

ISSUE I — WINTER 2023

VOIDZ

L I T E R A R Y M A G A Z I N E



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Managing Editor: Elena Polinsky

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Mark Halliday

He sat in a given place at a given time feeling and thinking.
At his desk; in a restaurant; on a park bench.
He sat on his toadstool thinking of memory and desire.
But he was only a boojwah American with a Nissan Sentra
and half of a serious mind. Yet

when he saw

the rainy streets of Manchester Connecticut in memory
with mud and gravel on one section of the street
near a certain Shell station and knew almost something
about the years and the years how they settle
gently and persistently down in their
soberly aging geological strata establishing their
long-layered kind of non-jubilant beauty
then he felt as if it would be right, would be
not just paltry arrogance to form up
what he saw or the tone and cadence of what he almost saw
up into what he might then offer forth as a ____.

Then

just one day later at a shopping center
the sense of ubiquitous small-soul boojwahness spread in
and he felt quasi-shame and quasi-hated his little ____
as the effete flowers of his under-tested life,
and in this mood her poured quite persuasive scorn
on someone else's book, testament of another boojwah brain.

But

back on a damp street in his own, Annie moved seriously
fourteen years ago in a dark blue raincoat.

Repairing a 'Suddenly-Winter' Day

Shamik Banerjee

Bring on a steamy, sugared something. Dawn
Arrived and fled too soon, but gave its chill
To us. Before the Bluethroat ends her trill,
Set up the cookstove. Make some stew. Get up

And look! a misty cloak has veiled our tree.
The panes appear as frozen lakes. The lanes
Are lined with little, dinky hills of snow.
We thought of watching birds today. We bought
A pair of binocs too, but who could know
That our long-dreamt ambition would fall flat?
Now what? Absorb the day's mundanity?

Job's scolding us, but Winter makes us slobs.
Your frizzy hair. My rugate cheeks. Our eyes:
Half-sealed by rheum. Still, at least we could rise,
And that's applaudable. So, don't stay bland.
It's only winter. We are not yet dead.
But what can sleep-done slugs like us do: shut
Those eyes for just a while, plan groceries,
Explore our phones, toggle between the floor
And roof, or dread our son's Sax coaching fees?
Now, given such a phase, won't one allow
More shiftlessness to chain him to the bed?
Yet things can get rip-roaring if we set
Ourselves in snuggly jumpers, fill our cups
With spiced hot toddy, and, while taking sups,
Read stanzas from some book. These will indeed
Warm our hearts' cockles and abate our plight.
In case these don't suffice, we'll hide within
A thick duvet, and though things have not been
Jolly enough, we'll spend our evening wholly
By the fireplace, glued to the TV screen,

Listening to soporific tunes of Waxwings,
And nodding off while watching Siskins' flight.

Midnight Upon the Cobbles

Wayne Russell

Rain slicked cobbles
forbidden gothic night
alone in the universe
this is where the weary lay
entombed beneath the stars
between the death chambers
of purgatory
trampled within mirror aliened images
this is where we spin that calm calculated
roulette wheel of life
somewhere between physics classes
and obo soloist
somewhere between snaggletooth
moss infused tombstones
where the willows and dogwoods
have morphed into skeletal
remains encased in the dead vines
visions of forbidden love
and unmade beds
hedgerows laced with the funk of
millennia gone
devoid of green fleshy leaves
lamplights are an onyx army
lying in wait
silenced snipers transfixed
the moon is on hiatus
it sleeps behind the veil of
cottony ghost clouds roaming

Nothing and Everything

Madeline Kinnison

I never had the heart to tell Annie I hated the lake. Even before everything that happened, that lake was a beacon of ick, every feeling of unwarranted angst as a ten year old too afraid to take it out on my parents or my little brothers, I had projected onto that infinity pool of murky dishwater and decomposing trees, carrying the thick scent of summer heat and street weed enjoyed by the older kids. I kept this all to myself, of course, because it was Annie. For whatever reason, she loved it there, insisting we spend every day of our summer in that oversized mosquito breeding ground. From dusk to dawn, we were there, swimming, talking on the beach, wandering in the surrounding woods. Annie's dark curls dampened from her sweat and the lakewater, and she would insist that we went back in the water as soon as we got out, grabbing my hand and chanting "Jen-ny, Jen-ny, Jen-ny", until I succumbed to her inhuman strength and was led back into the lake. I would then, of course, ignore the way my chest felt when her bare skin touched mine. We'd go neck-deep in the lukewarm waters and Annie would say something like:

"I think you look like a mermaid right now.", giggling and wading ever-so slowly in deeper,

"You just say that 'cause' my hair is wet." I'd reply, trying to ignore how slimy the bottom of the lake felt, a giant, expansive tongue, "every girl looks like a mermaid when her hair's wet."

"No, I don't think so," then she would bring her hand up to my cheek, pointing at the little freckles on my face, "these look like they could be little sea-spots or something."

"What the heck are sea-spots?" I'd laugh,

"I don't know!" She'd start laughing too, "They're just like, something mermaids would have."

Despite our differing opinions of the lake, we agreed about one thing: we hated the hole.

The hole was located at the end of the dock on the far side of the lake. The dock itself was lonely, completely out of place despite how close docks and lakes are in the natural order of human connotations. It wasn't a charming faded wood built by someone's grandfather, jumped off of by young children clasping hands in the setting summer sun. This dock was, large, industrial, an unwelcoming rusting metal the color of coagulated blood, its exact use unknown to most visitors of the lake, including us young girls. At certain angles, you could see beneath the end of the dock, locked away in a protective cage, was the hole, a swirling, violent whirlpool. At the base of the dock, a padlocked fence with a prominent 'NO TRESPASSING' sign warned away any rambunctious youths, but even with no fence and no bright-orange sign, you could hear the rushing water, echoing into its walls and traveling to somewhere neither of us knew and never would know.

"A waterfall," Annie once said, standing next to me at a distance from the fence, as close as either of us would get, "it sounds like a big waterfall." I shook my head.

"It's more like the ocean." I said to her, "Like the waves during a storm. A tsunami."

"Those are too huge," she'd say, shaking her head at the impossibility, "fifty feet tall is too huge for a wave to be."

We were always on the other side of the lake, as far away as possible from the dock and the hole as we could get. There were times where we would look up and stare for too long at the dock, our minds wandering to the hole, before returning to our activity with a twinge of nausea in our stomachs. I would lean over to Annie, whispering the local gossip, juicy things like:

"I heard Kelsey Mitchell got her period," I'd say, my voice hushed, as if the tadpoles and dragonflies might hear me talking about Kelsey Mitchell and her first period.

"You know if your period comes, the blood can turn into a baby?" She'd say, face stone-cold and serious.

"What?"

"Yeah, like, it comes together and turns into," she leaned in, atoms away from my face, breath hot and heavy, "a blood baby."

"Annie, that's not real. That's, like, not true at all." I would say, unless I had missed the day of health class we went over blood babies, "what are you talking about?"

“Blood baby!” She’d spring up, shouting as loud as her lungs would allow, “Kelsey Mitchell had a blood baby!”

“Do blood babies turn into blood kids?” I’d spring up with her, joining in. “Do they turn into blood adults?”

“Blood people!” Annie screamed, running into the water, “They’re everywhere, hurry, Jenny!”

If I was younger, I would believe that Annie actually was part mermaid, or at least part fish, by how much she insisted on being in the water. Most of our conversations on the beach led to a game being played in the suspiciously brown lake liquid.

“I wish we didn’t have to go home.” She said to me at the end of one day, watching the sun sink its way over the tree line, “I wish we could stay here forever.”

“We have to go home at some point,” I replied, “don’t you wanna see your mom and dad?”

Annie didn’t say anything, instead focusing on the setting sun. I saw her eyes briefly lock with the dock and subsequently, the hole, for a brief moment, before fleeing to the sand and gravel below us. “I wish that big stupid thing wasn’t over there,” she said, “the sunset looks so pretty.”

The date was August 3rd. Summer was creeping to a close, the return of the school year edging closer. Annie’s older brother, Ethan, had elected to stay home most days, occasionally tagging along when there was nothing else for him to do. As far as older brothers go, he was fine. He didn’t torment us. He wasn’t creepy. He didn’t drag any friends along to the lake with him. He’d sit there, on his phone, drinking out of his water bottle, which, in hindsight, probably wasn’t filled with water. By now, in the present time, he’s either done something really terrible or has remained in that state of inoffensive presence. The only thing I didn’t like about him is the way he smelled. He either smelled like weed (or, in me and Annie’s brains, a skunk: Jeez, Ethan, did a skunk spray you or something?) or that type of cologne that teenage boys like to wear - all men’s soap and deodorant and everything smells the same, but somehow that cologne is able to take that smell beyond its logical limit - he’d layer it on so thick my eyes would start to water. But the worst smell he could have on him was the booze. That’s the only reason I haven’t become an alcoholic, I think, the smell makes my stomach hurt, and it made ten-year old Jenny swear off the stuff for life.

He would watch us there on the sand, only occasionally looking up from his phone's cracked screen. Saying nothing. Getting up when the sun set and it was time to take Annie and himself home. Barely acknowledging my existence, except for August 3rd.

Something was up with him, and Annie and I started to notice. She rolled over to me on the little beach, pressing our bare shoulders together and said "I think Ethan's making snow angels in the sand," pointing at him.

"If they're on the sand, then they're sand angels." I said, scrunching my nose and not looking up.

"No, Jenny, look at him. What the heck is he doing?"

I looked up, and it did indeed look like Ethan was making sand angels. He was some distance from us, on the other side of the beach, spread out like a starfish and shirtless. For a moment I made eye contact with the dock, quickly averting my gaze back to Ethan, choosing the lesser of two anomalies.

"What a weirdo!" Annie giggled, rolling over, the sand sticking to her damp body and swimsuit in the process. "Eek!" She shrieked, "Jenny, I'm covered in sand! Don't you know it's poisonous?" She grabbed my hand, like she always did, "We've gotta get back in the water to get it off! Hurry!"

I followed Jenny back into the lake, but couldn't take my eyes off of Ethan, spread out on the sand like a pinned butterfly. His head was shaking back and forth, as if he were saying no, no, no over and over again, almost mechanical, a machine piston operating on cheap vodka and lord-knows-what-else. I had the same feeling looking at Ethan on the beach as I did when my mom would drive past car accidents on the highway. The same feeling I got when I heard the hole at the dock.

"Annie, Ethan is scaring me." I said, knee deep in the water.

"He's just being a weirdo." She said, her voice wavering a bit, "Just ignore him." She ducked into the water, plunging her head underneath.

I couldn't keep my eyes off of Ethan. I made my way towards him, coming out of the water and leaving Annie behind, my feet sinking deeper into the sand with each step. By the time I reached him, I expected to be waist deep, skin melting off or in welts or whatever poisonous sand does to you. My shadow cast over Ethan's spread out limbs, and he stopped shaking his head to look up at me. His smell hit me straight in the neck, something I couldn't pin down this time, something like rot. Rotting. We stared at one another for a few moments, before a small whine came from his throat.

“Annabelle -” he muttered, squinting his eyes, “Anna- Annie - you’re not Annie. You’re not Annie.” he sat up, his eyes blown open and bloodshot, gaping at me, the Annie impersonator.

“It’s Jenny,” I said, folding my hands together, “I’m Annie’s friend.”

