonight, you are abandoned in the hospital **again**
And after hours of struggling, you manage to stand
Only to find decaying bodies calling out to you
Faces blur until each one resembles your father's
Your father, who never embraced you softly
Your father, who only reaches out in this world
Calling you not son but vessel, ghost, prisoner
As if your father didn't—

[Reality:]

~~You escape the nightmares~~
~~You are unharmed~~
You survive



Chance Meeting
Makaela Striffler



Be Resilient
Naomi Van Putten

I Hope I Call My Mom

Haley Lang

i hope five years from now i know who i am
i hope i spend my saturday afternoons scrubbing cake-crusteds pans in a big
farmhouse sink
i hope there's a suncatcher hanging from a window that is cracked open and
i am feeling
the chill of autumn

and i hope when i am done i light a candle and make myself a cup of coffee
maybe i'll like it black
(or maybe i'll just add some creamer)

and i'll cozy up on a couch that i thrifted with my own money
and i hope i still have an endless supply of throw blankets and pillows
heavy cotton soft plush thickly knitted

i hope i call my mom and tell her about my day
and i hope i think to ask her about hers
i hope she's proud of me and i hope she feels as warm as i do
in this moment

and i hope she reminds me to blow out the candle i had lit
and i hope i can tell her that i've already done it

i hope i tell her i miss her
i hope she misses me back

i hope i pull one of many blankets close to me, bundled up like i bundled up
my babydolls
and i sink into the cushions
for a warm nap

How to Care (for the Dead and the Living)

Michael A Leavy

The Dead—I

Once, when I was a little kid, I came across a big-ass dead bird in my grandparents' driveway. I ran into their house and was all, Nana, there's a dead bird in the driveway, and it makes me sick to see it! It'll make me throw up!

She went out there, grabbed a shovel, scooped up that bird, and dumped it in the trash can.

Later, it occurred to me to be grateful that it hadn't gone into the eternally simmering pot of spaghetti sauce on the stove in her kitchen, like my mother's pet rabbit once had.

The Living—I

There's a photo of me when I was 4, or nearly 4, looking desperately cute in a sailor suit, and protective of a giggly little girl in a frilly dress sitting in a cutesy little rocking chair. One day, this photo was passed around Nana's kitchen table and forensically examined.

The adult women of the family—Nana and her three daughters—were drinking coffee and failing to agree about what they were seeing. My cousin Geralyn—younger than I by a month—and I were at the table, too, eating pan' e sugo (crusty Italian bread smothered in spaghetti sauce from the eternally simmering pot on Nana's stove; my younger sister, Kathy, was—well, she was either at the table or wandering about the kitchen. I'm not sure—she was always up and down . . . probably wandering. I don't think she liked pan' e sugo, and she'd dismissed the photo with a single glance.

There wasn't room at the table for all of us who were sitting there, and yet we were all sitting there. It was always that way at Nana and Grandpa's.

And the argument: my mother maintained that the giggly little girl in the photo was Kathy:

She always smiles like that when she's with her Bubba. He takes such good care of her and she adores him (true—the "adores him" part, anyway).

Kathy's brain-damaged, so everyone took a moment for platitudes, before Geralyn's mom—the middle sister of the three—launched her salvo. It's Geralyn,

she said. That girl in the picture is too old to be Kathy. And Michael is just as protective of Geralyn—he knows she needs the protection.

Auntie always reminded everyone that I was the smart one in the family. Oldest of his generation, the only one who could walk through Grandpa's garden with him and not destroy something, destined to be the family lawyer, thus destined to be everyone's protector, basically (we were a Mafia-adjacent family).

More platitudes were exchanged, and then the youngest sister launched her provocation:
It's me and my brother Mike.

The two of them were way younger than the older sisters, so this shut everyone up for a minute. Could it be? Nah.

Ger and I left the table to play in the next room while coffees were refilled, and Kathy may have joined us. Did I mention, Kathy was severely, as we said then, mentally retarded? That's why everyone cared how I took care of her. Kathy's brain was damaged by the incompetence of delivery-room personnel—mostly the same ones involved in my birth—but that was a story that my mother kept secret for decades.

So, anyway, Ger and I didn't see the look on our mothers' faces when Nana sat back down and said,
Stupidi! That's your dead baby brother in the picture, and your cousin Gina. Which is to say, the boy was her son, Joey, who—if it was him—would have been dead soon after the photo was taken.
So, you mean, not me? I didn't say from the other room. But Geralyn and I exchanged a look.

By now, with two children in the photo becoming seven, and with ancient grief having entered the picture, I wonder in retrospect if my mother also saw, somewhere in there, one more child, unborn, hers, the one she miscarried in the gap between myself—the child who almost killed her—and my sister, the child whose damaged brain my mother carried like a mortal wound?

If so, she took that secret to her grave.

The Living—II

The first time I almost killed my mother was the afternoon on which I was born. She liked to remind me of this on Mother's Day, because it was on Mother's Day that I made my nearly fatal entrance into her life. She never specified exactly what happened in the delivery room that afternoon,

perhaps out of fear that I would try it again, perhaps simply out of a sense of decorum.

All she'd say was
I almost died, Michael.

Still, I nearly sent her to the grave perhaps another half dozen times before I reached third grade and finally got my act together. These all involved me getting too close to dogs, horses, and other four-legged animals to which she was deathly allergic, then smearing their dander all over her the next time I hugged her. Or something. I was just a kid, so I'm unclear on the details. But she'd be rushed to the hospital, and—so she'd tell me later (and later, and again later)—
I almost died, Michael.
You nearly killed me.

#

But that was her life: "I almost died, Michael!"

I shouldn't joke. She was sickly, and her friends, when she was growing up, were always taking her horseback riding, or going horseback riding without her, or something, and next thing you'd know . . . another swing and a miss for Death.

When she was 35 and I was 8, she was diagnosed with lupus and given five years to live. She ducked and dodged death, surfing the leading edge of medical science, for another 50 years, time and again emerging from the hospital.

I almost died, Michael!
she'd say.
You don't know how close I came.

#

Somewhere, though, between 35 and 85, after watching her mother spend her last few years in a nursing home, my mother found a new theme: Michael, she'd say, shoot me before you put me in a nursing home.
Long pause.

No. I take that back. I could never ask you to do that.

#

I did put her in a nursing home, of course. I mean, what would her brother and sister have said if I shot her? And there was only the one year where she spent all her time with her head in her hands muttering over and over again, I wish I were dead,
then one last year, vaguely smiling at me and saying when I came to visit, Oh, that's nice.

#

I almost managed to have her hand in mine when she died. I was holding it just before she died, but she was holding onto life, too. When I noticed that our favorite Christmas song was stuck on a loop on the portable CD player and got up to fix it, that gave her her chance. She died while I had my back turned and she had her hand to herself.

The Dead—II

I spent six, maybe five, months when I was a college student as a Senior Ward Clerk, weekend midnight shift, Coronary, Medical, and Respiratory Intensive Care Units at the University of Michigan Medical Center. I saw, or rather wrote up, several deaths per shift. That was mostly what I did, sitting at my counter at the intersection of the three units, alone in the darkened, silenced midnight corridor: wait for someone to need a death written up, or more often to request a rush medication from the pharmacy, or less often to ask me to run a special errand. It was the special errands that gave me nightmares.

There was one patient in Medical ICU that took weeks—many weeks—before the time came to write her death up, and when it came, she gave me two to write. To everyone's surprise, it turned out that she, who'd been in a coma all that time, fighting some ailment that threatened to turn her blood to dust (and finally did), had been carrying a dead fetus which, I guess, she spontaneously . . . *delivered* would still be the word I suppose, as she expired.

There is, I know, a sadder story here than I can tell. I understand that a stillbirth is a terrible, terrible thing. But hospitals, ICUs especially, are dens of gallows humors, and this event was too macabre to fit where our emotions lived: Here was one dried-up corpse we'd never known as motile giving "birth" to another, with no kin that we'd ever heard of there to mourn, or ultimately collect, either one husk or the other.

So, after the initial *huh?* came panic. The ICUs and their clerk lack all experience of birth. What certificate do we write? Death? Birth? Both? Neither? What do we do with the, um, smaller body? Dispatched to the pediatric hospital, I had maybe two blocks to walk—UM Medical Center was *big*, with multiple buildings set in and among hills—and the path meandered through hallways lit only well enough to avoid stumbling into the walking dead.

I had to walk those two blocks back with stillbirth paperwork and a metal canister in a picnic basket.

A metal canister in a picnic basket.
No name to put on the paperwork.
Never even spanked.

Before that, I'd had naked-in-church anxiety dreams before exams and such. From then on, it was a-tisket-a-tasket-I-walk-that-baby's-basket-down-an-endless-darkened-hallway anxiety dreams.

The Dead—III

In time, I fled the dead, the dying, and the darkened hallways of the Coronary, Medical, and Respiratory ICUs at the University of Michigan Medical Center for the open spaces of a suburban shopping mall.

It took just a few months for the dead to track me down.

#

I had a sales job in the sort of fancy men's clothing store that was, in those days, expected to house a fancy tobacconist's shop among its departments. Ours was "manned," as we liked to say (it was the '70s, and we were all jackasses), by a very dapper lesbian in tweeds who smoked a pipe on the job.

My friend in the tobacco department acquired a nemesis one day when management hired a Nazi to man the adjacent Men's Furnishings department. He may not, in fact, have been a Nazi, but we all called him that because he was Austrian, homophobic, and it was the '70s, and we were all jackasses.

When the boss introduced us, I thought,
I know that name. When it occurred to me why I knew it, I thought,
No way, Jose. (The '70s, remember?) But I had to ask,
Have you ever died, Maxi?
Why, yes. Yes, I have.
(*Fuck.*)
What makes you ask?

