



SEASON  
of the  
GAR

BOTTOM  
FEEDER  
by: MARK  
SPITZER  
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CHE  
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FROM  
absinth  
to  
Marijuana

RETURN of the  
GAR

AGE  
OF THE

# RUDE BRUCE REVIEW

# NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

*Issue 13*

**Andrew A. Mobbs &  
Timothy Snediker** – Editors-in-Chief

&  
**Desiree Remick** – Guest Fiction Editor

&  
**Britney Logan** – Cover Illustration

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In memory of Mark Spitzer  
1965 – 2023  
He was our teacher and our friend

(&)

Dear Brucians,

We're very excited to present ISSUE 13 of *Nude Bruce Review*. We've been spare-time-slinging this shit—and it's good shit—for over a decade now, and we're frankly and forthrightly gladdened by the fact that you're still with us. But the truth is that not everyone is still with us.

Our dear teacher and friend, Mark Spitzer, passed away a month or so ago. He went suddenly, done in by a devil called cancer, and we miss him like hell. Mark was a big, loud, brilliant, wild man. He was also shy, subtle, funny, and he really, really fucking cared. He was a stupendous writer. He wrote in virtually every genre, translated freak French poets, published like a machine, taught his craft for decades, and published other writers (including us), as if his life depended on it. Maybe it did. In any case, rumor has it that his collected poems will be published soon, so he'll live on in those verses and—pardon the saccharinitude—in our hearts.

If you don't mind, we (Andrew and Tim) are going to take this opportunity to say a few words about Mark. ~

**Andrew:** Sure, I remember when I first met Mark Spitzer, the new professor making waves in Thompson Hall who moved south from his haunt in Missouri to crash the Central Arkansas literary scene, scope out river monsters in Lake Conway, and teach small-town wannabes like yours truly. He was donning one of his casual short-sleeve button-downs (almost exclusively patterned with paisley or

freshwater fish) the day he popped into the writing center, exuding this benevolent wildness—an ember, I suspect, he kept lit all his life, kindled in company with his trademark vim, candor, kindness, and just the right amount of crazy. This memory of Spitzdawg is precious, as is every encounter we’ve relished since then. Now, fifteen impossible years later, I am bursting with gratitude for my mentor and friend for giving us so much—his prolific poems and essays, his tireless alligator gar conservation efforts, his zany sense of humor, and his fervent support in launching *Nude Bruce Review*, even gracing our inaugural issue with his irreplicable presence and writing. And Mark has done the same for me in my life.

**Tim:** Where to begin with Mark? I don’t remember meeting him. When I cast back to my days as a Creative Writing major at the University of Central Arkansas (now fifteen years ago), I can’t but think that Mark was always already my teacher. It’s hard to imagine Thompson Hall without him, as if he were its spirit, or its poltergeist.... But I remember the day in his poetry workshop when he introduced us to Frank Stanford’s mystico-poetical opus, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*, a book that changed me forever. I remember that he taught me that the prefix ‘eco-’ comes from the Greek *oikos* (‘household’), and that the economy of the human race (read: Western capitalism) is burning down its home. I remember him letting me take the work-study money without doing much work. I remember the day he returned a chapbook manuscript that I’d shared with him, with a signed contract and a scrawled note (“SNED, I made some comments on ur poems. LET’S PUBLISH THIS SHIT!!”), and I remember the day he threw a huge party to celebrate the

launch of my book and Andrew's book, both of which he designed himself. I remember the evening at his house when he cooked us dinner and introduced us to his gars. I remember the time he asked me to find him some green. I remember that he kept inviting me to go fishing with him, and I ~~remember~~ wish I could forget that I never took him up on it. I remember how chuffed he was when I would make him do my fave poem, 'Sucking on My Biggie,' at every reading. I remember our last email exchange: belated, too brief. Small wonder that I don't remember meeting him; Mark's always been there, and he's going nowhere.

~ Thanks for listening, folks. And for reading. And for writing! Thanks to all of our contributors, without whom Bruce would have to put on the clothes of capitalist servitude, get a job, and quit his habit. Thanks to Desiree Remick for her judicious assistance with the fiction selections. And thanks to Britney Logan for designing and illustrating the beautiful cover for ISSUE 13, featuring our beloved mascot Bruce in the guise of our beloved friend Mark. (And, let's be honest, there was always something of Mark in Bruce—our literary lodestone.)