“Jenny! Jenny -” He looked behind him rapidly, as if someone were calling his name, “Jen, Jenny, Jen, Jennifer, short for Jennifer, right?” He turned back to me. I felt sick.

“No, it’s just Jenny.”

“Jenny. Just Jenny. No fur, if-fer. That’s good. Too many names are too fucking long.” He looked out into the water as he got up, all shaky on his bony arms and legs like a newborn deer, “Ann- Anna- Annie, where’s Annie? God, where’s Annie?”

Annie was watching us from the water, knee deep in murk in her purple tankini, biting her thumbnail.

“Annie!” Ethan called out, “Annie, get over here!”

Annie hesitated, which I’d never seen her do before, as came over, eyes on the ground and trying to hide behind her dark locs. She grabbed my hand when she was close enough. Ethan stared us down, terrified, like he’d never seen two little girls before, certainly a frightening thing to encounter for the first time. That little whine came out again as his head dashed around, frantically, the same panicked way one would do if they encountered a grizzly bear out on a trail. His head finally snapped to a stop, locking eyes with the dock. He was frozen. I gripped Annie’s hand tighter. Ethan’s chest heaved in and out, his ribcage begging to burst through his skin, before he took off running along the edge of the water.

Annie and I stood there, wide-eyed and hands clasping together so tightly we must’ve expected them to fuse into one, at Ethan, sprinting along the lake. Annie tugged at my arm.

“I think -” she gasped, her voice turning into the panicked whine of a child, “I think he’s going to the hole!”

Something shifted. I’d never, up until that point, been much of a protector. A leader. Something along those lines. Sure, like anyone else, I would hear songs on the radio and imagine rescuing Annie from a burning building with them playing in the background, my face dirty with ash as I heaved her bridal-style, a wooden beam just barely missing my head as the chorus to Edge of Seventeen hit. Real life is much less exciting than fantasies. You look a lot less cool when you try to protect someone. And Stevie Nicks isn’t there.

I took a deep breath and turned towards her, my brow furrowed with determination. I placed my other hand on her shoulder, weighing her down. “It’s okay.” I said, with all the confidence of a paid actor in an after-school special, “It’s gonna be okay. Ethan’s gonna be okay. C’mon, let’s go get him.”

“What if he falls in the hole?” she said, edging on a sob, “what if we fall in, too?”

“He’s not gonna go in the hole,” I said, already leading her forward, “Nobody’s that dumb. We’re not gonna fall in, either.” We retraced Ethan’s trail along the lake. The dock, and by proxy, the hole, for once in my short life, was not instilling me with an unapproachable dread, but instead, a sense of confidence. Nice try, you scary sons-of-beyotches, I thought, you’re no match for all four-and-a-half feet of Jenny Louise Kilmerman, I’m about to save my best friend’s weird brother and then me and her are gonna live in an apartment forever and never be around a giant gross lake ever again.

That feeling disintegrated the second I saw Ethan.

He was frozen in front of the padlocked gate to the dock. He looked like he was about to cry or hurl, his jaw quivering and his face flushed and red. We could hear the violent rushing of the hole now, screaming, shouting, sobbing -

“Someone’s in there.” He said, that same panicked whine that Annie had, “I think - I think someone’s in there, I can hear them.”

I shook my head as Annie clung to me, “No,” I said, “There can’t be. Nobody’s dumb enough to go in there.”

“No, no, no-no-no-no-no,” Ethan said, each no becoming more of a mumble than the last, “I think, God, I think someone’s in there, God, what if someone’s in there?” He brought up his hands to his head. “Oh God, someone’s stuck in it. They got stuck in it. I can hear them. Can’t you hear them?” He looked at the both of us for approval.

“Nobody’s in there.” I asserted, the shake of my voice not selling my certainty, my gaze shifting to the hole, its water rushing violently, “We’d hear them screaming.”

Ethan gripped the gate, pressing his forehead against it, “It’s hiding them.” He mumbled. “It must be hiding them. They’re screaming. The screaming. God, God, God...”

“I’ll look in there.” I said, “I’ll make sure there’s nobody in there.” As soon as I said it I realized what I’d done.

“Really?” Ethan said, “It might get you, too. You don’t know. There’s somebody in there.”

“There’s no one in there and I’ll prove it.”

Annie begged me not to. Ethan helped me over the fence. I was in a daze, the aftermath of my rush of confidence fogging my brain like a migraine. If I proved there was nobody in the hole Ethan would calm down and act normal. Annie would stop crying. We could go home and never fucking go back to the stupid fucking lake ever again. When my feet hit the metal floor of the dock, my heartbeat was thudding in my ears, the blood rushing at maximum capacity all throughout my body. Each step down the dock felt like I was sinking. I missed the poisonous sand.

The hole was at the end of the dock, underneath a giant grate. The rust of the dock stuck to the bottom of my feet, a blood trail of old unkempt metal stuck to my soles. Stepping on top of it, I looked down.

Humans, in their finite capacity for wisdom, cannot imagine infinity or eternity. Science says we can’t get past one hundred of anything. If I were to ask you to picture one hundred and one rubber ducks in your head, you would be stuck at one hundred. In your head, there is a pile of one hundred rubber ducks, despite your urgency to imagine just one more. There is just that. One hundred rubber ducks and nothing more. Standing there, above the grate of the hole, as it called for me, swirling and echoing in an endless spiral into nothing forever, gaping, calling, begging, this black hole below me. It was at this moment that I had a glimpse of eternity, going past my human condition to stop at one hundred rubber ducks and turn away, I stared down, its mouth gaping open, showing me what it had to offer: this infinity of naught and void. Whoever was down there, if anyone was down there, could spring up and stick their fingers through the grate, grasping at the thin, rusty iron like a prisoner, their screams meshing in with the endless rush of water. In the event that I were to fall into the hole and join this person, I thought, the swirling water would whip me around, by body banging against the metal structure surrounding it, while my lungs filled with the dirty water of the lake, centuries of muck entering into my body like a plague, any attempt to find air only welcomed with more liquid. The agony from this filling my chest would spread to the rest of my body as I would continue to fall, deeper in, before going completely under, any presence of light now gone. As I would go deeper, my body would stretch and contort beyond recognition, my atoms shifting into something distorted and malformed beyond what they were ever supposed to be.

Spiraling down, down, as what was once my body stretched thinner and thinner, a little string micrometers in diameter disintegrating into nothing. Null. Zero. For eternity. Endlessness. No light. No rubber ducks. No Annie. No Jenny. The hole offered me this, its deafening waves beneath me, the black opening of its spiraling mouth begging for me to fall through the protective grate, the bars locking it away from showing me the beauty of eternity and its opposite. Lakes are temporary. Friends are temporary. Love is temporary. Nothingness is forever. Before I could answer it, darkness overtook me, the hole reaching up through its cage and taking me into its mouth, surrounding me with its gift.

I woke up on the beach. The EMT said I had passed out on the dock, and my mom was there, hugging me first, then scolding me about jumping the fence and playing on the dock. My face scrunched up, and if I had the energy to, I'm sure I would have explained everything. But I didn't. Annie's face lit up as soon as she saw me, pushing past the cop she was talking to to make a beeline towards me. Ethan wasn't anywhere to be found.

"Jenny, Jenny! Oh, Jenny!" She shouted, throwing her arms around me like the wife of a soldier coming home, "Oh, Jenny, I was so scared!"

"It's okay," I said, my face pressed up against her hair, still wet somehow, "we're okay."

"You fell down and I thought you died!" She said, "I thought the hole killed you or something!"

"The hole couldn't kill me." I said, "I know karate and it doesn't."

Annie giggled. "Yeah, stupid hole!" she hugged me tighter, "Stupid freaking hole!" We hugged each other, the warmth of our bodies offering more than the nothing ever could.

My mom had banned me from going to the lake for the rest of the summer. Not much of a punishment, because I hated the lake, and summer was almost over anyways. I didn't bring either of these points up. Annie wasn't as disappointed as I expected her to be, the events of August 3rd staining any near future excitement about playing mermaids.

I still hate the lake. We drove past it just last week, and I caught a brief glimpse of the dock. The dock and the hole are always connected, like hospices and funerals, one being an eventual conclusion to the other.

I got that feeling again, like a tornado siren or a rising urge to vomit, as it flashed over me. I could, if I had wanted to, swerve the car off the road and drive it towards the lake, bursting through the padlocked gate to the dock. The grate, in this scenario, the cage keeping the hole from what it wanted would be gone, and I would drive my car straight into its open mouth, welcoming eternity. But I didn't. The feeling had left as soon as it came, a polite visitor giving a wave before going back to their business. I continued on driving down the road. It was all I could do.

Prodigal Youth

izzy stitchick

The future looms before me
Like millions of shiny cars on the freeway,
AM traffic, citybound,
Each luminescent container
The host to stories of varying degrees of
Likeness and unlikeness to my own.

They drive me mad,
These what-ifs whizzing past.
Perhaps they are late to work,
Or headed to their snooty private school
Maybe they are already drunk.
Maybe they are going home.

21 has been the harbinger
Of velvety, selfish reflection
And the subsequent fatal fixation—
Too much time spent pondering the freeway.
In fact, it's been opulent complacency, this age:

The present conceals some sort
Of perpetual European New Years Eve
Where the expensive wine tints our lips like wounds
And we, the partygoers, are all kissing
Alternate cheeks, lips, necks
Exchanging skin that is firm and glossy
Like the 12 celadon-green grapes
We are placing reverently on our tongues
Swallowing on the second until the big reveal.

Here we are young
And elevated, invigorated by faux wisdom
Yet we still find ourselves counting down
To something, somewhere, someone
Even after the wine runs out
And the new day begins.

Blind Faith

Kip Knott

Sunsets piss Sam off. Sam doesn't let most things piss him off, but sunsets in particular enrage him because they are a constant reminder that death is just over the horizon. Even now, as he stands outside his mother's house smoking a cigarette while the hospice nurse tends to his dying mother, Sam is unpersuaded by the light of a one of those sunsets where people swear they see Jesus's outstretched arms in the iridescent rays that beam between clouds. Sam shakes his head in disgust and spits on the ground before he turns to go back inside.

Someone might assume after hearing this that Sam is an unlikeable guy, or that he at least suffers from one kind of depression or another. The fact is, Sam is very likeable. His friends and neighbors would go as far as to say Sam is one of the funniest, most dependable people they've ever come across. All of them would agree that the stories he tells from his days as a wild teenager never fail to get a laugh.

Like the story about how he got the nickname "Ice Man" back in high school after he bet his friends that he could fit into one of those ice freezers outside Clay's Market where he had just replenished their beer supply because he was the only one with a fake ID. Now this might not seem like a big deal to most average-sized people, but at 6' 6" and more than 250 pounds, Sam was far from an average-sized person.

Sam had no problem living up to the name his mother gave him the day he was born, Samson. His mother always told him he that would grow up to be like his father, a larger-than-life man whose body still lies with eleven other miners beneath the ruins of the Sunday Creek mine, a man Sam would only come to know through his mother's memories the way a child comes to know mythological figures during bedtime stories. As soon as he walked through the doors of Our Lady of Sorrows High School the first day of freshman year, Sam was the Holy Grail for the football, basketball, and wrestling coaches. But organized sports held about as much appeal to Sam as sunsets, and he never once succumbed to the daily pressures to "play ball."