#

He'd died at the very end of one of those weekend midnight shifts on the ICUs, and I'd just had time to get his paperwork started before I clocked out. Macabre as always, the docs had thought it amusing to keep it from me that just after I'd left the building, they'd yanked him back from that shiny light you hear about just after I'd left the building.

A few months after that, Maxi and the jackasses and I did share a laugh about it. As jackasses measure these things, having a reanimated

Nazi corpse manning Men's Furnishings was no small thing, and we bragged about it here and there throughout the shopping mall. But, frankly, it didn't make us any fonder of him.

And when he was looking elsewhere, we couldn't help but eyeball him carefully, just to check for signs of decay.

The Living—III

There was a time when I lived in a neighborhood where dead birds fell from the sky every Fourth of July. Aunts and uncles and cousins, even Nana and Grandpa, would come to watch the dead birds fall. Well, to watch the fireworks launched skyward like an assault on enemy birds from the treeless park that bordered our backyard.

I personally hoped that the birds would land in someone else's backyard. I preferred the live cinders; they were fun to stomp on, but then, they scared Kathy, so that was no good. The men got a kick out of making wisecracks about the falling birds (some of which weren't dead yet and staggered off to the front yard to die, or maybe even fly away). Those birds they'd salute with their beer cans.

On those summer days, my friends and I would play Vietnam: climb up in trees, pretend the passing cars were enemy tanks, and blow them up with bazookas or something. We were very unclear about what Vietnam was like, maybe World War II Europe but more trees and smaller, skinnier Nazis. Snakes and elephants. It was 1966 or thereabouts, and it would be another year or two before we started to get good intel from older brothers or cousins or coworkers on summer jobs.

It's possible that on one or another of those dead-bird nights, my family began making their plans on how to ship me to our relatives in Canada in case my draft number came up. They had it all worked out; even the Canadians were in on it. But the draft ended just before I turned 18.

That's when my veteran friends took over, started looking me up and down, saying,

If you're thinking of volunteering, just say so: We'll shoot you now.

It's awfully nice when people care about you like that, don't you think?

IDENTITY

STORY: PATRICK McEVoy

ART: OLIVIA PELAEZ

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?





INTERVEN IS A SUPERHERO WHO REALLY WANTS TO FIND A SOLUTION TO A DILEMMA.



WHO IS THAT MAN IN THE PICTURE?



DOES ANYONE KNOW?



SOCIAL MEDIA. WEBSITES. POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS. PASSWORDS. TAX FORMS, AND SOCIAL SECURITY. THE TRACES ONE CAN LEAVE IN SOCIETY DON'T GIVE HIM ANY ANSWERS.



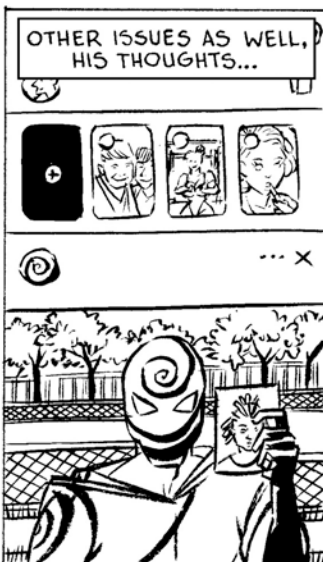
THE PURSUIT FOR THE TRUTH PUSHES INTERVEN FORWARD. HE GOES ABOUT AND STOPS CRIMES.



FROM THOSE WHO ASSAULT INSTITUTIONS TO THOSE USING THE COVER OF SUCH LEGITIMACY TO COMMIT THEIR OWN LARCENY.

ALL THE WHILE BEING DRIVEN BY THE BURDEN OF WHO IS IN THE PICTURE.





The Questioner

Belle Waring

Faust: Who then art thou?

Mephistopheles: Part of that power which still produceth good/Whilst ever scheming ill.

Lyukan Makaryovich Chorny was on the toilet when the Tayny Prikaz came, so that he was almost more embarrassed than he was terrified, which anyone would agree was wrong. He was taking a shit too, so being dragged off the thing—which stood behind a curtain in the kitchen—was doubly unpleasant.

He was a tall man with hair the color of rust, and wore a stretchy tan suit he only used at home. Naturally, he hadn't done anything wrong—when did people do wrong? But equally, when did that ever stop anyone from getting into difficulties? It must be admitted that he wrote poetry, but it was anodyne, about seasons, and larches, and mushroom picking. It was good, but not extraordinary. He even dashed off laudatory poems to Tsarina Katerina III, just in advance of this fatal moment. He had many times considered it might come; he almost half-expected it. Not in any “prophet of disaster” fashion, but rather, an equanimous one. The poems were all snatched up together from his desk drawer with an air of ridiculous triumph by a sallow man with pocked cheeks, and Lyukan Makaryovich had no doubt they would be the end of him, somehow, odes and larches and all.

“On your feet, Chorny.”

As if they had not thrown him down to begin with! His neighbor across the way was coming in as they went downstairs, and never had a man looked more intently at nothing. It was as if Lyukan and the three men from the Tayny Prikaz, in their black suits, had made themselves air, and vanished into it. The car was black, naturally, glistening as if some poor soul had been going at it with a chamois during the arrest. For they had announced he was under arrest, while his pants were still around his ankles. Again, shame shouldered fear out of the way. They drove swiftly, and the eyes of the men and women waiting at the crosswalks slid over the black oval of metal about an arshin above the ground, as if seeing nothing there.

One heard of people taken elsewhere, another state building, or even some dacha, so questions could be asked in a more intimate

environment. But those were important people whose careers had plunged into a ravine. Otherwise, there was only the Lubyanka, incongruously pretty with its orange and yellow pilasters. It had been bricked up for a time at some point, but now it was in full swing, people bustling about as they went for lunch, and the parking lots beneath filled with black cars like beetles, hovering in their ranks. For a moment, Lyukan Makaryovich wanted to ask if they took the same car each time, or were they interchangeable, but it was a stupid question, so he stopped himself.

He was dragged unnecessarily to the bank of elevators, when he could perfectly well have walked, but that was the *Tayny Prikaz* for you. He worried they might go down, but they went up. Still, the cell was dark, having no window. It was just as you would imagine. There was something like an interior latrine, and he felt incongruously cheered when he had finished his business. A lightness. And then he waited for a long time.

Lyukan Makaryovich thought they would ask him about his poetry, probing questions about symbolism and so on. For everyone knew there was a sub-branch of the service which studied only literary criticism. They could tease out anti-state sentiments from the fairy tale "Vasilisa the Priest's Daughter." Instead, he was taken to a doctor's office, where he and an assistant took measurements. Some were normal, such as heart rate and reflexes, others less usual, such as ocular tests and chest X-rays. Then there were some he did not see the point of at all: wrapping a red thread round the thickest part of his thigh, making his fingertips yellow with some tincture of iodide, and putting a thing like a priest's *kamilavka* made of chrome strips on his head, and adjusting it.

Once satisfied, they had him change into the blue pajamas one might wear in the hospital and ushered him into a room a few doors down, very large, bright from the windows facing east, and full of machines. They were a bit difficult to understand, but then he saw they were like tilted chaises atop which a cap such as he had been fitted with was the terminus of a great arc of wires and hoses and who knew what, with screens at the side showing various graphs and lines. There were men in most of them, and a few women. It was loud with screams; that might even have been the most notable thing. It was unpropitious, certainly. But what was there to do? Lyukan climbed up onto the chaise with its black rubber covering.

"Hold still, Chorny!" the officer there shouted. Again, so unnecessary, but he imagined they had attended classes, and perhaps sat

examinations, in which they were marked down for not yelling with the right brio. Who was he to set their studies to waste? They fixed the crown on his head and connected it up to the wires and hoses. Glancing to his right, he recognized someone: a novelist, a woman with cropped gray hair, a better writer than he. Once he had caught her mimicking him, capering in a version of his long-legged stalk. Another time she and her girlfriend tore old pamphlets into bits and scattered them over his head shouting that it was snow. But nonetheless, he scarcely liked to hear her regular shrieks, like those of a beaten dog.

Seeing this look, the doctor said genially, "It works better with you lot."

In general, Lyukan Makaryovich found him inappropriate. The doctor who took the measurements was suitably serious, while this man seemed almost jolly. He could see that Chorny was unsettled by the screaming. "You shouldn't worry so much about that." He began to turn dials and then grinned. "It's no Solovki!"

Lyukan Makaryovich did not quite know how to take this. He was not a brave man so much as a fatalistic one; still, he did well, waiting for the pain. But if he screamed, he never knew, for the next moment he was being shoved into a cubicle to change into something warmer and then rushed back to his cell with pointless haste, to eat the food waiting there. It was less revolting than he feared. He was a fastidious man in this way. But black bread and cheese, and sausage, and an apple—this was a perfectly fine thing to eat.

Then he heard the tapping, coming from the pipe along the floor. Six repeating sections, set well apart, then the whole repeated. He had never learned Morse code and never regretted it till this instant. But what else would it be but privet—hello? So, he carefully tapped back. Over the course of the next five days his correspondent taught him to "write." He introduced himself and learned his compatriot was a man named Ivan Ivanovich Potkin, who was a playwright in Piter and had been in the Lubyanka for eight months.

Ivan Ivanovich wanted to play chess, but Lyukan Makaryovich was not good enough to remember the course of play. Sometimes, as a kindness to his new friend, Lyukan Makaryovich would make little balls of bread and tiny bites of apple and put them on a grid he made on the floor with strips of peel, but of course he lost at once, however much he was spotted a bishop. He did not like them in any case, so slantwise, startling you like a monster in a film. They would have to be guests of Her Imperial Highness for some time

before he improved. Like him, Ivan was spending part of each day—who knew how much—under the chrome kamilavka. Naturally it would have been nicer had Ivan been a wealthy priest, and able to dig through the walls of the Château d’If, but it was nothing like that, only Lyukan sacrificing part of his food for chess. But he had a friend.