Brucefully,

Andrew & Tim  
Editors

# Poetry



# My Pronouns Are Lying

by H.R.Harper

My pronouns experience *rigpa*, recoil, take cover as soon as possible, and write a poem like this, but not this. My pronouns, stunned, roll around in the annals of history, not exactly lost, but far from any place that can be found. My pronouns form new versions, as is their nature, to be transcendent, immanent and ungrammatical. Grammar tames but does not harness them. Avoiding grammar, my pronouns make my myths. My pronouns, apparently, are for sale.

For instance, my pronouns pretend they are the wax in Icarus' wings, more's the pity for him, the gods, and the emptying skies. My pronouns walk under that sky, want to keep it from loss, replicate it as a hedge against loss. But somewhere someone must have seen something remarkable, a boy falling into the dark sea. Now my pronouns hold places in sentences where collective agreement is not enough. Their failures make my pronouns the only map of consciousness, the world looking at itself. Their failures are *not* for sale. No digital marketing scheme can reach my failures, my glorious failures.

My failing pronouns are the aether, the rich soup of neutrinos and theory, the dark and light of all possible universes. They shine with capaciousness in their war against holograms, against simulations, against profit-

loss calculations. My pronouns make the world we know by the light they use. But my pronouns, shifty and out-of-date, also hunger to touch wood, to smell the living rot of the forest, and to exit the math and codes that monetize our loss of the material world. These lies of resistance are exactly their grandeur.

So, with their need for the real world without constructs, my pronouns regroup, case the joint, duck for cover, and slip out the back. In the back 40 of the desert and floods, my pronouns find the lost jar where symmetrical particles hide until it's time to end time. They are wrapped in torn curtains.

My pronouns, long-winded but wiser for the wear, pack up the DNA of what's possible, and are exhausted by what's not. My pronouns fold themselves – origami, charts, clean linen, mudras, counterpoints, scrolls, neurotransmitters, carry-on luggage, black holes – to close the argument. And every fold's a lie.

# Letter to My First Time Being Tear Gassed

by Tyler Jones

Halfway through that seven-day bike ride  
from San Francisco to LA when I saw it  
on a country road snaking through beige  
fields. A plume of smoke by the state prison.  
Amorphous,

billowing as the crosswinds blew a feather  
into our four faces. A Pollack painting  
blurred and stretched into static  
long miles from the medic who flushed us.

I don't know how anything survives this heat, Jim.  
Today, a dead hummingbird by my car. Proof!  
Green, slender, still. Its eyes were the first to go.  
Ants circling the sockets. I lost mine, too,

I thought of you.  
How I asked to be treated differently.  
Desire, tears, and our last letter.  
How the gas evoked something similar.

How we sat on campus bricks cursed with ivy garland.

# Sermon {PRIVATE}

by Mark Blaeuer

Let's also take a look at First John  
Two the lust thereof but he that does  
the will it's 37-18 15 seconds left  
the kick is good it's 38 and grim and  
tough and brutal Sugar Bowl the injured  
player and the penalty we're gonna take  
time out the Trojan offense muttering  
around the line of scrimmage what He  
has commanded us to do if you don't fear  
God this'll be for you eternal everlasting  
Hell you can't ignore Isaiah 43 to smoke  
cigars and drink beer narrow is the way  
that leadeth choose the church you want  
divorce remarry what God prefaces contrary  
to your purposes I'm warning you about  
the glory burning Hell so hot it sets  
the mountains Deuteronomy you paint your lips  
and watch your television Holy Ghost what  
shall we do but I have made it plain you  
hypocrite false prophet Pentecost uh-huh  
you listen yeah verse 37 yes a cloudy day  
it's not my words repent repent nobody  
never did Post Office Box New Orleans  
U.S.A. the 25 the 30 nice return by  
Browner Tinsley back to throw the pass  
is incomplete they've stopped  
the clock.

# Vine Street

by Layla Lenhardt

Without a second thought  
I sent your Capricorn sun  
to the gallows in exchange  
for limerence and third chances.

But everyone after you was just  
a different iteration of the space  
you left behind. Their names on my  
phone screen like shallow etchings  
on forgotten headstones.

We could've had a place  
on Vine Street, and filled it  
with cats, a wedding  
beside the willow, a hundred

more years. Instead I sit shiva  
with my feral, adolescent heartache.  
I salt my doorways and sheet my mirrors,  
and try to remain gentle with myself despite  
this inherent vice.

She said, "*Everybody loses  
the thing that made them,*"  
And I've grieved for you for so long,  
you feel like folklore.