So when Sam bet his friends another case of Old Milwaukee that he could fit inside that ice freezer, they all jumped on that action and watched as he opened that small silver door, then reached in and tossed out bag after bag of

ice before cramming his drunken mass into the empty freezer. As Sam pulled the door closed, he noticed how the setting sun held the world outside the freezer the way a drop of amber holds its own tiny world for eternity.

The way Sam tells the story goes something like this: “The last thing I heard before I pulled that door closed was Jack Duffy saying, ‘God bless you, Sam. Hope to see you on the other side.’ I don’t remember a whole lot after that. I can tell you what it was like to be in that cold dark, though. It was like getting a sneak peek on what comes after we die. I tell you boys, dying ain’t nothing but a real thing.”

It’s always at this moment in the story that the room goes quiet as the grave and Sam hangs his head as if the weight of that memory is pushing him down. And just when the silence is the deepest, Sam snaps his head up and yells out, “Next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital wrapped in one of those foil blankets like a newborn baby surrounded by my ‘friends’ chanting ‘Ice Man, Ice Man!’ I’ve been the ‘Ice Man’ ever since.” And every time, the uncomfortable silence is washed away with choking laughter.

What Sam always keeps to himself, though, what he refuses to describe in exact detail to the people who populate and define his life, is the bottomless darkness that surrounded him as he slowly drifted into unconsciousness. The day that he climbed into that freezer, Sam was at that point in his teenage life when the darkness of death was like a Siren’s song tempting him to see how close he could get to it without actually crossing all the way over. The deeper Sam sank into the darkness of the freezer, the more he believed he would see the other side growing closer in the distance. He kept waiting for the inevitable pinpoint of light to appear on the horizon, or streaks of kaleidoscopic colors to rush toward him the way they did in a movie he saw once, or anything that would guide him to his final destination. But in the end, all that Sam found was nothing, a blinding void, an absence of sensation and any sense of self. And that’s the part of the story Sam refuses to divulge.

Sam has another dozen stories that he knows are sure to get a laugh. If he’s surrounded by a group of friends and neighbors and they don’t ask to hear one of his stories, then Sam happily volunteers one. No one in the town of Hemlock has tired of Sam’s stories after forty years. In fact, everyone has come to rely on them, and him, even during the roughest times, and Sam has learned to accept this role.

No one in the town, not even Sam himself, has amounted to much. Most of them, like Sam, live in the same house they grew up in. They all still buy

their groceries, or smokes, or dip, or Old Milwaukee from Clay's Market, although Mr. Clay died fifteen years ago and the market has been owned by Jack Duffy ever since. And when any one of them needs a helping hand or a laugh, they know they can turn to Sam. For instance, Sam built a wheelchair ramp for old Lucas Mehling, the town elder, when he broke his hip outside the post office. Sam got the soy bean crop in for Lizzie Sarvis when her husband dropped dead in the barn from a widow-maker heart attack. Sam donated . . . Well, you can go on and on about all of Sam's good deeds. Most of the folks who live in Hemlock say Sam is as dependable as the new day.

But the fact is, Sam knows that he is keeping the ultimate truth from everyone. Ever since he saw the truth in the dark of that freezer he climbed into all those years ago, Sam has carried it with him just as he carries his own shadow, something everyone can see, but something no one ever acknowledges. If anyone ever bothered to really ask Sam what the truth is, he would have to think long and hard about what to say, even though he knows no one would believe him. Sam learned a long time ago that everyone would rather cling a kind of blind faith in anything, as long as it wasn't the truth.

Like Sam's mother. As Sam sits next to her bed and takes her hand one last time, she turns to him and asks, "What is it you're not telling me?"

Sam looks out the window. The last remnants of the sunset sink below the horizon. "Nothing," Sam answers honestly after a long moment, not wanting the last thing he would ever say to his mother to be a lie. "It's nothing."

"Nothing? Are you sure?"

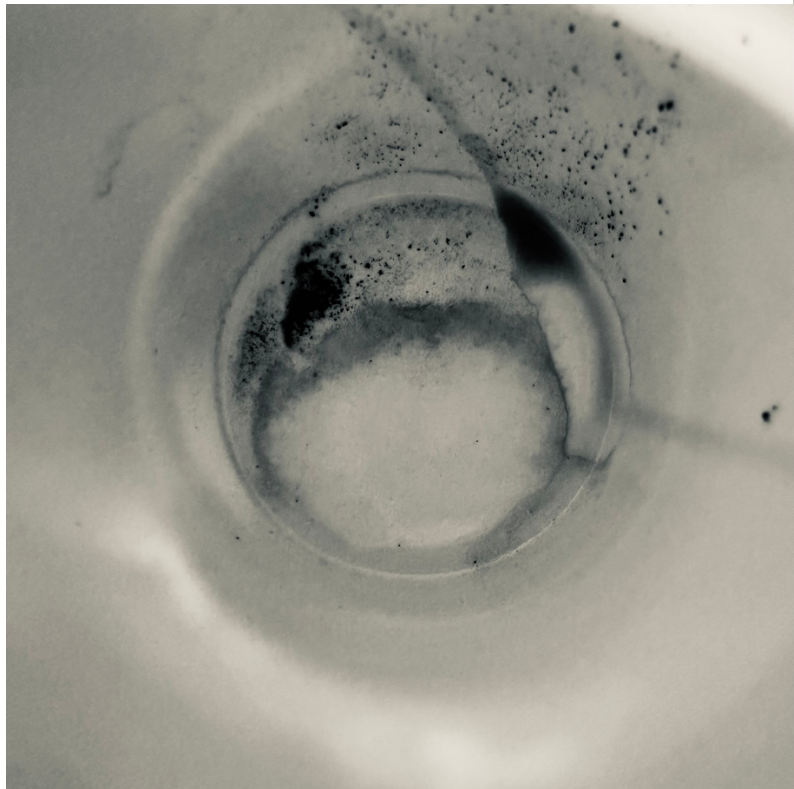
"I'm sure, Mom. Really. It's nothing."

Sam's mother looks into his eyes for the familiar streaks of blues and greens and flecks of gold that belong in part to her, in part to Sam's father, and in part to her mother and father, and all the mothers and fathers who came before them, colors that have always reassured her there is something more than nothing waiting for her on the other side.

Mystic, CT
Fay Dillof

As if stuck in an airport
terminal...
All her friends, departed...
She watches strangers...
Asks again for the time...
Loses track of it...
Wants to be more than waiting...
Perhaps a glass of wine?...
Clutches her bag...
Where again are her glasses?...
Checks around her
to make sure she still has
what she still has...
Touches again the bridge of her nose...
The top of her head...

Dregs
Rick Kraince



On Mending (My Relationship with Writing)

Maya Roediger

*Will I have another thought
That does not pertain
To getting out
Of this hole
I am in?
Or losing
A best friend?*

When I broke up with my boyfriend before college, I blamed myself. After all, I had done the breaking up. I would even argue that there was nothing special about it, not more so than any other relationship ending. If anything, it was remarkable in how kind we were to one another, which doesn't seem to make a good story.

No matter how many stories or poems I wrote about my feelings, I couldn't come up with a good one. I was frustrated. I wanted, needed, my words to be better. I was growing into writing and was painfully aware of how much it didn't shape up to the expectations I had for it. This was only made worse by the fact that my thoughts never seemed to resolve and only went in circles.

Sometimes I find myself thinking only in fragments. Words fail to describe a tangible narrative. All that remains is a feeling, a disaster, a story without an ending, looming in the back of my mind trying to claw its way free. I can't find it. It refuses to surface, even at my strongest beckoning. I will not lose myself in this haze. But haven't I already? There is no beauty here. How can something so right go so wrong? I swear ... I swear ... I swear...

Despite the complication of having trouble thinking, I kept kicking until I was on the other side of that moment (if you can call seven months a moment). I wasn't prepared for any of it: I wasn't ready to leave my best friend behind, I didn't understand how I could walk away healed, and I wasn't ready to let go of the pain I felt.

Understandably, a lot of that writing was—well—very dramatic. Sometimes I am tempted to erase the things I wrote or put them all in a metaphorical filing cabinet marked “Thoughts of My Dramatic Teenage Self” as if moving on also means discrediting everything I felt because it seems so inflated now. At the very least, heartache can be a reminder of all the reasons there are to love and hate writing—the feelings and words of your (dumber? wiser?) younger self somewhat immortalized for you to read.

*It's hard to say when I crossed the bridge, found a way to laugh, let the pain drift.
Sometimes it visits, a reminder to me of the power of love and the hurt it can leave. I
may not be by your side, but this piece of me will always know you. Not as we once
knew each other, but as an echo of who we were. Do you miss it?*

There is an ever-present desire in me to have every word I put on the page be golden. I used to think I would need to be proud of every line in an old poem book if some poor archaeologist found it in 3,000 years and tried to read it to figure out what life was like in the 21 st century. That also may have been dramatic of me.

It took an entire experience of a breakup to realize that I wasn't writing amazing work and to start coming to terms with that. In retrospect, I am not sorry to have written about a brush with grief that really did impact me. Nor am I sorry that a lot of those words came out in cliché-filled, oozy poetry. There is a reason no one else sees my worst pages and lines. Sometimes, it's nice to have permission to splatter words on a page just to make myself feel better. Sometimes, I just want to make things for myself. Sometimes, it's nice to know that all those lines of bad poetry will ultimately just be swallowed up by time.

*Mending my soul
Was bizarre and unreal,
And that is on healing,
Pain drifting away.*

The Scream

Fay Dillof

The caregiver helped my mother
 into the bathroom
then forgot her. For two hours
my mother sat on the toilet, calling
 for help. She tried...
 couldn't... to stand. Then to...couldn't...
lower herself to the floor,
imagining she would somehow crawl
to the bedroom.
I keep picturing it.
 Also The Scream.
 Except the screamer
is not walking,
 and there's no wavey sunset...
 no shoreline...
 no bridge...
 because the screamer is not on the banks
 of the fjord or anywhere
 anyone can hear her.
 She's as if on the moon.
 Or on the reverse of the moon,
pinned by gravity.
 The room spins on its axis.
 Whoa...
 just now,
 in order tell what happened, I've had to
 eat a row of crackers, open the Airbnb mini-fridge
 three times. Walk around the room. I sat down,
except then immediately I ...
 and in doing so,
 like the figures trailing behind the screamer—
 the ones the screamer feels abandoned by them—
 they who can't understand
 how terrifying the world has become—

A Descent

Lily Wissler

The TV had been off for two hours, and Marietta's mind buzzed, cells searching for sound to latch onto. The bright screen had become a nuisance. She had put it on when trying to mimic what she figured a normal person would do on vacation. Two episodes in, she realized no one was looking over her shoulder.

She'd quickly turned the TV off and turned to the window. Her thoughts weren't slowed, but Marietta didn't think she was the type to ever achieve that kind of stasis.

Occasionally, she'd hear a bumping sound coming from the top floor, near where she assumed the unfinished bathroom to be. The sound was no doubt the reason she had become the new home's ward. That, and the tickets. "You know the types," her sister had said in her venomous voice. The false whisper that only worked to amplify her words meaning. Julie was famous for it.

"The types?" Marietta had asked, not understanding.

"The contractors. Oh," a tsk, "don't make me say it and sound like an asshole, Mari. You know what I mean. They'll, you know, skate the tickets and put me down a honeymoon."