And then, suddenly, Ivan was gone, and Lyukan Makaryovich tapped into the void. He tried and tried, and eventually there came tapping very faint, which he knew must come from some much further cell, saying only, “You will see them soon. Fear not. You will see them soon.” Lyukan tried again and again to contact this person, but only received one reply after two days, “that they should care after so long.” And then three short taps, somehow sharp and high, laughter: ha ha ha.

He had begun to feel strange under the treatment. He could only imagine that it was agony, which he happily knew nothing of, for he was beginning to feel weak despite the work he did pacing his cell 2,000 steps a day and doing press-ups on the wooden floor. It was rather nice, part of an inlaid design of sheaves of wheat which had been cut off when they made the cell. He admired it often and knew every swirl in the grain as if it had been the face of the girl he loved when he was 17. Sometimes he even used a bit of his water to clean it.

And one day when he returned to his cell, there was another prisoner there. What joy! He had strong features and a bit of gray hair at his temples though he was not old. He wore a sort of green military uniform with laurels at the collar, nothing Lyukan had ever seen. But he was so calm, sitting on the cot, tapping his fingers on the wooden pole that held the canvas. Lyukan suddenly worried they might have to fight for it. Or perhaps, could they both fit, with great discomfort? No, he would let his cellmate have the cot tonight, and they would take turns.

“Friend!” he said. “I am Lyukan Makaryovich Chorny, but you may call me Lukasha.” (This was a little sudden, but he was lonely). “It is with the greatest possible pleasure that I make your acquaintance.” The man inclined his head equivocally.

“I am Vsevolod Nikolaevich Merkulov. The pleasure is mine, also.”

“How long have you been here?”

Vsevolod Nikolaevich frowned. “Do you know, I’m not quite certain.”

Lyukan Makaryovich thought nothing could be more natural. “Ah, yes, I see. Myself, it has been almost four months. Have you been wearing the hat?” He made a rakish gesture. For so they called it, others with whom

Lyukan had spoken. Vsevolod Nikolaevich frowned still further, looking off as if the wall three arshin away were transparent.

"I think so. At least, I've seen the machines. You go inside them?"

"Yes, exactly."

When the tray came, there was only the ordinary amount, and though Lyukan Makaryovich offered to divide it in two, or even give Vsevolod Nikolaevich two parts in three, his new guest refused all food. Likewise, he said he would sleep on the floor, but here Lyukan insisted, and he lay down on the inlaid wood with the sheaves, degraded now where once it had shone in a room where people were happy. But he woke dismayed, as Vsevolod Nikolaevich Merkulov, whom he had already called Yasha in the strange swiftness of this place, was gone. He wanted desperately, deeply, to ask after him, whether he would be sent back, or what had happened, but he knew this was a bad idea and might even for some inscrutable reason get Yasha in trouble. So, he said nothing.

Three weeks later, it happened again. Vsevolod Nikolaevich was leaning against the wall, turning the toe of his shining black shoe against the tip of one of the sheaves, carefully, back and forth. His uniform was impeccable, with the red at the collar, and his hair showed the marks of the comb.

"Yasha! I've been so worried! What has become of you?"

"It's difficult to say. It just seemed appealing here." Lyukan Makaryovich knew he must mean this cell, and not the Lubyanka, but how would he have any say in it? Again, they fought over who would give up the food, with Vsevolod Nikolaevich insisting he had just now been fed a hot stew with potatoes and beef. That settled it, so Lyukan ate all there was. He might have done terrible things for a hot stew. He insisted again on taking the floor and awoke cramped and cold to see his Yasha gone. He went miserable to the chrome machines. The doctor asked him sharply what was wrong, but he denied anything but a pain in his stomach, for which he was given a sachet of revolting powder.

After the third time he could not bear it. He had talked late into the night with Yasha, who was vague about his work but had an interesting life, with a Georgian mother and a Russian father who were, he intimated, minor nobles. It was understandable that he should keep this secret, since the mercantile nobility had been abolished some time ago. And as one would imagine, Lyukan awoke alone, though he had tried not to sleep.

When he was being put into the machine, he asked the inappropriately cheery doctor, "What happened to the man in my cell? I don't mind sharing, you know." There was an undertone in his voice, pleading. The doctor called some officers over, and they took him out of the bright room that rang with screams.

"All right, who was he?" What followed was unpleasant, because, although Lyukan Makaryovich could not imagine anyone getting into his cell without being put there by the jailers themselves, he did not want to betray Yasha. He had lost a tooth before Vsevolod Nikolaevich appeared suddenly in the room, leaning against the white counter with the heels of his palms resting on it. He was not animated, precisely, but he did not display his usual calm, and he apologized.

"I'm quite sorry, Lukasha. You can tell them. Tell them to look me up." Lyukan's head was spinning.

"Yasha?"

"Yes, it's all right, Lukasha. I can keep them away from you also. I am sorry." Lyukan Makaryovich turned to the men, who had stopped when he began talking, and all showed great interest.

"He's Vsevolod Nikolaevich Merkulov." Lyukan was confused. "He's just there." Lyukan motioned to his right. "He says you should look him up."

All the men leaned back, and none bothered to look to where Vsevolod Nikolaevich Merkulov stood leaning so casually against the white counter. The chief officer was smiling. He took a little card out and unfolded it, wrote on it with his finger, and began to scroll back, and back, till he tapped an entry. Then a genuine smile broke over his narrow face, and he passed the entry around, and called for vodka to be brought in. They gave it to Lyukan also, and it probed his tooth socket with a beautiful chill.

"God save you, Chorny. Ask him if he has a good memory." Lyukan turned, and Vsevolod nodded with a demure smile, bright eyes looting under his lashes, like a girl.

"Yes," Lyukan said to the officer. "But what is this?"

"He's a ghost, of sorts." The man lit two cigarettes, and handed one to Lyukan Makaryovich. It was the first he had smoked in a long time, and his hand trembled. "Him, right?"

Lyukan was briefly shown a monochrome of Vsevolod Nikolaevich Merkulov, taken away before he could read anything. "Yes, but younger."

"He was one of Beria's gang, the very top. A hundred years ago. More. Sitting here." The officer pointed to his own chair, then paused. "No, sitting in the head office. He managed to avoid being executed after getting pushed out, denouncing Beria in a fashion so exquisite it was thought more fiction than fact—though it was true! They shot him in the end, of course." Lyukan looked over at his Yasha, who smiled faintly, as if to say, *Being shot is not so much trouble as all that, Lukasha.*

"Normally we just get prisoners or minor security officers from long ago and question them through 'interpreters' like you. Before this, there was another building for internal security here. We occasionally get the types who followed Pushkin around, drawn like moths from the Okhrana in St. Petersburg. But this way, with the man you have found"—the officer leaned back, immensely satisfied, his gray eyes half-closed, clearly thinking in part of his career—"we question the true questioner."

Lyukan Makaryovich still understood nothing. "Why didn't you just ask me if I had seen anyone, then?" His right eye had swelled shut, and he was a shade resentful though, to be fair, this was their métier, the Tayny Prikaz.

"People will say anything at all under the right circumstances, and they could pretend to see someone invisible, and answer questions, and it could all be imagination! Particularly writers and so on—who are the most useful interpreters in some way we don't understand. It's ironic. If we had perfect records, we could catch them out, but . . ." Tilting his head from one side to the other, he poured Lyukan Makaryovich another icy glass of vodka, which he stared through. "But if we had perfect records, there would be no need for any of this." He raised his hand and turned it on his wrist, vaguely gesturing towards the room, and the machines, and the screams.

Lyukan tossed the vodka off and looked back into the glass. "But why would you want someone to answer questions about the past, about so long ago?"

The narrow-faced man looked surprised, shrugging as he took a long drag on his cigarette. He exhaled sharply.

"We want someone to answer questions about everything."

On a Morning When Everything Feels Heavy

Maudie Bryant

The coffee scalds my tongue,
bitter as the ache that woke me.
I think of my father's hands,
how they used to cup my face,
how they smelled
like cigarettes and sawdust.

The world doesn't care
if I stay in bed today,
but my inbox fills
like a sink left running—
so I pull on jeans
stiff with yesterday's sweat,
grab the keys,
and pretend the engine's roar
isn't just another version of my own.



Your Guilty Conscience

Nic Surgit

Safe Conduct

Lauro Palomba

Its habitat long cemented, there it lies
at the concrete's edge, first time seen
a baby garter snake
slim as a straw, no longer than my hand
its triple stripes not yet striking
flashing its tiny, tiny tongue
pondering the next wriggle

Whatever its internal map
all choices clinched a shabby death
the street suicide by rubber crush
the sidewalk fatal with bicycles and pets

Simple to have picked it up
I'm told their bodies are dry
not slimy as our prejudice insists
but love of reptiles, I most surely lack

Not far an undeveloped lot
a paradisaal wooded tract
still wild with shrubs and grass

And so we launched our trek
snake and chaperone
my feet stalking it behind
a threat, a coax, a guard

It undulated laterally at its pace
how much panic fear I cannot say
resting, licking, speeding up
the tongue nonstop querying the air
once I chanced to graze its tail
instinctively it coiled, head lifted, acting tough

At last it concertinaed into pasture
stretched its puny length, rectilinear
with gratitude and farewell
I wished to believe

I counted the near quarter hour shuffle
the distance of a stone flung by a child
though if maiming venom ruled its glands
I might weaken this remark
what we dislike we have no need to harm



Running Out of Time
Fernando Aguirre

Hands-free

Kari Wergeland

Seagulls in the sky
send out their boisterous calls,
and I go to study them.
This stone is cold.

Down below the river flows
into the expanse—
as waves deflate the other way
across scrubbed sand.

Cloudless blue
stretches to the man
with two dogs.
One mutt romps young,
the other old.