# Menu for a Post-Vegan Rumspringa

by Faith Earl

After he died, I was greedy for life; sick  
of going without when I had the choice.  
I ended a years-long stint of veganism  
with sourdough toasted and drowned  
in butter, ripped up and pushed face-first  
into saffron yellow yolks like a know-it-all  
swirled in a toilet bowl, licked the runoff  
clean. I added butter to my oatmeal,  
to squash, smeared it thick on pancakes  
for mouthfeel alone. Ordered a meteor-sized  
meatball from the Italian joint on the corner,  
burrata on bread, the pizza paved in soppressata.  
I baked a chicken pink-winged hands-on-the-hips  
stance and all, hissing and browning in its own  
rendered fat. Filet mignon still bloody, dates  
stuffed with goat cheese. What I am trying to say  
is that I think I was starving longer than I realized  
and for more. That I know all my poems about food  
are about grief, and all my poems about grief  
are about hunger.

# The Awkward Gravity of Running

by Henry Crawford

*Goodbye to the elms*

- "The Moose," Elizabeth Bishop

Departure abounds the early rising jogger  
stepping into a zoetrope of ranches and east coast colonials  
the oaks and ornamentals folding into the green color-field  
lawns

lending shape to the otherwise formless dawn  
with blades of grass in crewcut salute as she makes her way  
down the cul-de-sac shortcut that wends a well-trodden  
path

to the middle school soccer field  
where she emerges upon a goalless flat of faded chalk lines  
her Maggie did three years here  
caught with cigarettes in the bushes on the slope  
that gushes into a trash strewn run-off stream  
no need to go there today  
in two years it will all be townhomes  
walkable to the shopping strip coming into view before her  
as she jogs across the parking lot lines flowing beneath her  
feet

as if spinning on a piano roll of individually crafted  
footsteps

like those she imagines in the Brooklyn of her daughter  
and she tags the Market Street stop sign and rounds back  
into the tree lined lanes now stirring with SUVs and Teslas  
getting to the last quarter mile mark in front of the Daley  
house

with its two entwined trees

where she always says to herself *Goodbye to the elms!*  
and sometimes remembers the Daley's who fled the  
    Troubles  
everyone went to the housewarming  
it must have been fifty years ago  
she had a crush on Tommy boy but it wasn't much  
and they've long since moved on  
as she slows down coming to her own front yard  
with a final bound up the small brick steps  
opening the empty mailbox she pulls out the key they made  
at the hardware store before it went out of business  
and closes the door with coffee to be made and nobody  
    home.



# The Bus to Basic Training

by Shawn McCann

The brakes struggle to stop  
the oversized tires,  
grind bone scraping bone  
before finally giving up.  
The man behind the wheel  
stares at the window.  
His perfectly faded hair with  
a tiny strip atop his head  
is a sizzling Roman candle.  
The doors slam open.  
The man dons his brown round,  
crossed rifles gleaming in the sun,  
assaults us with a devious smirk.  
Metal shakes as he leaps to the curb.  
Six drill sergeants descend  
like hellhounds, growling  
muffled slurs I can't understand.  
Seconds later, I taste the red  
Georgia clay, gear chucked asunder  
like tornado debris.  
My muscles burn as I push myself up;  
my ears sting from their screaming.  
And all I can think about is how  
Dad was right.

# *Ukiyo-e*: Pictures of the Floating World\*

by Charles Tarlton

*O snail climb Mount Fuji  
But slowly, slowly!*

- Kobayashi Issa

The water in the canal is blue,  
and the mountains in the distance  
are also blue, and the banks of the canal  
are blue against the white Sakura blossoms  
in clusters like pillows, and Mt. Fuji  
is white in a hinted distant single line.

富士  $\neg$  *Fuji*

Ironies attend the mountain standing  
alone, the fuss and circumstance  
of life clustering nearby,  
and the far away vanishing point,  
and an empty bridge,  
                    busyness and two horses.

Tiny trees in the distance fit  
between the clusters of white blossoms  
and the setting sun casts long thin shadows  
of people, signposts, but not the trees, somehow,  
and not the white mountain;  
            this is the desperate puzzle we have to solve.

\*Utagawa Hiroshige, Evening Glow at Koganei Border, Ukiyo-e, ink and color woodblock print on paper, 9<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches, late 1830s, Sackler Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Public Domain) Poem by Taihaido Donsho:

*The glow of sunset at the end of a cloudy spring day  
Foretells tomorrow's weather in Koganei,  
Where cherry blossoms are in full bloom.*



# Special License

by Essie Martin

The

Christmas my neighbors killed a moose, they

strung his body by the hind legs from a tree,

letting him bleed out through  
the mouth. I remember wondering why

his blood was so thick, how it dripped.