Marietta was beginning to understand what Julie was implying by that point in the phone call and sighed through her nose politely. "Okay."

"Just, really be sure you get them out of the box when they show up. I can't believe I was such a dunce and shipped them there. Thank God your little apartment is so close to it. What's the drive again?"

Marietta had looked up at the clock mounted above her desk at work, willing the hands to move faster. "Hm? Oh, around an hour."

Julie hmphed, "Yeah, that's nothing. We'd be on the road an hour and a half at least, and, besides, you know how I get on long car rides."

Really, Marietta didn't, but she made a vague sound of agreement. Their childhood hadn't been full of the vacations Julie's husband had seemingly made her so used to.

"The pipe issue, Mari, it'll be the death of me..."

At that point, Marietta had plugged into that odd in-between fugue she'd been visiting lately. It always felt like she was floating, a bystander to her own

life as her mind fogged over, the edges hazy. Her sister's words overlapped and blended.

Marietta hoped the stay at the cabin would fix this. And it had, for the most part. The only times the fog had occurred was when she had checked her phone, her eyes scanning over missed calls and text messages from her mother and her sister. She knew she should answer soon, she knew it. But she couldn't make her fingers tap out the response, let alone curve to pick the phone back up at all.

Instead, she sat stationary, her eyes glazing over as she peered out the long, floor-length windows of the cabin. A wedding present from Julie's mother-in-law that now only Marietta had opened.

Marietta sniffled; maybe she was coming down with something. The perfect excuse not to respond to the messages. She rubbed her tongue around her gums. Maybe they felt hotter than normal. Yes, she was certainly coming down with something. Without looking, she kicked her phone further away from her. She heard it fall off the edge of the couch cushion, a dark, modern-styled thing. Distantly, a clamoring answered it from above. Marietta wished she had listened to the issue with the pipe. The sounds from the bathroom were so disjointed that they kept catching her off guard. Her little jumps irked the accent pillows she was sure had been painstakingly chosen. Marietta reached back to straighten them each time.

She found a perverted solace in the poke of the bird feathers from within the pillows each time she righted them, her guilt manifest.

She hated lying. Even by omission. She could never stand the feeling since a child when that particular quality of hers named her the school narc.

"Mari, the reason they don't like you is because you tattle," Julie had pointed out matter-of-factly one night over spaghetti.

"Julie," their mother had snapped. "Stop that."

"It's true."

"Marietta, ignore your sister. You should always tell the truth."

Julie had snorted and gone back to scooping up her pasta. Marietta had rubbed at her nose.

The next month, Marietta remembered this moment when the principal asked her if it was true their mother had been drunk in the pick-up line the day prior.

"Yes," she answered simply.

The principal had nodded and picked up the phone, the hollow sound of

the punched-in numbers busying the air before the buzzing that then turned to her mother's voice. "Hello?"

The ride home was silent, stilted until: "Never spread my business again, Marietta. You hear me, you little brat?"

Marietta hadn't answered right away, wondering if her mother remembered their dinner discussion weeks earlier. Her mother's lips were pulled over her teeth like a dog as she watched the road ahead, and Marietta saw that she didn't.

"Okay, I'm sorry, mommy."

"Don't say 'mommy,' you're too old for that shit."

At that point, tears burned in Marietta's eyes. "Okay."

Marietta hadn't called her mother anything for days after that, waiting to hear what Julie called her. Julie did not speak to their mother unless she absolutely had to, which made figuring out the title much harder. Eventually, eavesdropping on a fight, she'd heard mother.

Ever since, that was what Marietta had called her.

Julie had stopped talking to their mother years ago, marking Marietta as the go-between. Marietta's unread texts were surely gossip about the other waiting to be answered by the only one that would know in either case. That was how the pair communicated, artless jabs foisted into Marietta's ears for her to de-claw and disseminate.

Marietta's stay in the cabin was the newest material.

"I'm surprised she let you out long enough to watch the place for me," responded to, "God, how much she asks of you. I raised such a twat. I can't believe it."

Marietta knew the pair would be disappointed in her mistruth. She kept telling herself, They don't know they don't know they don't know. The mantra was both symptom and antidote. Feathers pricked her fingerprints once more.

She turned on the TV again, but she didn't remove her gaze from the window.

...

Marietta wondered when she would get lonely.

When she'd first pulled up a day earlier, her treachery on the car seat beside her, she'd found the cabin gave her a pit in her gut for its remoteness and visage. It was too new age to be called a cabin at all, this grey thing covered with windows. The only rooms you couldn't see straight into were the

entryway beyond the front door, and the two wood-paneled locations, one upstairs and one downstairs, for the bathrooms. Other than those rare peeks of tinder and the interior, the only sign the place was a cabin at all was its isolation. It had taken thirty minutes into the forest on curving roads for the place to show itself after the same amount of time getting out of the city.

Even with the distance from civilization accounted for, a night had passed, and Marietta hadn't missed company. She rarely had any back home, yes, but people were always around her. At work, she could hear and feel the breath of others in adjoining offices. Sometimes it made her feel so surrounded, so overwhelmed, she'd stand in a bathroom stall panting. That had since been replaced by the fogging sensation. Now, nothing. The cabin had helped her after all, the remoteness gifting her the ability to stay in the present. The place was cavernous in its vacancy. Marietta's only company belonged to the pipe, which she found stopped at night. Bright and early, the noises would begin anew.

Marietta had briefly considered walking down the hallway from her bedroom to the unfinished bathroom. She wanted to ruin the mystery for herself and identify the offending pipe. Her mother's words applied tinnily to the situation, a reshaped ghost of mocking's passed: "What the hell do you know about pipes, *Marietta*? What the hell do you know about *anything*?"

Marietta didn't check the sound; the metallic clangs continued. She had long since stopped jumping, though they grew in their disjointedness. The clangs went from every five minutes to once an hour to as sparse as one every three.

Her spot on the couch was growing concave, used to the shape of her bottom. Really, it wasn't unlike work. The chair cradled her legs as her mind wandered the perimeter, her hands tasked with whatever she was meant to complete. No, not unlike work at all.

The thought had her rubbing at her nose, the nervous tic a relic from her childhood. She needed to forget this work thought, too. This cabin stay was her getaway. Her vacation.

"You need one." Her sister had said on the phone the night she had floated the plans. "I've never met a person who needed a vacation more. That, and a lobotomy. Hah! That would chill you, wouldn't it?"

Marietta had flinched when she'd googled the word later that evening. Now though, her thumb running over the bump in her bridge, she wondered if her sister was right. Marietta obviously needed at least a little help, even if not quite so far as physical marring.

Marietta imagined her mother's reaction if she had to tell her she couldn't make it to their weekly dinner, that she had plans. Therapy, Marietta would have to clarify after ceaseless digging from her mother. The scene played out with the sort of surety that made Marietta almost worry it hadn't happened before.

Marietta pinched her thigh, floated back. No therapy. That was final. The cabin's power took root once more.

...

She couldn't remember the last time she ate. Marietta stood from the couch, her seat reshaping itself. She pointedly ignored the table which hosted the proof of her deception and took the long way through the entry hall. The cabin's layout was full of empty spaces and the occasional tight nook that made no sense at all. She paused, taking in a spot on the floor as she turned the corner.

"I guess he used to vacation here, some weird backpacking trip he did with his friends every year in college, since it was the closest National Park." Her sister had told her, "He got all teary about it, I don't know. I'm just glad you're close to it. I really needed someone I trust there."

That was her sister's own tic that had never ceased over the years; she hated others in her space. Julie had tried to joke that Marietta didn't count as a full person, but her voice was tight. Marietta often wondered how Julie had ever gotten used to her husband. If Julie would lay there seething in the dead of night as he curved around her in an innocent, unconscious display of affection.

Now, Marietta stared at a boot print in the doorway, the toe facing the living room. The sole was huge. When she placed her own foot next to it, it only came up halfway. Mud had stamped it into noticeability. Marietta swiped her hand back and forth over her nose. She pointedly had not been outside since arriving two days prior; she had loved to watch the rain that had caused this mud, but she had held no interest in splashing in it. She didn't wear work boots either, and certainly none this large. Her feet were bare and tiny by comparison.

Julie would have told Marietta if anyone was set to enter the place during her stay. In fact, her obsessive behavior required it from her like penance. Julie had told Marietta the exact list of people who would enter the home and in what order. First, the five contractors her mother-in-law knew from their work in her own homes to build the cabin inside out, two cleaners to wipe up prints exactly like the boot mark. Next, Marietta, who would usher in two of the original contractors to finish the bathroom as a pipe had done *something*—

Marietta hated herself for not listening—that prevented the room from being finished. Then, Marietta would leave, and the two cleaners would return to scrub out her presence. Then, the newlyweds would arrive, fresh off their belated honeymoon. The mud print was unaccounted for in this arrangement, a size-13 unknown. Asking her sister meant risking admission she'd been avoiding earlier contact. It meant telling Julie she hadn't listened to the issue with the pipe, as well, in case the explanations were intertwined.

Goosebumps pilled Marietta's skin.

The pipe was related to the boot, yes. But, in an explainable way. A belated clanging came from above in affirmation.

"It's fine. Something the new cleaners are set to take care of," she told herself. She immediately wished she hadn't spoken at all. Talking to herself, really. Maybe her sister was right all those weeks ago.

Then, the loneliness struck. Marietta considered reaching for her phone to assuage this feeling before remembering it wasn't there.

•••

The noises had stopped. Hours ago, Marietta had found herself counting the sounds as she pretended to watch TV. There had been fifteen clangs, then none after five pm.

The contractors were set to be at the cabin in three more days. Her week was unraveling. Still, she couldn't find it in herself to leave.

"Basically, I just need you to be there to check the mailbox each day. The flight got canceled, so we had to have the company reship new tickets that fit the timeline. The flight threw everything off by three weeks, of course. I'm fucking pissed, so is he, I think. Just... they're projected to get there the day the contractors come back out. I need you to wait for the tickets until then. I'm just... this was the one thing I—I don't want to miss them." Julie had sniffed at that point, correcting the slip. "They'll be there Saturday. I need you there starting Monday. Just in case."

Just in case. Marietta had called off work in a concise email to her supervisors and packed a bag with the essentials. A vacation. She wasn't sure she'd ever had one.

Now, she sat on the couch staring out the window, her normal perch for her time at the cabin thus far.

Marietta wasn't alone in the cabin. She knew this to be true as her eyes moved from the window to refocus on the edge of the table next to her lie, where her keys once lay.

They, too, were missing.

Her vision swung back to the window. It was so nice to no longer feel that infinite floating sensation, to not tailor her facial muscles to another's inflection. She didn't want to lose this time she had.

"Once the tickets are there, you can leave. There's no need to stay." Julie had then said her husband was waving at her. She squealed as the call cut off. That was the last they'd spoken.

A letter with the travel company's logo emblazoned in gold had sat inside the mailbox on Monday before Marietta had even parked the car. She had grabbed it and pulled into the driveway anyway, unpacking her bags while it watched her before she moved it to the kitchen table. It had sat there ever since in silent vigil; Marietta didn't want to leave.

Even now, Marietta had no urge to flee. Since a teenager borrowing her mother's car, Marietta had learned the hat-trick of keeping a spare in a box beneath the hood. Marietta always forgot things, and keys were the first to go. Inside the box, snug beneath the metal, lay her escape.

Though her hands sweat, she felt no urge to get up and follow through with the getaway.