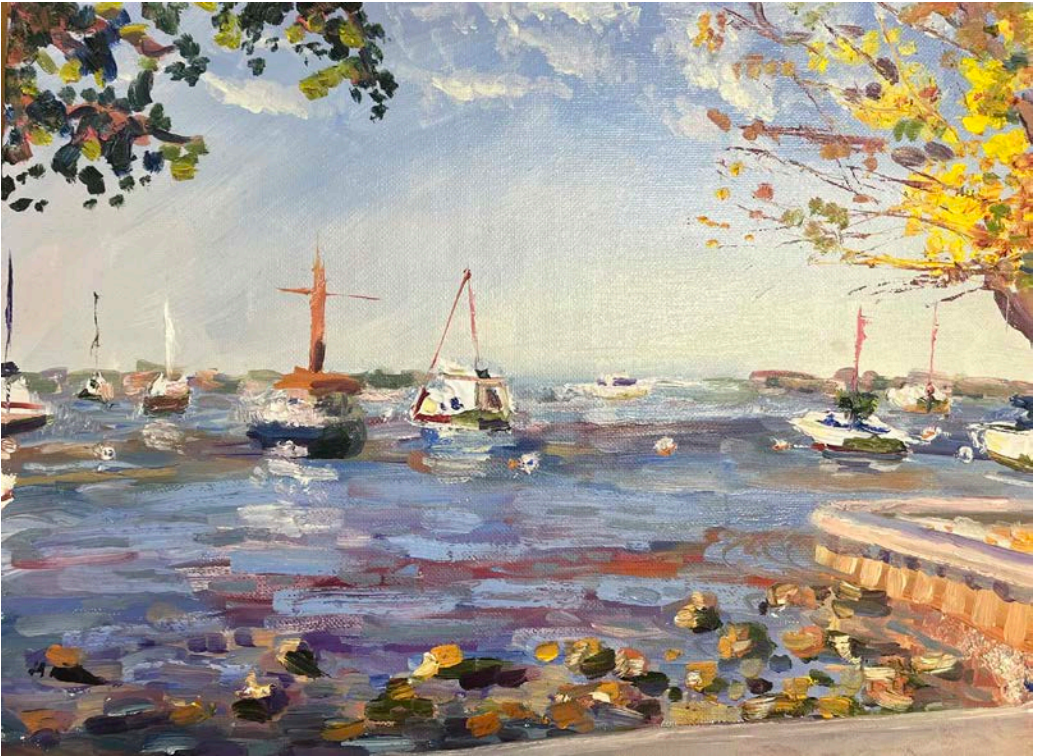
Wind blows up a fan of fine particles.
The gulls are down,
a crowd of fat bodies,
white and gray feathers,
holding still,
as if waiting for a presentation.

Out of the ashes,
my father's spirit moves
into the flock
as if he has something to say.

Some of his dreams still reside
inside my own visions,
the ones that stretch.
And maybe there's something more

inside my calcified core,
something like building blocks.

Seagulls soar,
mass of wings above the scene.
It's good to float hands-free,
release what reaches.



Sarasota Sailboats
Ashley Kormanik

Except

Jeffrey Hantover

*At night, Beatrice Woods dreamed about Duchamp.
"Except for the physical act," she wrote, "we were lovers."*

As Paris was rising from its slumber, they walked hand in hand to the patisserie to buy warm baguettes. Some mornings when his head was bursting with ideas that he couldn't wait to explore in his studio after his morning coffee, he would stride briskly ahead of her. But every half dozen or so steps he would turn around to make sure she wasn't lost among the workers heading for the Metro.

One brisk fall night, they left a club in Montmartre floating on the sounds of Stéphane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt. He stopped and raised his hand toward the starlit sky. He plucked a star between thumb and forefinger and placed it in her open palm. She nestled the star in her sequined evening bag. He took her hand in his, put his arm around her waist, drew her close, and with her cheek against his, they danced in the middle of the empty street to the music of love.

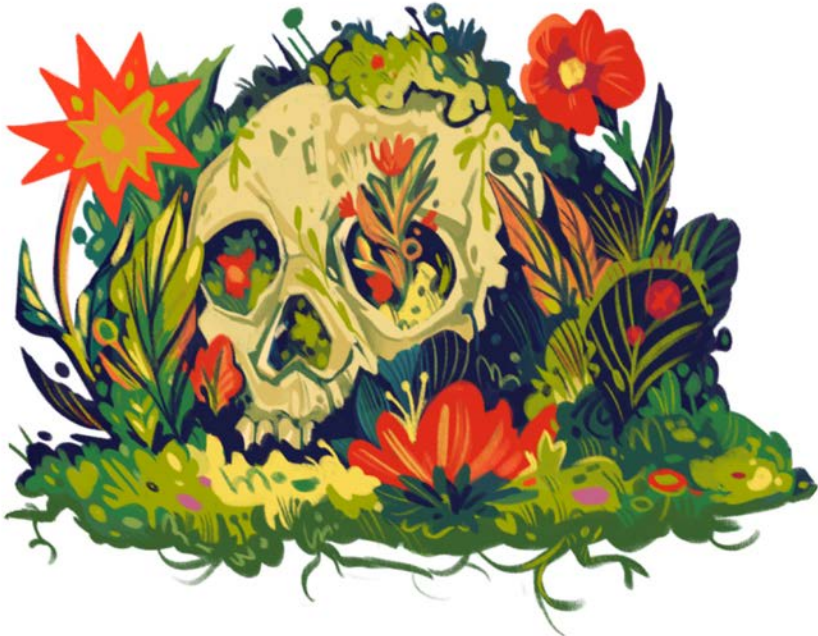


Roman Candles
Anna Rold

And It Was Over

David Romanda

They met at a Starbucks.
She was wearing a black blouse
and jeans and was sitting with a black coffee.
He came over (he didn't even order).
She had the papers out and ready.
"Hi," he said.
She said, "Hi."
She pushed a black BIC pen over to him.
He was standing. He took the pen,
bent down and signed. He didn't look over the papers.
And then he signed his copy.
"Thank you," he said. And he held out the pen.
She took the pen and said, "Thank you."
And then he gave her a bit of a smile
(he didn't intend to smile), and he turned and left.
And he was out on the pavement, and it was over.



Life after Death

Kadin DiStefano

Bring It On

John Grey

That means you,
mutant mailmen
with your tracking stamps
and your loaded letters.

And you mammoth construction guys
tossing girders around like cabers.

And let us not forget
all the genetically-modified government workers
out mugging the old and the insane
on your three-hour lunch breaks.

I can handle you,
vampire parking lot attendant.
And you,
werewolf cop.
And you, snarky girl
behind the counter
at Oily's Fried Donuts.

I may not look like much,
but I floss.
I decorate my apartment in Ikea,
and I don't believe in breast implants
for women.

When I was in high school,
I was a star pole-vaulter.
One day, I leapt so high
I haven't come down yet.



A Clouded Vision
Gillian Ceballos-Kirby

This Is Your Life

Jonathan Chibuiké Ukah

You could have chosen something else,
like spreading out your arms like wings,
to cover the five continents of the world,
and perching on the back of a grasshopper
to distant places, where the stronghold
is a room of Bibles and walls of the Word,
or where the wind is a yellow tongue of fire.

You could have chosen to buy a yacht,
to sail across the Atlantic or the Pacific,
places unknown to the Church of Christ,
where you lie on the surface of the sky
and spend the years counting the stars,
leaning on the barks of the Iroko as Jonah,
knowing no sorrow, pain, and repentance.

You could have chosen to be the lavender flower,
beautiful as the morning dew in summer,
the haze of the moon cascading over your head
and you would not stir from your floral paradise
to weed away the dead leaves and roots.

You could have chosen to do nothing else
but go into the woods to share fruits with insects,
watching the bluebirds chirp in the forest
and crickets sparkle and die and return.

Instead, you chose this road of restlessness,
this stratum of stones, digging deep honey,
a life mired in casting nets into the sea,
where wool and wax are only appropriate
when you're worth more than rubies and pennies,
counting each second that follows your draw,

keeping a vow in your soul and spirit,
and waving this light, you wear like a necklace,
for everyone to see and perhaps to follow.

Such an impossible thing you have chosen,
when the day spreads out like King Solomon's Mines,
and you could have been a Sheba in an epic court.



Kansas Wildflowers

Anna Rold

The Closing Argument against the Farmer's Wife

Kevin Grauke

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as you know, the farmer's wife has been charged with three counts of aggravated cruelty to an animal, a third-degree felony. And as you know, the defense has taken great pains to paint its client as the sweetest of women. We've heard how she bakes for grieving neighbors, cares for the sick, and prays for every lost soul. And if you meet her at the market, she'll ask after the health of every one of your family members. But woe betide any mouse—especially one with two friends!

Her attorney claims the three mice were "running after" her. Those were the exact words used. Now, have you ever in your life seen a mouse "run after" a person? I, for one, have not, and I've certainly seen my share of them; our town is rife with them, after all (though not as bad as over in Hamelin, of course). And while, yes, mice are vermin, nothing deserves to be tortured. But, back to "running after." We've all seen how cows chase after dogs that chase after cats that chase after malt-eating rats, but has anyone ever seen what she claims? Oh, and did I mention that these mice were blind? *Blind!* Yes, she would have you believe that not one, not two, but *three* sightless mice ran after her. How stupid does she think you, such an esteemed jury, are?

Here's what I think happened. When confronted with the evidence of her crime—three sightless mice with bloody, stump-tailed little bottoms—I think she blurted out the first thing that came to mind: *They were running after me!* In other words, she immediately claimed victimhood. And we've heard all about this victimhood, haven't we? "Scared to death." Isn't that what we were told she was?

Okay, just for a moment, let's take the defense's word for her state of mind. Imagine, then, if you will, three mice legitimately running after you. What would you do? If you were to tell me, *Well, sir, I'd run to another room and shut the door*, I'd accept that as reasonable enough. If you were to say, *Well, sir, I'd beat at them with a broom until they either ran away or I managed to kill them*, I would even accept that, though begrudgingly, as beating three mice to their deaths with a broom seems like an overreaction to me. If you were to say, *Well, sir, I believe I'd cut off their tails with a carving knife*, I would assume I'd misheard you. But forestalling my moral judgment of

this bewildering choice for the moment, let's simply try to imagine the steps that this would require.