She tried to make herself scared—to think of the horrible possibilities of the boot owner's plans. As she pictured the atrocities, Marietta found she didn't feel a thing. The coffee maker beeped from the other room.

Coffee had always upset her stomach, but it felt like such an adult thing to enjoy. Here at the cabin, she had figured out the perfect mixture of cream and sugar to make it preferable. Stirring was her favorite part. Marietta grabbed the accoutrements and got to work. The spoon fit snugly between her forefinger and thumb. She wished she knew the brand of the silverware, but of course she had no way to ask. Even if she did, she wouldn't.

Marietta found she felt better without the phone. It had been causing her so much unease, knowing she was ignoring it and had no plans to answer. She had never truly chosen to ignore anyone before and disliked the feeling as much as lying. It was different though; one of the causes for unease was necessary, kept her tied to the cabin and uninterested in drifting off.

Marietta hoped the boot-owner would take the tickets, too. Then, she could really relax. She tried to hide her laugh with her hand.

...

When the clanging again stopped that evening, as perverted as it sounded in her mind, Marietta wondered if anyone had paid her this much attention

before. Her loveless teenage years had blended into loveless adulthood. She figured she wasn't cut out for that sort of thing and others could sense it more than she. Better to trust than be heartbroken.

Her mother's fraught relationships over the years had scarred her anyhow, made her wonder if love was even a possibility. Marietta often looked to Julie and her now-husband as proof, but Marietta always noted the near-reptilian look in Julie's eyes as she looked him over.

The noises were interesting to her. What was the boot-owner doing up there? Was that truly the pipe, an unrelated warning call? Was boot-owner standing with a ratchet, whacking an exposed bit of piping when the feeling called most? She snorted picturing the latter. Perhaps that was what it was. The boot-owner surely got tired at night, choosing to wander into the woods to collect muddied footprints to save for her before stealing off with some of her belongings, hoping she'd notice.

Marietta lay staring at the ceiling. She pictured a zoomed-out, doll's house view of the cabin. Two lights in the home revealed stylized rooms, one with a figure in bed, her. The other with someone dressed in all black, tiptoeing in large work boots with their ear pressed to the door. The image would almost look as if the boot-owner was scared of her.

What a thought. Marietta fell asleep holding in more laughter.

...

Who was the boot-owner? Marietta wondered, staring at a leaf drifting towards the ground from beyond the large windows.

A contractor? A cleaner? The mail person? Someone that had overheard the phone conversation with Julie? Someone her mother-in-law had told the plans to? A stranger, wandering past?

The possibilities were infinite as Marietta tracked the leaf's fall.

She hadn't turned on the TV for the past two days now. The silence was the crackling of an empty phone call waiting for a hiss of breath. The clanking sounds had never started that day. Marietta was beginning to miss them.

She wondered if this meant the boot-owner was now wandering the house, unmoored. Or that the pipe, the true source, had broken once and for all. Or, maybe, the boot-owner had left.

She didn't think it was that.

Marietta watched another browned leaf drift back and forth in the wind, reminiscent of one that had tucked itself into her car window a few falls prior. Marietta had been so frightened that she had pulled over on the road's shoulder

and looked over, expecting to see something alive and willing to fight her for its own mistake. Instead, it was the drowsy leaf, finishing its lonely plummet to its final resting place, though now separate from the siblings it had once been attached with. Marietta had spent a long time—too long, her mother had later told her—deciding what to do with the leaf. Marietta hadn't been able to decide whether to keep it or throw it back out the window. She wanted it to be with its family; she didn't want it to be lonely. But, then again, who was to say it didn't want to be with Marietta, that it hadn't strategically chosen this landing spot.

Marietta eventually decided to keep the leaf and not move it.

Three months later, Marietta agreed to help her sister with a ride to work when her car was in the shop. Julie had sat directly on the leaf. Like their mother, Marietta's sister could be careless to those on her periphery, be it people or leaves.

“Yuck, Mari, what was that!?” She'd asked after Marietta had gone stiff at the crunch; Marietta should've moved it to the console.

The evidence of the leaf's existence remained in the curve of Marietta's car seat. She had set the guilty letter on top of the body of her old friend a few days earlier, the few lonely specks that clung tight to the fabric.

A loud sound came from above. It wasn't the normal pipe noise she was used to, and she couldn't pinpoint the location beyond the upstairs.

Did the boot-owner think she was scared? Marietta was almost disappointed she wasn't. Surely, this was the most interesting thing to happen to her. Her shining achievement would be her death, or whatever else the boot-owner had planned for her. Were they watching her now somehow, peeking from the top of the stairs?

They were running out of time, or did the boot-owner know that already? Was Marietta truly that interesting to watch? The thought was thrilling. Nearly scandalous in its flattery. All she did was sit and watch other things, really. She figured the two of them were alike in that way.

The boot-owner had two more nights. That was it.

Marietta grew hungry and stood. She was now used to avoiding the kitchen table and opting for the entryway instead. Marietta used to love playing hide and seek as a child.

She preferred the act of searching, the airlessness it gave her stomach as she turned corners until she smacked into the warmth of her sister who was always slightly too rough in her frustration at being found.

“Mari! No fair!”

Now, Marietta pictured the boot-owner standing around the door frame, waiting. She held in her laugh, imagining rounding the corner and eclipsing their body heat. It wouldn't be too bad, honestly.

Though she didn't miss being around people, Marietta missed bodily contact. Her sister would give her vaguely condescending hugs full of “oooh”s when they saw each other that Marietta secretly reveled in. Their mother would give constricting ones that pulled too tightly against Marietta, her nails nearly breaking skin as she clutched her. Marietta preferred Julie's hugs, but, nevertheless, she stored each of these moments of contact up just the same; she needed to be touched. She was a tactile creature who disliked being around others; an enigma.

Marietta wondered if the boot-owner ever felt this need for contact, if they'd experienced hungry skin. She supposed she should hope they didn't. Marietta tip-toed up to the entry way and spun it quickly, expecting to see the boot-owner standing there, caught making a new shoe mark for her to spy on. The space was empty, and goosebumps raced up the back of Marietta's neck. Finally, there was the fear.

The kitchen sink had become full, but Marietta dreaded washing the dishes. She wished the boot-owner would pick up the slack. She tittered at the thought.

The letter still sat on the table, untouched. The only thing in the home that she dreadfully wanted removed. It was causing the only break in the stillness of her mind. She wasn't used to her thoughts being this slow, this sluggish. She had nothing to keep her up at night; she had left work perfectly between projects, and the house needed no upkeep. She was utterly at peace.

Marietta wandered back to the living room, a bowl of food warming her lap like a cat. She'd always wanted a pet, but she was never sure if she would be a good owner. Well, she thought, no bother to worry about it now.

Marietta had never thought that phrase in her life, of that, she was sure. Whether it be from impending death or the mind-numbing quality of no responsibility—par the cursed letter—, Marietta now understood sanctity. A bird who had flown and flown and flown for years in a treeless sky had finally earned her perch: utopia.

A loud stomp came from overhead, this time unmistakably from her bedroom. The boot-owner was toying with her, she mused. She wished she could be more fun.

Marietta wondered if they felt the same relief here, tucked away in these square feet of forest, this person who had known she was coming somehow, someway.

No, she reasoned, the boot-owner's mind was frantic, running at rates more like her own when removed from the cabin. Panicked, sweating thoughts of cat-and-mouse beyond Marietta's own musings probably filled their head. Marietta wondered if that's why she felt so calm, if there was a balance of serenity and panic that meant she took the share of peace for the week while the boot-owners stumbled. If their mind raced for hers to mellow. She should thank them, really.

Marietta stood, planning to make another cup of coffee. Whether it be a final one, or the first of the last until the boot-owner struck. She truly couldn't guess, reaching for a new mug all the same. She missed the sensation of stirring. It felt the closest to a task in the cabin as she faced the front door, back to the table. She truly did feel bad about the tickets. Though, Marietta guessed her sister would get them at the same time anyway, on Saturday, when the new contractors showed up and found the cabin and its contents. Whatever that would look like, and whether Marietta opened the door for them or not. No, the tickets didn't matter as much as Marietta thought, it seemed.

As she poured, the goosebumps came back. Marietta rubbed at them, angling herself to face the counter now. The spoon made satisfying clinks against the mug's rim. She had grown to love the sound, a faint twin to the noise from above.

A feeling like hide and seek visited her stomach once more as she tapped the spoon off and set it back on the counter; Marietta felt someone creeping up behind her. She'd grown used to the feeling after years of living with Julie, her older sister constantly worried Marietta had stolen clothes from her wardrobe or gloss from her drawer, had entered her room without permission.

Marietta knew she was right this time; she tried to hide her smile as she turned.

Decent

Wayne Russell

It was that slow hazardous stroll
into the darkest garden
of that long farewell
that terrified us most.

We witnessed your voyage
into the abyss of
blankness and confusion
and yet
you were fading from our
own line of vision
so painful to witness.

It was like watching a wreck
play out in minds frame by frame
everyday

slower and slower.

We knew that there was nothing
that science could do

the doctors shook their heads
washing their hands of you
hiding behind mask of
sterilized indifference.

You
the aged adult
in his twilight years
seemingly abandoned by God
in your most obvious hour of need
left to suffer in that garden
of darkness.

Alone set adrift in an angry sea
no anchor in which to ground you.

A blank canvass erased by
the simplistic hand

of a forgetful child
the cruelest of

ways too parish from
this mortal coil.

And after years of this
mental unraveling
you were a blip
on our radar
then gone
into the darkness
of that garden
of eternity.

Fear and Desire

Alesha Davis

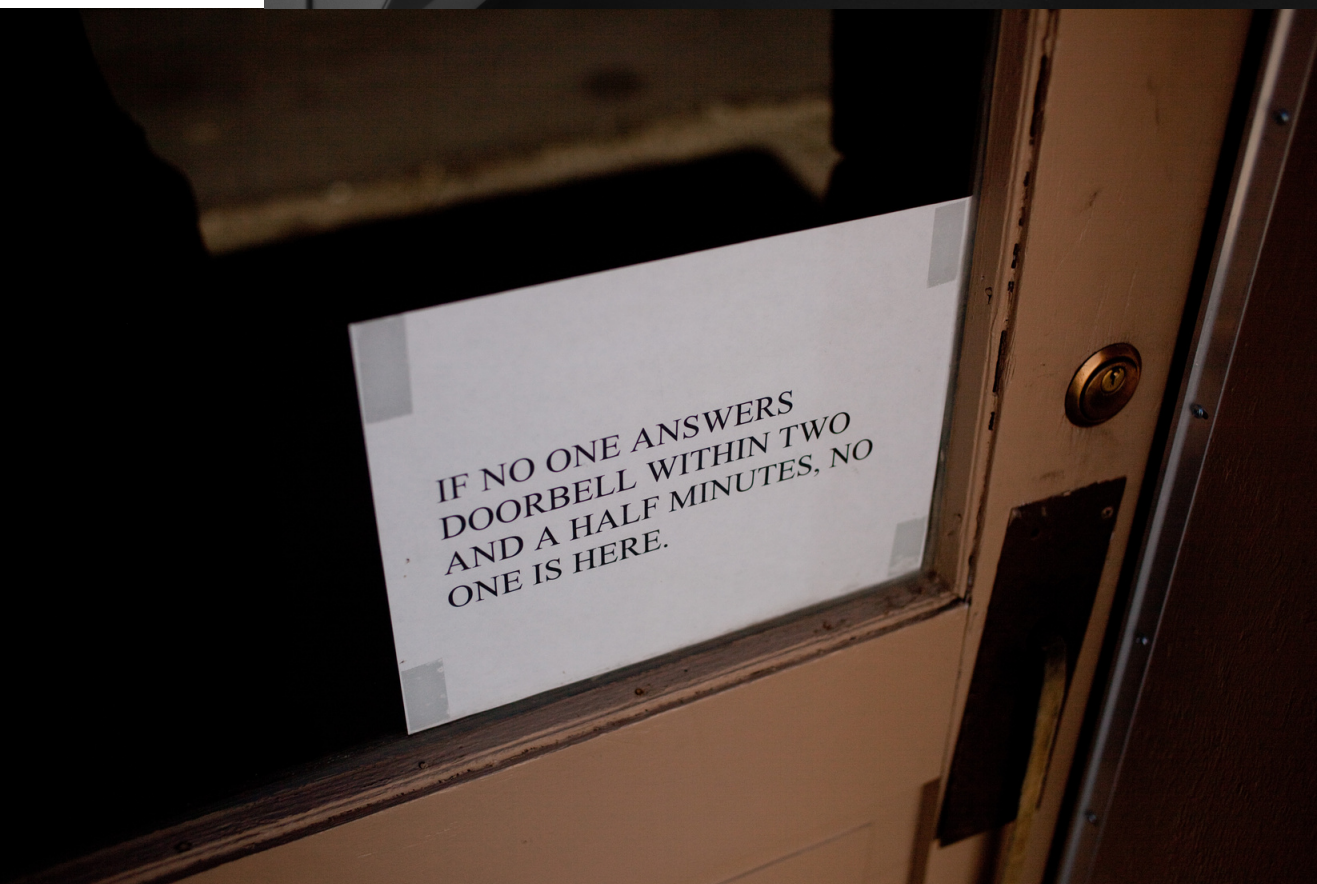
Waking up is a familiar disappointment.
Nothing is sweeter than sinking back into the sheets,
molding myself to the warm spot my body has left there,
remaining safely against the cold that lies directly outside
my impression on the mattress, momentarily weightless
on the cusp of consciousness, turning away from the expanse
of tangible time. Embracing the empty experience of slumber
is the only answer against the gnawing that comes
with living life while breathing.

I wonder sometimes if this is what dying could be like.
Is it something as pleasant as turning your head
into the perfect spot in your pillow, your whole body relaxing
as you lose your grasp more and more.
Toes, fingers, nose, legs, arms, stomach,
melt into the black. All that remains is your mind,
until that too, stills, blissfully quiet without your notice.
And inexplicably—you're gone?

Because I never notice when I stop thinking, my mind
the type to incessantly hum. I only know that I have escaped
once I reawaken, peace broken by the sound of an engine—
sometimes, the quiet chirr of a PC starting up,
sometimes, the loud rumble of a cars ignition—
Disappointing, distressing. Why then is the thought
of suddenly, ineluctably releasing into oblivion—
lost, or welcomed into the black—so terrifying?

My skin burns for nothings embrace. I choke on how I need it,
how I miss it. I count the seconds until I can return to it.
But, if it were to clutch me, I fear I could not bear it

Rob Strong



At Twilight

Amanda Grinstead

When the sky dons its robes of indigo
I slip into a tranquil reverie,
where shadows lengthen and soften,
and mirrors hold whispers
of ancient stories. A gentle breeze dances
through the forest like secrets,
a lullaby for my weary soul,
a gentle reminder that even in stillness
there is movement—a world in transition.
As I stand on the threshold
of day and night, I remember
the fleeting moments
of my life past by
and embrace the twilight.

the broken-bright darkness
of the densely starry night

Jessica Licker

Before the neighbors installed their always-on flood lights, in the odd few moments scattered through the year when I didn't have practice or club meetings after school, I liked to climb onto the hood of my mom's minivan, back arched ever so slightly to match the roundness of the curved metal, legs stretched out to rest on the lid of the big wheely trash can, and wait still until the motion sensor halogen bulbs dimmed enough for me to watch the stars.

The train in the distance was too far for me to feel the vibrations where my body made contact with the ground with car as conduit, but the muted whistle of its horn and the thrum of its engine floated on the gentle breeze that brought with it, on different days, the sound of cicadas and frogs, dogs barking—the buzzing of generators, the crackling burn of someone's barbeque, and the sweet-sharp scent of a bonfire down the road, burning kindling from the sap-rich pines lining the street named for them.

Cassiopeia and Ursa Major—the big dipper, were my points of reference to orient myself, second only to Orion, if I got out early enough in the cool, spring nights to catch sight of his belt beyond the rooftops that fenced in my view of the night sky. The sky in our sometimes corner of the Catskills—where the nearest neighbor was all the way up the hill and the phone lines were party lines until almost 2010 looked like it could come down at any minute.

The concentration of stars like bright pin pricks, in the near unfathomable deep—Delphinus from the patch of lonely mountain brighter than the moon where it sat in the streetlamp-polluted sky in town. And the trees around the clearing—intrinsic gray, brain gray—blur into a shape both friendly and formidable, a fence around the broken-bright darkness of the densely starry night. And I thought that was what dark looked like—the possibility for an abyss more beautiful and terrifying than I could ever imagine. A darkness that implied safety and comfort within the familiarity of location—of the scent of home on the breeze and the taste of acrid sweetness in the air, the sensation of the cool, damp grass against the gap where my sock didn't quite cover my ankle.

School was school was school. The planetarium wasn't the same as sprawling on a minivan hood and leaning into the midnight chill until my gaze went blurry, but I still wished my twelfth-grade astronomy class could go on for hours—head craned back so far that the crick in my neck felt permanent. Until Mr. McConville had us all stand and spin, disorient ourselves, and then turned out the lights, I had never seen such exquisite dark.

Lanterns

Jessica Licker



New Moon

Shana Collins

I gaze into the bathroom mirror,
Expecting to see someone.
But all that is shown is
Two dying eyes
And a half smile wanting to cry.

I expect to see an alive girl inside me,
one who giggles at everything
And asks the biggest questions.

Maybe, I am hoping to see a real smile,
One that is big and full,
One that doesn't need braces
And other people's embraces
To feel complete.

Maybe, I need
A full moon for a face.
But all I can think,
Is it's more like
The new moon
To me.

The Other

Samantha Imperi

“What are you?” Leigh asked.

“I’m your best friend,” Malava answered. She looked puzzled by the question. The two girls lay across from each other in the loft space above the living room at Malava’s house. All the lights in the house were off and they were huddled in sleeping bags on the floor, their heads resting on pillows as they faced each other. A flashlight lay in-between them pointed at the wall, illuminating their faces from beneath their chins.

“No,” Leigh said, reaching out and touching Malava’s hand. “That’s not what I meant.” The question wasn’t mean or accusatory, only curious and interested. “You’re different from me. And your mom, too. You’re both... different.”

“I’m not different,” Malava said. Leigh read pain in Malava’s eyes, but Malava didn’t move away from her touch.

“It’s a good different, though,” said Leigh, shifting closer. “Like sometimes, I think you can see the wind. Not just the way it bends the trees. The actual wind. And sometimes when you’re talking, I’m almost positive the birds stop to listen. When you’re playing barefoot outside, I swear the grass grows right under your feet.”

Malava blushed and shook her head no but didn’t say anything. She was looking down at Leigh’s hand resting in hers. Malava felt the thrum of energy she harnessed in her fingertips, always there and waiting. She thought about how long she’d wanted to share it with Leigh, to let her best friend feel the pulse of the universe run through her like Malava did. Malava’s mom said that humans weren’t ready for that kind of power yet. That they needed more time to evolve, to ascend the trap of their corporeal form as her mother had put it.

“I’m just like you,” Malava finally said. “But not.” She wiggled up out of her sleeping bag until she was sitting cross-legged atop it. Leigh mirrored her and the girls sat face to face in the darkness with just the peripheral glow of their flashlight illuminating the room. “Let me show you.” Malava grasped both of Leigh’s hands in both of her own. She felt down into the tips of each of her fingers and probed at the energy there. She whittled and refined it until it was no more than the size of an atom and she passed it into Leigh’s possession.

Leigh felt the energy enter her body slowly, like the energy itself was unsure it belonged there. Her eyebrows furrowed at the strange new sensation and then she smiled at Malava. It felt pleasant, slightly warm and tingly.

“You feel it?” Malava asked. “Hold it in your hands.”

Leigh tried to focus her mind on the location of the thing that had entered her, but it no longer felt like one thing at all. It felt like many, many things crawling up the inside of her arm. Her first thought was ants, but her second thought was wasp stingers, and her third thought was scalding knives. She looked down at her arm and it looked perfectly normal but she didn't seem able to do anything with it. She noticed she was screaming.

Malava's eyes widened in horror as Leigh's screeches began to fill the house. She grabbed back on to Leigh's hand and tried to pull back out the grain of energy she had given her, but it wouldn't come. Instead, Leigh's arm spasmed out of Malava's grasp as her friend began to twitch and flail with uncontrollable spasms. Malava screamed for her mother, who was surely already hustling to the scene, drawn by Leigh's cries.

Then Malava simply watched helplessly in absolute terror while the person she loved most in the world exploded into a fine red mist that painted every inch of the loft an unnatural crimson.

Malava sat stark still, her mouth hanging open like the hinge that holds her jaw together had utterly failed. The mist of Leigh's essence was so fine it didn't even drip off her skin, just clung in a sticky film to every inch of her. She could taste Leigh's blood in her mouth, she smelled it in her nose. The silence of Leigh's absence was thick like oil all around her.

“Oh no,” Malava heard from a very long way away. “Oh, god. Malava what have you done?” The pitch of her mother's voice was rising. Her ejaculations of sounds reverberated through the air, disturbing the bubble of stillness around Malava.

The breath came back to her all at once, rushing into her lungs like a wave crashing against an open vessel. Her scream was a note that scattered the light from its bulbs for a pulse. The sound spouted violently forth from her.

And then her mother's arms were around her cooing a combination of soothing hushes and muttered repetitions of the word no. They rocked like that a moment before Malava found her words.

“I didn't,” she gasped as a sob climbed angrily up her throat. “I didn't know. I couldn't.” Tears dripped thick from her blinking eyes.

“Shh, my love,” Malava’s mother ran her hand over Malava’s hair, sticking in the thick and tangled mess of knots and blood. “There’s no time. We have to go.”

The two creatures were off the floor in moments. They left the house untouched, taking nothing as they cut the lights and slid out the back door.

“Now you know,” Malava’s mother said as they pulled out of the driveway. “Humans are not ready.”

Malava nodded and gathered all the energy she could from her fingertips. It pulsed through her body like a heart that beat in her chest. And then the blood was gone, and with it the visage Malava wore. In its place was the face of a young boy with dark eyes and an upturned nose. Malava’s mother too, now, was different: an elderly woman with wrinkles and icy white hair. Malava looked out the window and watched their house slip away into the horizon.