First, it would probably necessitate catching the mice and securing them in some fashion so that the amputation could be performed. In other words, her story begins falling apart immediately. Had the three mice truly been running after her, she would've acted instinctively, not so methodically as careful confinement would require. For the sake of argument, however, let's just say that she went after them with a garden hoe instead of the more-likely broom. Let's just say, "scared to death," she bravely stood her ground as they quickly drew closer, and then she brought that hoe down. Theoretically, what might happen? If its blade were sharp, she might cut one of the mice in half—or, short of that, amputate a tail. *Oh, ho*, I can hear her attorney thinking, *so you're conceding the possibility of this story!* No, I'm not. Only *one* tail-slicing is possible in this scenario, not three. Under no circumstances would three mice ever naturally configure themselves in such a way as to be parallel at their tails, as would be necessary. Similarly, there's no way that three separate strikes with a hoe would result in nothing more and nothing less than three amputated tails. Ten separate strikes would not result in only three amputated tails. Ninety-nine strikes would not. Not a chance, not with them running about as mice do.

Mice, as our expert, Dr. Calaveras, testified, can run up to 8 miles an hour. Now, that may not sound very fast, but consider this: If you take size into consideration, a mouse running 8 miles an hour is equivalent to a human running 160 miles an hour. Wrap your brain around that for a second. The world's fastest human can run 28 miles an hour, but only for a very short distance. Try now to imagine that human running six times faster than this. That's how fast a mouse truly runs.

Now, picture *three* mice running that fast. Then imagine bringing a hoe down. Can you, without doing any other damage to their tiny bodies, see yourself being able to lop off nothing more than three tiny tails from three tiny bodies speeding toward you like three tiny, blind Corvettes? I'd sooner believe a roomful of monkeys could bang out Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Speaking of which . . . though shrews resemble mice, they're not even rodents. Their closest relatives are actually hedgehogs and moles. When Shakespeare used the word, however, he meant it as a term for a violent, ill-tempered woman. Other words once used to describe this sort of

woman are *harridan*, *termagant*, and *virago*. Here in our enlightened age, we know that such words are merely misogynistic relics of a much darker age, and our abandonment of their usage is a good thing. However, a woman can still be just as bad as the next fellow, which is why, in closing, I say that if you don't convict the farmer's wife, her sadistic lust will grow. Mice will come to bore her. She'll move on to squirrels, and after squirrels, she'll come for your beloved cats and dogs. One day, you'll come home to find beloved Fluffy and Fido trailing blood across your carpet, stump-bottomed for life.

And what, pray tell, will come after Fluffy and Fido come to bore her? With that, I'll close, leaving you to contemplate whether she'll move on to us, tailless though we be.



Heist

Judah Crow

"Excuse me, sir?" said the bank teller.

"I said, 'Freeze,'" said the old man, a little louder. The long creases beside his upper lip made him look very sad. One of his eyes was red and watering. He was pointing a pistol at her chest.

The teller looked up. The bank had gone quiet. A woman with white hair and a flowered dress and a vast lap was sitting in the waiting area, a shotgun resting on her walker, covering the room. Ollie, the guard, had his hands in the air. All the customers and tellers had their hands up too.

"All the cash," said the skinny old man, "all the cash, all the cash, in the cash drawer. Please."

He was missing some teeth on top, but she heard him clear enough. She said, "Certainly, sir."

Her name was Lu, and her name tag had three nine-pointed gold stars. She'd been Trainee of the Month three times in a row. *In a crisis situation, remain polite and helpful.*

She stacked bundles of bills on the counter. He one-handed his heavy reading glasses from a shirt pocket to check the bundles. They slipped and fell, with a clatter. Slowly, he bent down to the floor, picked them up, and returned them to his pocket. Ollie and the customers, hands in the air, craned their necks to watch. Then he stowed the bundles into a Trader Joe's shopping bag, one by one.

"Goodbye," said the man. He was going to back away but decided instead on a slow scissor-step toward the door, half-turned with the gun still pointing at the teller, its barrel trembling up and down a little.

"Thank you and have a great rest of your afternoon," the teller heard herself say.

At the door, the man shouted, "Edie. Edie!"

"Edie yourself," said the woman in flowers. She made a few practice swings, then raised herself to her feet. She waddled backwards, rolling the walker and shotgun smoothly.

"Now, don't any of you move," she told the room, "or I will blast you. No, wait. On second thought. I take it back. On the floor! On the floor, now, everybody. Everybody on the floor. Hup, hup."

He opened the door for her. She rolled out, backwards.

"Goodbye now," they said. "Goodbye."

There was a golf cart at the curb. The man at the wheel wore a pink polo shirt.

"Dick!" the man said.

"Wake up, Dick!" the woman said.

"I'm awake," said the man in the golf cart. "I'm awake. All done?"

"Yes. We're all done."

"Very good. Where to?"

"Just drive for a while. We'll tell you where."

"Okey doke. Off we go."

"Well, that wasn't too bad," said the man in back, gripping the bag.

"I told you, Fred," said the woman. "Didn't I tell you it wouldn't be so bad?"

"No, I don't think so. I thought that's what I told you."

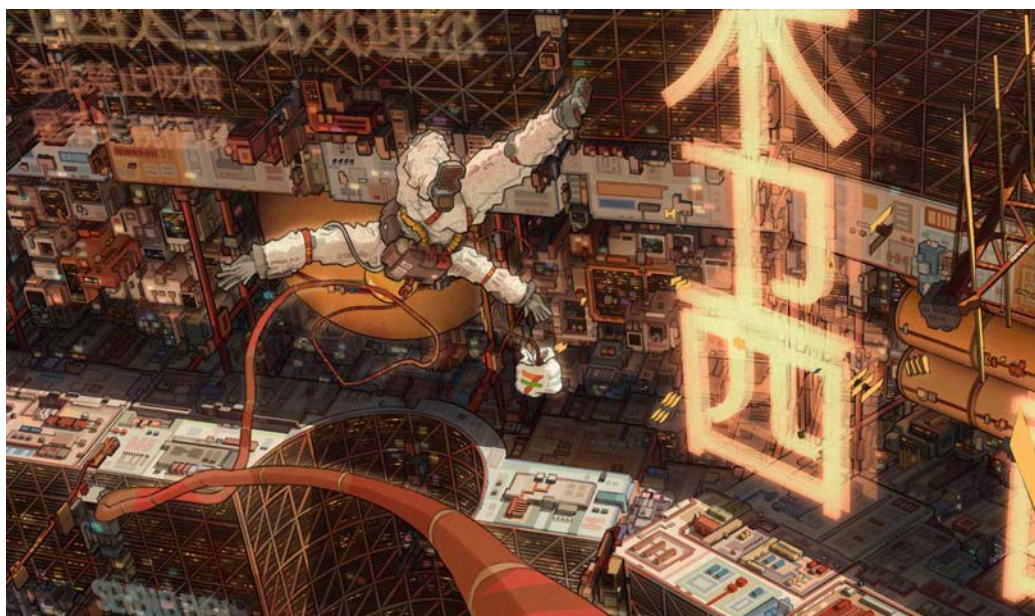
"Fred. Don't start with me."

"All right then."

There were cherry blossoms. A bit of sun broke through the clouds.

"Have a great rest of your afternoon," the woman mimicked.

They smiled.



LV 2349

Clay Waters

Even within these elaborate citadels
without clocks or windows
still, I cannot escape
my inner countdown,
that heavy tick weighing, warping
my pocket of space-time
with the numbers to come:
40,000 accidents I must avoid,
200,000 incidents I must swerve,
a million rolls of the dice
before sleep.

A billion moons beyond,
an evolved lung gulps desiccated air
in the vast citadel
built to confuse invaders
rows of rusted metal machines
still girded for war.

On the south end
of the asphalt battle-zone
his bone-crammed Black Pyramid
battles the invading Green Cross,

his clock stopped, his breath short,
his life a passing chance—

What is it like
for life to leap out at you
like a surprise?

I take my short spin
and await its tiny pleasure.
Did I lose? Will I live?

A billion moons from now, who could tell?

Unfinished Exit

Claudia Wysocky

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city.
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
whom you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude
in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at