Mother

Amber Autumn Leaves Huntsman

Waxing luminary hanging gravid
above my silver haloed head
casting incantations over the canopy
like an incandescent oracle

By her loud moonlight I press my heels
over cracking dead leaf litter
hoping
to not fall through the rot
hoping
to cut a way through
the whisper of a path neglected
by the keepers of this land

There is a clearing ahead waiting
To be fed

I offer a heavy matriarch
with a relieved heart
She's ripe now ready
for her next phase I'll make a nest
of cedar branches and lay
her within a thorny embrace
The thicket will grow fat with her nitrogen
She'll nurture mycelium
Queen of the conifers

Griffin Studebaker



Foxglove

Amber Autumn Leaves Huntsman

Hand me the rusty knife
I'll cut it out myself
Handle to the heavens it's been seasoning
since winter solstice

I only ask that you hold me while I do it

Walk me through the ferns
over root and rock to rest
beneath the mossy mother maple
Let me crawl into your lap
Hold my left hand
while my right hand carves

You tilled my soil
Broadcast this seed
kissed my head like my father didn't please
Press your palms to my cheeks one more
time cradle me
while I split my stomach

As I spread myself
for you again

agape
open

The blood pools around your thighs
Look into my eyes as I reach inside
this cavern
Past my slick intestines
around my ruby ribs

Whisper to my ear
how I was once precious to you
As I curl my fingers around it's roots and pull
this unrequited digitalis growing between my cracks
Noxious and beautiful
The most gorgeous weed in my garden

When I am done do not
help me to my feet I stand
alone

watch my entrails fall to the ground
as I divine how I will sew myself
together with bloody hands

Glory to Labor!

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

Soviet poster, 1975

For October glory
I spurned a break
for my wife's
funeral reception.
I have ascended
to labor reverie.
After turning thirty
lachrymose stings
and the mirror
reflected hammer
sprouts from both
acromions and metal
sickles from the
sanctum. By thirty-nine,
hammers rose to each
intertragic notch
and operated
independently
manipulated
by tentacle sickles.
Factory boss
elevated me
to the blackest
corner to preserve
excessive power.
Voice box only
screeches
industrial squalor
so I interact
with comrades
via surplus
centimeter-
wide penny-
paper ribbons.

Ivory and Gold

Elvido

Occasionally, when I'm staring at my reflection in the mirror, I pause and think: *Thank god for cybernetics.*

When you're looking at a body worth more than most people will ever earn in their entire lifetime, it's hard for that thought not to cross your mind. I pity the rich fools—spending their paychecks on yachts, expensive cars, and penthouses, because they haven't figured out how to invest in themselves yet. An integrated phone linked directly to your brain makes calls, writes emails, and looks up anything you want with a mere thought. Cybereyes able to zoom in and examine things with microscopic precision, and ears that instantly translate any word you pick up, even from hundreds of yards away. Synthetic heart and lungs to replace all the organs prone to disease and failure, and they perform better than the real ones ever could. A titanium spine, highly resistant to permanent damage from having your nerves severed, falling from high places, or any other form of blunt trauma. Artificial, golden hair and skin akin to ivory—flawless and immutable, possessing radiant hues beyond what is humanly possible. Chrome arms and legs—bulletproof, as strong as an Olympic weightlifter's and plated in solid gold just to show everyone that you can afford it.

But what's the point of all these state-of-the-art marvels of modern biotechnology if you can't try them out every once in a while, right? You won't get much use out of your brand new, shiny tech if you're sitting around in meetings all day, listening to businessmen blab on and on about investors, revenue and stock prices while you're fantasizing about gutting them in front of everyone and watching the life drain from their eyes as the rest stare on in shock, horrified at the prospect that they might be next.

"Mr. Cayne?"

I open my eyes.

Gone is the blood and gore, the dying coworker in my arms, the panicked expressions. Instead, a dozen or so people are leering at me expectantly.

"Daydreaming, are we?" one of them asks with a smirk. I feel the urge to wipe that look from his smug, pathetic face. But instead, I apologize for the interruption and feign interest.

"As I was saying, our profits are expected to increase by 17.3 percent in the next fiscal quarter, but only if we gain the approval of the police department to expand our area of operations. Mr. Cayne, I am under the impression that you volunteered to talk to the second precinct in order to reach a mutually beneficial solution?"

After clearing my throat, I speak up: "Consider it done."

The chairman nods in response and carries on with the meeting, while the rest of the attendees turn back towards the presentation, satisfied with my answer. The graphs show our city, split into several color-coded sections, divided among a handful of companies and the police like a cake.

Eventually, all the tedious meetings, press conferences and public appearances end, at least for the day. My colleagues leave the office building and head home, or perhaps to a high-class restaurant before hitting the clubs. A vapid, shallow, homogeneous lifestyle, repetitive despite having the money to afford variety and excitement.

While they're busy trying to distract themselves from their boring jobs with food, drugs, and company that's just as dull as they are, I get into my Rayfield—a sleek and striking, yet surprisingly reliable model—and tell Richard, my chauffeur, to take me downtown. We drive past countless skyscrapers, neon signs, concrete megastructures—a cityscape that's nightmarish to some but a dream for others—until we arrive at a bustling street, lined with designer brands, fancy jewelry stores, and other expensive establishments. My driver already knows where I'm headed, so the vehicle comes to a halt in front of a rather unassuming storefront. The silver letters above the door read "DYNALAR", and as soon as I step through the front door I find myself in a sterile, rather minimalistic room, with square glass display cases showing off the company's latest cybernetic inventions.

Immediately, a clerk steps up to me—a man wearing a cheaply made suit and tie. I don't recognize him, but apparently he recognizes me.

"Mr. Cayne! Welcome back. How can I help you today?"

I don't immediately register his words, but after I'm done looking at a particularly interesting implant, I turn towards the salesman and ask, "Do you have anything I can use to defend myself?"

He looks somewhat surprised by my question; I'm a particularly tall and intimidating person, and anyone can tell with a glance that my body is heavily modified. I know he's wondering why I *would* need more.

"We have got a few options for self-defense in the back. If you'd like I can show them to you." He begins talking as we walk away from the new models and approach the less popular cyberware.

"If you're looking to defend yourself from any violent thugs, I can recommend an integrated EMP Burster. It disables every electronic device in your vicinity, except your own cyberware of course. We can offer a special phone case that makes it n-" he starts explaining, but I lift my hand to interrupt him.

After staring at the small device briefly, I tell him, "I'm looking for something more... direct. Effective."

The clerk chuckles awkwardly and offers, "Well, we have cyberfingers that expel pepper spray, though they're not as useful in situations with multiple aggressors...". Instead of hearing him out, I nod, turn around and walk out of the store. Perhaps this is the wrong place for what I have in mind.

As I get back in the car, I name another address. It's located in one of the city's many bad neighborhoods, where violence and theft are ubiquitous, daily occurrences.

"Are you absolutely certain, Mr. Cayne?" the old man asks, clearly concerned for my safety, but I reassure him. He is better off not knowing exactly what I'm looking for, and he knows better than to pry into my personal matters.

As we drive, the flashy ads and glamorous shopping districts give way to residential buildings in various states of disrepair. Addicts lie on the sidewalks, either too delirious to move, or, if they're sober enough, already looking for their next fix. Occasionally, we pass wrecked cars that sit on the side of the road, broken and looted but not enough of a nuisance to be towed away. My driver looks mildly uncomfortable as a drunkard wanders across the road in front of us, and he reluctantly honks the car horn at them. Soon, we slow down, and I step out while Richard warns me, "Be careful, Mr. Cayne."

The awful stench and din of these filth-ridden streets is an assault on my senses, forcing me to turn on my nasal filters and turn on some white noise to shut out the sirens, screams and desperate voices. I walk a wide berth around all the homeless scum littering this sidewalk like discarded trash. Whenever one of them reaches out to try and touch me I kick their hands away.

Of course, among the rabble, my golden, radiant form stands out a lot, so it didn't come as a surprise when a small group of muggers accost me. Feeling safe in numbers, they pull out baseball bats and copper pipes - one of them even has a handgun.

In these parts, it's not unusual for the poor to rob people with visible cyberware, to forcibly remove and sell anything of value. They call it scavenging, as if the practice isn't grotesque enough by itself and needs a name just as repulsive as the act.

They don't stand a chance against me, though.

Before they can even lift their hands to take a swing at me, I swiftly grab two of them by the collar. I easily toss the criminals aside with enough force to make nearby walls crack upon impact. Then I reach for the third assailant; the reflex booster I bought a few weeks ago was finally paying off. The remaining scavengers, having been thoroughly terrified, turn tail, knowing they are utterly outmatched.

While they run for their lives, doubting if the person they just encountered was even human, I fix my suit and shirt. Thankfully, no blood has spilled onto the fabric.

After the brief distraction I proceed to a shadowy, narrow alley, which leads to a steel backdoor. No doorbell, no sign, nothing to indicate what is waiting on the other side. Slowly, I lift my hand and knock. The sound of metal hitting against metal rings through the empty street, then it opens to reveal a ratty, scrawny individual who wordlessly beckons me inside and leads me through a decrepit hallway. Squatters and more junkies haunt the almost entirely bare rooms on each side, though our destination is downstairs, in the basement.

Harsh halogen lamps bathe the surprisingly sterile clinic in an uneasy, cold light. The stranger hands me a catalog with their available procedures, then gestures for me to get on a medical chair while they fetch the necessary instruments.

"This one." I point to a page as I pull out a Credchip. These back-alley doctors are expensive, but provide services that no one else dared to offer. Just a few minutes later, the anesthetic starts to kick in, and I watch as the nameless medic digs their scalpel into my hand, carving into the last remaining piece of organic skin to make room for something new.

—

The next day at work had been as uneventful as any other, perhaps even more so.

During my lunch break, a few colleagues ask me if I want to join them for lunch, and I reluctantly agree. They take me to a somewhat pricey café,

though the cheap, faux-industrial furniture and decor makes it appear shabby and makes us look out of place. All of us order various dishes and continue to talk about business, as if these people don't know any other topics. Our food arrives and I listlessly stab at my salad with a plastic fork, refusing to listen to the others.

Instead, I start to observe the other patrons: a young couple on a date, a mother and her child, more white-collar workers who deemed this place close enough for a quick bite. Another walks through the door. It's a man in his thirties, looking nervous as he steps up to the register.

I watch as he takes a deep breath, then pulls out a shotgun. It takes a few seconds for the cashier to realize what is happening but when she starts screaming, everyone else panics as well. The robber waves his weapon around, threatening to use it if his demands aren't met. An employee starts shoveling cash into a plastic bag, while the others, desperate to survive the ordeal, plead for their lives.

Slowly, I get out of my seat, ignoring my coworkers' words. The thug notices, and points the barrel straight at me.

The deafening noise of the shell bursting elicits more agitated yelling, and I look down to assess the damage - my clothes are torn to shreds, but my skin underneath has merely a few dents from where the lead pellets had hit me. Calmly, I approach the man, grab his firearm and break it over my knee, snapping the gun like a twig.

The man was scared, petrified even.

I didn't think an opportunity to test out my new toy would present itself so soon, especially not one where I was doing the right thing. My fingers clasp around his face, my palm begins to whirl menacingly, and the culprit flails around, desperately trying to break free from my grip, until the mechanical noise grows louder, a sound somewhere between a jackhammer and a blender creating a jarring cacophony as the head of this unlucky thief is turned into a misshapen pile of hair, teeth, blood, skull fragments, and brain matter.

"Arthur? What have you done!?"

I open my eyes once more.

The decapitated stranger lies on the floor, quickly inundating the café as he bleeds out. The shotgun is gone, and so are holes in my shirt or the indentations in my skin.

Lament of a Future Cyborg

Eleni

Had modernity not enveloped me so early, perhaps I'd be more than just a cat scratching at the walls of her little room.

Constantly I claw after something in the distance, yet always it slips away into that web of untraversable time.

Feel everything through an opaque screen of blank overstimulation, tinged with insincerity and an air of numb acceptance,

overcome with a hideous longing for worse and worse realities, just to blink awake that furry little thing lying comatose in my belly.

She is roused only by that which lives monstrosly within the machine, so, I too become a part of that cyborg future. My willing fingers removed

from my body, replaced and fused with alloy replicas of the very claws that scratch at my skin from the inside. Whether these new integrations

are merely a translucent cage, stronger than my former walls, or my liberation, I do not know, but cyborg girl does not recognize the alternative,

self-assured with her condition as something other than just a cat scratching at the walls of her little room.

The Spider

Cam Kurtz

Nestled in a branching singularity, deep as the universe and black as the void itself, in the corner of a galaxy so cold, he watches. Like a patient spider, he watches as the ants go by, toiling for their food, each a ripe berry to be plucked from the vine. Back and forth they go, ignorant of their looming witness. Blissful ignorance, perhaps, for one world, beset by three yellow suns, chanced upon his passing glance.

“See us,” they asked, so curious, and like an acolyte he dreamed for them. High in the sky, the three stars darkened in chorus. Then, together as one, their minds were filled with visions of wading in a vast black ichor, serene and glassy, as far as the eye could see. Below the black top, the people saw stars, great and small. Spheres of light so pure that bobbed up to the surface, observing these new vagrants. The waves moved slow and calm like bystanders, and the people crafted an idea. Maybe, this was a test, and only by retrieving one of these motes of light could they become like him. And so, they plummeted, reaching for the stars. But the tides had other plans. In a flash of black lightning the sea began to rise and fall, becoming gargantuan parapets of onyx that broke and crashed, and the people woke from the drowning nightmare.

“Free us,” they begged, so brave, and he would free. In the sky, the three stars like beady eyes, arrayed in line, looked down on the world and gave no light, instead casting long shadows that blanketed the planet in a depthless dark, and like the black above they became strangers to themselves. In the shadows cast by his gaze they would see him, in all his glory. But they were gnats, not spiders, and he wove a web of the strings themselves. Their cells filled with his stygian venom and in a single moment of twisted, malignant ecstasy they let out one last shriek:

“Kill us!” they cried, with wisdom usurped and useless, for any hope of a final peace had long passed. The three suns flashed white, an indiscriminate white, for just one moment. Like the blip on a radar or a blink of his eye, and when they returned to yellow there was naught but a barren rock left to meander in their orbit, empty, but for an endless sea of ebony waters, that could sometimes be seen to dance with lights just below the wake.

(Ir)rational Circling

David Wanczyk

3.14159
isthisit
3it89793
Is3846isthis

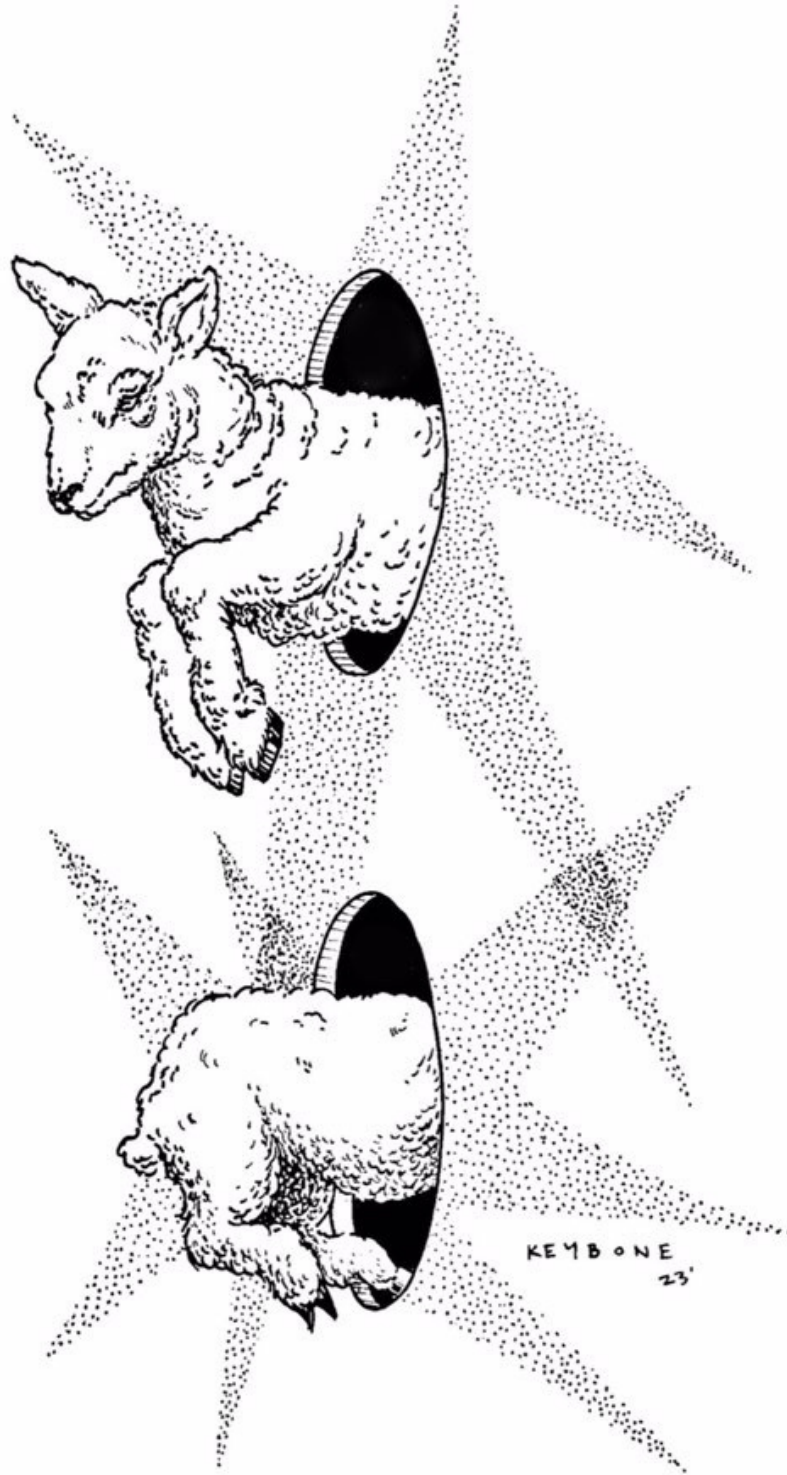
43383is7
9it0is884
1971this93

9937it10
It8is

0974944
59is3078
1this40thisis8
Thisis

089986is
803482it
3421170
this798Yes48
0865yes3is

Kyra Siemer



Contributors

Mark Halliday teaches in the Creative Writing program at Ohio University. His seventh book of poems *LOSERS DREAM ON* was published in 2018 by the University of Chicago Press

Shamik Banerjee is a poet from India. When he is not writing, he can be found strolling the hills surrounding his homestead. His poems have appeared in *Fevers of the Mind*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal* and *Westward Quarterly*, among others.

Wayne Russell is a poet, rhythm guitar player, singer, artist, photographer, and author of the poetry book *Where Angels Fear* via Guerilla Genius Press, it is currently available on Amazon, while his second book of poems, *Splinter of the Moon* will be released via Silver Bow Press in early January 2024.

Madeline Kinnison is a senior at Ohio University studying English with a creative writing concentration. She enjoys reading and writing about ghosts and strange women. After she graduates in the spring, she hopes to live in a haunted house.

izzy stitchick likes to listen to bob dylan in the bathtub while they write.

Kip Knott is a writer, poet, photographer, and part-time art dealer living in Delaware, Ohio. His most recent book of poetry, *The Misanthrope in Moonlight*, is available from Bottlecap Press. You can follow him on Instagram at @kip.knott and read more of his writing at www.kipknott.com.

Fay Dillof's poetry has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review*, *FIELD*, and *Green Mountains Review*. Her poems have won the Milton Kessler Memorial Prize and the Dogwood Literary Prize and have been supported by a John Ciardi Scholarship from Bread Loaf, a Claudia Emerson Scholarship from Sewanee, and an Anne Bastille Residency. Dillof lives with her husband and daughter in Northern California, where she works as a psychotherapist.

Richard Kraince: Bryophyte hunter and umbrage gatherer gainfully engaged in détournement seeking alternative planet for photosynthetic feline polity.

Maya Roediger is a second-year student at Ohio University. She enjoys reading, writing poetry, and climbing rock walls

Lily Wissler is an emerging queer writer from Dayton, Ohio. She is currently studying English - Creative Writing at Ohio University. There, she is Head Fiction editor for Sphere Literary Magazine.

Alesha Davis is a senior at Ohio University studying journalism and English. They dabble in poetry writing as a hobby. She prefers the dark, yet is afraid of it. Her favorite fruit is mango.

Rob Strong is a freelance photographer in New Hampshire. While most of his work features people, he is occasionally drawn into voids.

Amanda Grinstead was born and raised in Albany, Ohio. She began to process her childhood & relationship trauma through stream of consciousness writing & then poetry. Her poems retell her past with unequivocal honesty and are often deeply melancholic.

Jessica Licker is a literary history graduate student at Ohio University. She is a connoisseur of soft pretzels and can be found haunting public libraries and reading in trees when the weather is nice.

Shana Collins (she/her) is a poet at heart. She has been published in the Los Angeles Press, Women Writing For A Change anthologies, and won an honorable mention in a poetry contest at her local library. Every week, she helps co-host Designated Space, a spoken word open mic night.

Samantha Imperi is a Ph.D. student of Creative Writing at Ohio University. She received her MFA in poetry from the NEOMFA program at the University of Akron in 2023. Her work can be found in Wild Roof Journal, The Great Lakes Review, The Festival Review, and other journals. @simperi08 on Twitter and Instagram

Amber Autumn Leaves Huntsman is a Hedgewitch, multidisciplinary artist, and drama therapist living deep in the forests of the Olympic peninsula in Washington State. Amber's first poetry chapbook, *Cool Dark Places*, was recently published through Winter texts. (<https://www.wintertexts.com/store>)

Griffin Studebaker

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan also has recent poetry in *New York Quarterly*, *The Greensboro Review*, *descant*, among others. He is a Senior Lecturer of literature at Georgia College & State University.

Elvido is a writer and aspiring author based in [REDACTED], currently studying English and Linguistics. Their go-to genres are horror, dystopian fiction, and social commentary, usually in the form of short stories, flash fiction, or table top RPGs.

Eleni is a poet, student, and someday novelist who can typically be found petting stray cats and writing about sadgirl aliens.

Cam Kurtz is a writer from Fort Collins, Colorado currently assembling a degree in Creative Writing from Ohio University. His dream is to one day write a science fiction short story so unsettling that it will ruin the days of High School English students for years to come.

Dave Wanczyk is a writer and teacher living in Ohio. This is his second poem about pi.

Kyra Siemer is a second generation tattoo artist with five years of experience. She enjoys creating illustrative surrealism, and blackwork designs. You can find her on Instagram @keybone.tattoo



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