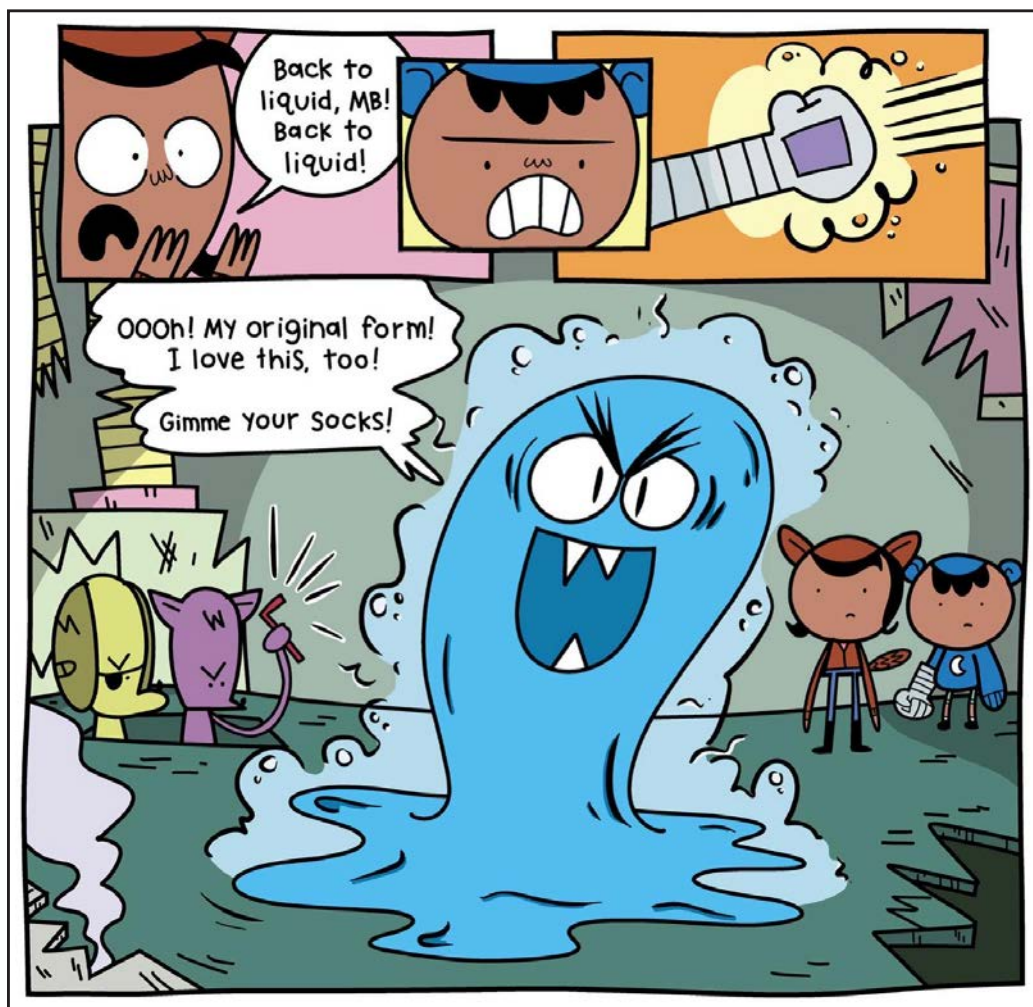
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.
So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.
For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost
souls
who never got their own
missing person's poster.
Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit
to find its proper
ending.



Interview with Jarod Roselló: Loving What You Make

Interview by Destini Brown and Peyton Milhorn



Red Panda & Moon Bear: The Curse of the Evil Eye.

Jarod Roselló is a Cuban American writer, cartoonist, and University of South Florida professor originally from Miami. His books—the award-winning middle-grade graphic novel series *Red Panda & Moon Bear* and the chapter book graphic novel series *Super Magic Boy*—have been named to the New York Public Library and Chicago Public Library best books of the year lists and the Texas Library Association's Little Maverick Reading List. He was the recipient of the 2019 Nerdy Award for graphic novels and the 2022 Washington Library Association OTTER Award for children's literature.



How did you get into creative writing?

JR: When I was in high school, I started writing short stories to make my friends laugh that involved all of us as characters and terrible things happening to us. Around the same time, I started reading for pleasure.

When I was in college, I was getting towards the end of my bachelor's degree in psychology, and I still had another elective I needed. I took a creative writing class, and my professor really liked the things I was writing. Nobody had ever said that to me before. It sort of wormed its way into my brain. And I thought, *Oh, I'm good at this.*

Eventually, I thought, *I want to do this.* So I applied for my MFA in creative writing. Then the rest kind of all came together. It was me following what I liked doing and what I was interested in.

What are some of your inspirations in literature, comics, and even arts?

JR: The two books that got me really thinking about image and text and being playful with those things were Edward Gorey's work, specifically *The Unstrung Harp*. He does these gothic sort of macabre, really dark stories—almost adult picture books. He's done a range of really bizarre, strange things. But I loved that interaction of image and text.

And then there was this little book of illustrated poems by Tim Burton called *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*. That was another book about image-text pairing.

I loved both of those books, and I thought, *This is what I want to do*.

Around that time, in the early days of the Internet, there was a website called *Exploding Dog*. You would submit a sentence, a line, a phrase, and [*Exploding Dog*] would draw an image to go along with it. There was something kind of magical about it.

Those were early inspirations, but I still wasn't making comics at that time. I was in high school, and a friend recommended *Crime and Punishment*. It just sounded cool, and I was in an edgy phase. It just blew my mind, so I started seeking out other books similar to that—Chuck Palahniuk and *Fight Club* and other works that were frightening. I was really amazed at how horrifying these books were.

I got Dave Eggers's book (sorry, my cats are wrestling on the couch), and something about the prose style—I love the way those sentences sound. I started reading more of his stuff, which led me to his press, McSweeney's.

At that time, I was also reading comics—not making them, but just reading them, and there was a book by Steven Dixon and the cover was drawn by Dan Clowes, who's a cartoonist. I was like *Oooh, that must be a great book*, so I bought it. That was probably the book that made me think, *I'm going to be a writer, and I'm going to write like this guy*. I still return to it when I need inspiration.

I went on to do my MFA in creative writing. I was pretty much writing a hybrid of Dave Eggers and Stephen Dixon at that point and really falling in love with comics and indie graphic novels.

It's interesting that those horrifying novels were so inspiring, because now you write children's literature.

JR: I read a lot of stuff that's nowhere near the kinds of stuff that I make. I don't just read for pleasure. I try to see what people are doing and making

and engage with it that way. Even if it's not my thing, I can still appreciate it on a particular level.

Reading Chuck Palahniuk and *Fight Club* and his set of books was a lesson in how to use language and structure your sentences in ways that can lead your reader into an emotional response.

How do you look back at your older work? Do you feel pride and nostalgia, or do you ever cringe looking at your writing?

JR: It's hard to look back at my old stuff sometimes because I think, *I would do this totally differently now*. But I also have such a great amount of affection for all of the things that I made.

Sometimes when I go back and reread my work, I can't just focus on the story itself. I remember where I was when I was making this. I remember how hard I was trying, how proud I was of the work at the time. So I tend to read it as an artifact of a different time rather than *Here's my work now*. But there's a lot of stuff I wrote even in my twenties. And I'm like, *This is really good*. Maybe there are a few changes I would make to it now, but I think this is good. I think as artists, it's important to love the stuff we make.

Early on in my career, I was not confident, and I was a little self-deprecating. I had this cartoonist I respected come to me and say, "If you don't love the things you make, why should anybody else love them?" I should love these things that I've made. They're a piece of me. They're a part of me. You made it, and you put yourself into it. You should remember that.

I try to be generous and gentle to myself in the past. It's also easier for me because at the time I started publishing, very little was online; it was all in print magazines, so the chances of me running across the stuff I published in my first few publications are zero at this point.

There are definitely some pieces that I'm really glad are not anywhere. Now I think it's a little bit harder for younger writers because you're publishing stuff online, and when it's online, it's potentially online forever.

I feel our students, or any students on a creative path, look back and think: *Well, I can't believe I wrote that.* It's a process. There are no shortcuts. You can't get to where you are now without doing the thing you did before. It's impossible. You can't teleport there.

To delve into your process, as someone who writes for children, how do you approach difficult subject matters? Do you tend to forgo them in your work?

JR: The work that I do for kids definitely addresses difficult subject matters. I have chapters in my books about the stress of parents getting divorced and immigration issues. So those topics do come up in my books, and those are things linked to trauma for children and for families.

As a children's author, it is my job to make sure that kids love reading and that it is ultimately a joyful experience for them, because we need to keep kids reading. I don't want to traumatize kids. So I have to remember that the audience is not me; it's not other adults. It's not my job to train children to become the kind of adult I want them to be.

Also, children don't take from media the things we want them to take. They latch on to little images; they make connections from their lives. I decided that in the books that I've been writing now—and that might not always be true for all books in the future—but in *Red Panda & Moon Bear*, specifically, those difficult subject matters are part of the setting, part of the fabric of the reality of the world that the characters live in.

It's an immigrant neighborhood, and immigration is never a subject of the story, but it's part of the fabric of that world.

We can acknowledge that it's scary and it's sad and it's hard and it makes us angry and it makes us feel things that we don't really understand. I make work that affirms *I know this is how you're feeling and that's totally normal, because that's how you should feel when something like this is happening.*

Some books are empathetic; they see the world as it is and reflect it back to us. And it makes us feel better because we're seen. And then there

are books that are presenting a new future. Some books are hard to read because they're real. Some books present these realities where we can see what the world might look like if it were better. *Panda & Moon Bear* falls on the spectrum at *Here's the world if everybody was just a lot kinder to one another and a lot more thoughtful and a lot nicer*. We want to present models of what a better world could be because that feeds our imagination. That's been my approach with children's literature.

It is really important work as far as not fixing the problem, but more just learning how to deal with it. Especially for young kids, where they probably feel very powerless a lot of the time—a lot of decisions happen that they are a part of, but they have no control. Kids feel stuff harder. You probably can even remember back to high school, where things were a 10 at all times, and now you're a few years out and thinking, *I would not react the same way as I did then*. Kids aren't being melodramatic. They're not overreacting. They're reacting appropriately to how they're feeling. So it's important for them to see that and say, "It's okay."

You mentioned kids being the audience, but *Red Panda & Moon Bear* is funny for adults too. When you write comedy for children, how do you know the jokes will resonate with them?

JR: I do a lot of work with kids. I have two kids who are the ages of my readers, which is helpful, but I also do a lot of school visits, workshops, and teaching with kids. As a children's book author, it's helpful to keep hearing how kids are talking to one another, the kinds of jokes that they're telling.

The narrative structure of *Red Panda* was inspired directly from this six-week cartooning course that I did with third through fifth graders. As adults, we tend to think when we're telling stories, *plot point A causes plot point B to happen, which causes plot point C to happen*. But when the kids were telling their stories, plot point A would happen and then a character would just change the narrative and pivot immediately into something else.

I really love this idea that in comics, because of panel breaks, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves, "What could happen next?" There's the gutter, the space between the panels, which signifies a shift in space or time, but it

doesn't signify a specific shift in time. It could be anything. You could jump 10 years into the future. You could go 10 seconds later. So the form of comics lends itself to that imaginative storytelling and those hard pivots.

I had this rule in those books that the kids can make anything happen by thinking it could happen. I wanted to play with those loose narrative rules. The kids could change the story and move it in any direction they want. I would have never known that if I hadn't sat with 7, 8, and 9 year olds for six weeks trying to tell stories and being really frustrated the whole time.

How did studying creative writing help inform your scriptwriting process for comics?

JR: There are a couple of things that are consistent across both. One is that language is still your medium when you're writing scripts; whether it's for film, whether it's for comics, animation, or whatever it is, you're still in the world of manipulating language and crafting language to create an experience for the reader. I know when we write, we tend to think the words are disappearing, and our readers are sort of immersed in the scene. But the truth is that the words are the story. You've just carefully crafted your scene to make it feel that way.

One of the things I learned in my MFA from one of my professors was that writing fiction, for me, was a way to practice caring for other people, to build a world where I could have characters in peril and then help them figure this thing out. It's always been hard for me to craft bad endings because of that.

I had a character in my thesis who had a dog that was a lot like mine, and the dog got lost. The proper resolution of the story was that they should not have found their dog again, but I couldn't bring myself to lose my dog and never get her back. So I made it that they found the dog. And my advisor was like, "This really undermined your whole story," but I learned something about myself that day.

There are lessons, craft lessons, and also lessons about who you are as a writer and what your values are, regardless of what you're writing or what form or genre you're writing in.

As a Cuban American writer whose comics contain references to your cultural heritage, what advice would you offer to writers who want to incorporate elements of their own cultural backgrounds into their work?

JR: When I grew up in the '90s, multiculturalism was the big thing. Let's see and identify and recognize all the different cultures that make the melting pot of the United States. But there was also an essentializing force; you had to be effectively the stereotype. If I wanted to write a story, people were only interested in it being Cuban American, Cuban refugees telling the story of coming to America, learning a language. Those stereotypical elements were the only things really of interest.

I just wanted to tell stories about fighting monsters and doing things like that. But at that time, Latino kids weren't allowed to fight monsters because they had to deal with the trauma of immigration only. When I got older, that tide started to turn a little bit; we had more writers of color writing about their experiences. Nobody had to be that stereotype or that token anymore. It opened the door to writing all different kinds of stories. So for me, writing characters that look like me and sound like me and come from the places that I come from is important because that's what I have the strongest connection to. It's the easiest for me to write, but it did take some reprogramming in my mind to get there.

For example, if I were 10, and you asked me to draw a winter scene when I grew up in Miami, it would be like a New England snowy winter. Our media are really strong in terms of telling us what stories should look like. . . .

I could write a story that was about a family moving to Miami for the first time and struggling to learn the language. I could, but it would be a struggle for me because that's not my natural inclination as a writer. So I think it's better that somebody else who really wants to write that story writes that story. And I write the story I want to write.

When my characters speak Spanish, it's because that's just how they would say those things to one another. When they fight a pastry, it's a pastelito from a Cuban bakery because that's the kind of place that exists in that neighborhood and then normalizes it too. I like for it to seem normal and

natural and not *Even Hispanics can do these things too*, right? I don't want that. They just happen to be Cuban kids, but that's not the most important part of this story. Their superpowers are the most important part of this story. That's just part of who they are as people.

So that's sort of been my approach for the stories that I've been writing. That's how I'm comfortable writing. That's the contribution I think I can offer. And then checking my own work too, to make sure that I'm not falling into traps that have been set. And make sure that I'm not pushing myself to be stereotypical of my own culture—because it still happens. Just because you are from that culture doesn't mean that you're immune to the influence around you. You have to be mindful of that.

I decided that my readership was other Latino kids. So I wasn't going to translate anything. I wasn't going to do anything; that's just the book. It's important to decide who your readership is. If you're writing to a white audience, that's different than if you're imagining you're writing to an African American readership. You might phrase things differently. You might explain certain things that you wouldn't otherwise.



Self portrait by Jarod Roselló

So figure out who your readers are and then just make really good work because if it's really good, people are going to read it. Even if it's not for them, they're still gonna find it. There's no excuse not to make something good. At the end of the day, your job is to make something awesome.

Fernando Aguirre (Running Out of Time) is a Peruvian American illustrator and graphic designer based in New Jersey studying at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. He is entering his senior year and hopes to pursue art and design in the music industry. His art is motivated by his life's memories and music, where he finds inspiration from the feelings invoked by both. He enjoys creating graphic, shapey art that uses traditional elements in different ways to help each piece of his feel human. He plays with textures created using watercolor, gouache, collage, and scanner manipulation to get add an extra dimension to his pieces.

Destini Brown (Interview), is a sophomore in creative writing at Ringling College of Art and Design who loves all things film. Check her out on linkedin! www.linkedin.com/in/destini-brown.

Maudie Bryant (On a Morning When Everything Feels Heavy) is a Pushcart-nominated poet, multidisciplinary artist, and educator, whose work explores the complexities of memory and identity. Holding an MA in English from the University of Louisiana Monroe, she surveys layers of human experience, unearthing the disquiet beneath the surface. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *3Elements Review*, *Welter*, and *Apricity Magazine*. She writes and creates from Shreveport, Louisiana, where she lives with her husband and two small sons.

Gillian Ceballos-Kirby (A Clouded Vision) is an illustrator based in Sarasota, Florida, and Lynchburg, Virginia. She is currently studying illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design, with a minor in creative writing. Her work focuses on poster and book cover design, and she enjoys playing with shape and color through elegance and design. Originally inspired by the work of Mucha, Gillian works to pull experiences from real life and push them into the fantastical and magical. She strives to capture the world as it would look with an untethered imagination, and what it could be—rather than what it is.

Judah Crow (Heist) is a working scientist, fiction writer, and playwright. He lives in the tiny time-warp town of Crockett, California. His short fiction has appeared in *Wigleaf* and *Litro*. He should have gone to bed hours ago.

Kadin DiStefano (Life after Death, Life and Death) is a children's book illustrator known for her playful, colorful style and love of storytelling. Drawing inspiration from nature, nostalgia, the color pink, and magic, Kadin makes vibrant illustrations that spark curiosity and joy in young readers. She shares her work online as Kadin Kreates, where she posts spreads from her latest books, assignments, and personal projects. Kadin blends whimsy with heart, often incorporating fun characters, rich foliage, and magical moments. Whether it's a starman floating in space or mermaids hanging out, her work invites viewers into a world that's equal parts whimsy, joy, and just silly adventures.

Madison Gear (Lounge of Lizards) is an illustrator and designer originally from New Jersey. She ventured to Florida to attend Ringling College of Art and Design and received her BFA in 2025. "Lounge of Lizards" was featured in her senior thesis children's book, *Animal Families*. Her thesis was about the obscure collective nouns for groups of animals. For instance, there's a flock of sheep or a pack of wolves, but there's also a snuggle of sloths and a lounge of lizards! View more of *Animal Families* and her other work at madisongearart.myportfolio.com, or contact her at madisongearart@gmail.com.

Kevin Grauke (The Case against the Farmer's Wife) has published work in such places as *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Cimarron Review*. He's the author of the short story collection *Shadows of Men* (Queen's Ferry Press). *Bullies & Cowards* is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press in 2026. He teaches at La Salle University and lives in Philadelphia.

John Grey (Bring it On) is an Australian poet and U.S. resident whose works have been published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Tenth Muse*. His latest books, *Between Two Fires*, *Covert*, and *Memory Outside the Head*, are available through Amazon. His upcoming work is soon to be published in *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *La Presa*, and *Shot Glass Journal*.

Ashley Kormanik (Sarasota Sailboats) is an illustrator with a love for children's book art, character design, painting, and so much more! She creates art to tell a story and make people smile. When she's not in class, she can usually be found sketching animals at the local zoo, taking care of her houseplants, or keeping up on what she lovingly calls her "old lady hobbies" by crocheting, slowly strolling through parks, and feeding birds.

Jeffrey Hantover (Except) is the author of three novels: *The Jewel Trader of Pegu*, *The Three Deaths of Giovanni Fumiani*, and *The Forenoon Bride*. His novella, "Sweet Willie Gold Has the Blues," is forthcoming in *Running Wild Novella Anthology*. His poetry and short fiction have appeared in various literary journals.

Haley Lang (I Hope I Call My Mom) is an art student with a love and passion for creating in every form. When she's not writing or reading poetry, you can usually find her sewing clothes, making jewelry, or drawing comics.

Angelina Leaños (she/her) (What Lies in Fathers' Dreams) is a Ventura County Youth Poet Laureate Emeritus and a second year MFA student at Fresno State. Angelina regularly serves as a Poetry Out Loud coach and a Poet-Teacher, mentoring youth in poetry recitation and creative writing. Additionally, Angelina is a member of California Poets in the Schools' Board of Directors and was a reader for the 2023 Philip Levine Prize. Her work has been published by *Urban Word*, the Chicx Writers & Artists Association, *Arkana*, and *Fruitslice*. You can find her on Instagram at [@angelinaleanos](https://www.instagram.com/angelinaleanos).

Michael A Leavy (How to Care (for the Dead and the Living)) is a neuroqueer anarchist, retired social justice educator, actor, anthropologist, and emerging writer, with work published or forthcoming in *Pasatiempo*, *96th of October*, and elsewhere. They have taken courses with Ariel Gore, Susie Bright, and A Writing Room Collective, among others. They write and do a bit of teaching in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Find more writing at michaelaleavy.com.

Patrick McEvoy (Identity) has had illustrated stories appear in *Quarterly Magazine*, *Flora Fiction*, *Glint*, *Old Pal*, *Best of Penumbra* Vol. 6, and on Slippery Elm's website, among others. "Um" has been published by *Metastellar*. In addition, short plays he wrote were chosen to be performed at various festivals in New York City. In 2024, *The Dream People* appeared online and in public for Equity Library. The short play *At The End* was also performed for the Cut Edge Collective in 2025. His photography has also been exhibited with Exhibizone: Scenic, Artistonish, HMVC, and appeared in literary journals.

Peyton Milhorn (Interview) is studying in literary creative writing at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. Find her on LinkedIn at www.linkedin.com/in/peytonmilhorn.

Alisa Nikishin (Magic Forest) is a freelance illustrator and designer based in Sarasota, Florida, and Portland, Oregon. She works on narrative-focused digital and traditional illustrations, bringing stories to life for children's books, visual development, editorial illustration, and more. Alisa is also a student at Ringling College of Art and Design, pursuing a degree in illustration with a graphic design minor. In her free time, Alisa loves to travel, crochet, and try new crafts.

Claire Oh (Cover-Little Guardian) is an illustrator from Minnesota, currently honing her craft at Ringling College of Art and Design. She blends traditional mediums with digital tools like Photoshop and Procreate to create rich, detail-packed illustrations. Her style is ever-evolving, shaped by new experiences, inspiring artists, and diverse cultures. Beyond art, she's a master of many hobbies: Whether it's synchronized swimming, rock climbing, or volleyball, she's always on the move. Explore her work or reach out for commissions at her <https://coh.myportfolio.com/> (password: claireoh) or on Instagram: @pungsandogart.

Lauro Palomba (Safe Conduct) has taught ESL and done stints as a freelance journalist and speechwriter.

Madisyn Parisi (MPDGF) is a queer writer from Marriottsville, Maryland. They studied accounting and creative writing at Towson University, where they served as chief copy editor of the university's award-winning lit mag, *Grub Street*. In their work, they like to explore dreadful people, gender, and the things we dare not say out loud. When they're not writing, they're probably baking banana bread or slaying monsters in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Olivia Pelaez (Identity) is an American comic book artist. She graduated from the School of Visual Arts with a degree in cartooning. Her published work includes short comics published by DAPshow, Spazdog Press, Space Between Entertainment, Oneshi Press, and more. She was the main artist on the *Kitchen Witch* series published by 215 Ink, and the *Little Girl* series published by Devil's Due Comics. She grew up in New Jersey, where she currently resides. She has a daughter and one cat.

Anna Rold (Kansas Wildflowers, Roman Candles) is an illustrator from Kansas City graduating from Ringling College of Art and Design in 2025. She is heavily inspired by all things Victorian, steampunk, and fantastical. There is nothing she finds more thrilling than telling stories through art, and she aims to inspire by using lively colors and intriguing characters. She has a major love of comics and has been a part of Ringling College's 15th issue of *Meanwhile*, as well as writing and illustrating a graphic novel for her senior thesis. Outside of drawing, you can find her reading classic literature, baking sweet treats, or dancing around her room to her favorite music.

David Romanda (Admit It and And It Was Over) has published in places such as *Columbia Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. His book *Why Does She Always Talk About Her Husband?* came out in 2022 (Blue Cedar Press). He lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. Check him out online: www.romandapoetry.com

Michael Roque (Under Painted Grace) was born and raised in Los Angeles and discovered his love for poetry and prose amid friends on the bleachers of Pasadena City College. Now, he lives in the Middle East and is being inspired by the world around him. His poems have been published by such literary magazines as *Ink Pantry Publishing*, *WordCity Literary Journal*, *Hot Pot Magazine*, and others.

Jarod Roselló (Interview) is a Cuban American writer, cartoonist, and teacher originally from Miami. He is the author and artist of the award-winning middle-grade graphic novel series *Red Panda & Moon Bear*, and the chapter book graphic novel series, *Super Magic Boy*. His short comics and fiction have been published in *PEN America*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Hobart*, *The Rumpus*, *The Collagist*, and *Barrelhouse*. He lives in Tampa, Florida, with his wife, kids, dog, and cats, and teaches in the creative writing program at the University of South Florida.

Mika Seifert (On Mount Everett) is a concert violinist, writer, and broker of rare violin bows. His short stories have been published in the *Antioch Review*, *Cambridge Literary Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Image Journal*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Texas Review*, *World Literature Today*, and elsewhere.

Hugo S. Simões (Fat Men Brawling in Key West) comes from a small island along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. He currently lives in Lisbon, Portugal. His prose and poetry have previously appeared in *Southwest Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *MORIA*, *Same Faces Collective*, and others.

Makaela Striffler (Chance Meeting) paints and draws many oddities, with a heart rooted in fantasy—most definitely born from her love of old fairy tales and *The Lord of the Rings*. Fed, watered, and given sunlight, she grew up in California, where she discovered the wondrous secrets of art. While initially drawn to the fine arts, Makaela now steps into the illustration field, ready to create new work.

Botong Sun (Callisto Citadel) is a second-year illustration student at Ringling College, focusing on sci-fi and industrial subjects. He specializes in objective, realistic rendering and sees drawing as a form of natural history—where understanding the world is key to depicting it. His work bridges science and art through the study of optics, physics, and reference-free rasterized fabric construction. Influenced by films like *Blade Runner*, he pursues a scientific approach to visual storytelling. His works can be found on Rednote and Bilibili under the username 死变态SBT.

Edward Michael Supranowicz (A Delicate Balance) is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet.

Nic Surgit (Your Guilty Conscience) is a young artist and writer pursuing her passions in illustration and creative writing at Ringling College of Art and Design. She specializes in dynamic and engaging work and expands her horizons into fine arts and commercial art. Her work has been featured in a multitude of magazines, exhibitions, and anthologies. She has previously published her illustration work with Owl Talyn Press. Now, she can be found leading the concept art team with Cow Town Creative. Find her work on her website: <https://www.nicsurgit.com/>.

Jonathan Chibuiké Ukah (This Is Your Life) is a Pushcart-nominated poet living in the United Kingdom. His poems have been featured in *Unleash Lit*, *The Pierian*, *Propel Magazine*, *Atticus Review*, *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, and elsewhere. He won the third Prize in the Voices of Lincoln Poetry Contest in 2024 and the Alexander Pope Poetry Award in 2023. His second collection, *I Blame My Ancestors*, published by *Kingsman Quarterly* in July 2024, was a second runner-up at the Black Diaspora Poetry Slam in 2024. He was the Editor's Choice Prize Winner of *Unleash Lit* in 2024. He was shortlisted for the Minds Shine Bright Poetry Prize 2024 and was the second poetry prize winner at the Streetlights Poetry Prize in 2024.

Naomi Van Putten (Be Resilient) is an illustrator from Florida who loves a more graphic approach to art. Her family is from Curaçao, and this heritage heavily impacts her work through vibrancy and women of color as the subject matter. Fashion illustrators like René Gruau, runway fashion, vibrant colors, and nature inspire her. Along with this, Naomi tells stories through her illustrations, focusing on the daily struggles of young girls and their mental health. She shares personal experiences to make sure there is a personal connection. Her narrative work is used to connect and share a diverse story among young women.

Belle Waring (The Questioner) is a South Carolina native and longtime resident of Singapore who studied classics, ancient philosophy, and IE linguistics at Columbia and Berkeley. She is, late in life, a first-time author. Everyone at home says, "You were always the one telling the stories." Garnering that reputation in small-town South Carolina requires dedication to awkward secrets, lesser-known ghosts, and bad mistakes in rowboats.

Clay Waters (LV 2349) has had poems published in *The Metaworker*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *The Santa Clara Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Roanoke Review*, as well as *Shift*. He lives in Central Florida, close enough to the theme parks to hear the fireworks. His website is claywaters.org.

Kari Wergeland (Hands-free) has work that's appeared in many journals, including *Atlanta Review*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and *New Millennium Writings*. Her chapbook, *Breast Cancer: A Poem in Five Acts* (Finishing Line Press), was a category finalist in the 2019 Eric Hoffer Book Awards. She has worked in libraries up and down the West Coast and once reviewed children's books for *The Seattle Times*.

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

Mark Wyatt (The Raucous Raven) has published poems in *Acumen*, *Ambit*, *Between the Lines*, *Echo Room*, *ELTED*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Iron*, *Litmus*, *New Statesman*, *Nine Muses Poetry*, *North*, *Outposts*, *P.E.N. New Poetry II* (Arts Council/Quartet), *PN Review*, *Poetry Durham*, *Poetry London Newsletter*, *Poetry Nottingham*, *Rialto*, *Slow Dancer*, *Staple*, *Typo*, *Westwords*, *Weyfarers*, and *Wide Skirt*. Now developing a sequence of pattern poems that take inspiration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, he is based in the UK after teaching in South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8647-8280>.

Claudia Wysocky (Unfinished Exit), a Polish writer and poet based in New York, is known for her diverse literary creations, including fiction and poetry. Her poems, such as "Stargazing Love" and "Heaven and Hell," reflect her ability to capture the beauty of life through rich descriptions. Besides poetry, she authored *All Up in Smoke*, published by Anxiety Press. With over five years of writing experience, Claudia's work has been featured in local newspapers, magazines, and even literary journals like *WordCityLit* and *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*. Her writing is powered by her belief in art's potential to inspire positive change. Claudia also shares her personal journey and love for writing on her own blog, and she expresses her literary talent as an immigrant raised in post-Communist Poland.

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The background of the page is a dark blue vertical band on the left side, featuring abstract, hand-drawn patterns. These patterns consist of numerous concentric circles in a lighter blue-green hue, some of which have vertical lines or 'drips' extending downwards from them. There are also some red and white markings interspersed within the blue band. The right side of the page is a solid dark blue background.

Fernando Aguirre
Destini Brown
Maudie Bryant
Gillian Ceballos-Kirby
Judah Crow
Kadin DiStefano
Madison Gear
Kevin Grauke
John Grey
Jeffrey Hantover
Ashley Kormanik
Haley Lang
Angelina Leaños
Michael A Leavy
Patrick McEvoy
Peyton Milhorn
Alisa Nikishin
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