Plunk. I still think of

him, how my neighbor's Christmas was

thick with moose fat. They were hungry,

for a taste of something  
big and wild. Something that you have to hide

behind a gun to destroy. Something that wanders  
the woods and commands quiet, until

single shot, a clap of bullet, extinguished his  
life.

# Turquoise Sweater

by Ellis Elliott

She kept asking for the turquoise sweater  
with square tortoiseshell buttons,  
and I kept saying “I’m looking.” As if  
there were any place to look besides  
the narrow, standard-issue wardrobe  
in her bland nursing home room.  
I chose not to tell her about her condo  
floor filled with boxes and garbage  
bags, or Uncle Pink backing up the truck  
to load the freezer. I did not tell how  
my brother and I sorted through  
her photograph albums, her yellowed  
letters with grandmother’s cursive,  
or her jewelry. I did not tell her about  
the twelve pairs of scissors we’d found,  
or the bulging manila folder of her  
nursing school papers. Not the ruby-red  
Fostoria glassware in the kitchen cabinet,  
not the ten boxes of instant Jell-O in the pantry,  
not the turquoise sweater with square  
tortoiseshell buttons, and most of all, not  
the multiple trips made to Goodwill. I think  
she knew it was gone. Both of us practiced  
in the truths we were hiding, as if rehearsing  
lesser agonies could ease the letting go.

# Self-Portrait in Dog Years

by Alison Hicks

I spread balm on my left thumb joint  
    between steroid shots  
serum around my eyes  
    when I remember

The dog of my third age comes to me limping  
    holds his paw up  
I feel into the web between pads and fur  
    don't find anything

He was an old soul when he came to us  
    eager to explore  
I had to walk him in a circle to turn him around  
    He stops now

turning me toward home  
    in the middle of the block  
When a memory pleases me  
    I'm sad I'm no longer living it

I copied Alice Neel's *Self-Portrait* for an art class  
    hoping to steal that bravery  
I'd like to be a figure in Matisse's *La Danse*  
    curve of joy

# FICTION

# Transplantation

by Mark Keane

THEY RECEIVED NOTIFICATION of a donor liver. More tests were required, and Liz made an appointment for Quinn. She asked her brother, Philip, to see what he could find out as he was a senior administrator at the hospital.

Philip called in on his way home from work. “The liver is as good as new,” he said. “The donor was teetotal and a health freak. Run over by a car when he was out jogging. A tax consultant and an asshole by all accounts but that hardly matters. It’s a liver transplant, not a personality transplant.”

Quinn had ignored the symptoms. No appetite, itchy skin, pains in his stomach and out of breath just going up the stairs. When Liz found him slumped over the bathroom sink, coughing up blood, his condition could no longer be ignored. The prognosis came as a shock: end-stage cirrhosis, his liver damaged beyond repair. Not a question of cutting back, switching from whiskey to wine or wine to beer. Quinn could never drink again—a liver transplant his only hope.

It took eight hours of deft surgery to resect Quinn’s liver from the abdominal tissue and replace it with the donor liver. He spent a week in intensive care. Drugs were required to suppress his immune system and



other drugs to protect him from infection, a cocktail of medicine for the recovering alcoholic.

“Quinn’s liver was in a shocking state,” Philip told Liz after he’d spoken to the surgeon. “Pumped up like *fois gras*.”

In the hospital, Quinn didn’t want visitors. Liz brought him books to read but they remained unopened. She hated the ugly room with its blank white walls. A small window overlooked a corner of the car park.

Quinn stared into space as she recited the dialogue she had prepared on her way to the hospital.

“You’re looking much brighter today,” she said in a cheery voice. “The weather is picking up. We’ll soon be able to sit in the garden.”

Liz found it hard to accept this was the same Quinn who, glass in hand, would talk non-stop about a favourite book or film. He never willingly left a party.

“We’re almost the last ones here,” she’d point out. “It’s time to go.”

“Don’t be such a wet blanket,” he’d say and reach for another drink. “Loosen up, I’m just getting into my stride.” Turning to some random straggler, he’d continue his drink-spiel. “No question Albert Finney was good in *Under The Volcano* but the role was tailor-made for Richard Burton. Did you know Burton’s spine was coated in crystallised alcohol? Now, that shows proper dedication to the booze.”

Quinn never wanted the celebrations to end. An extra drink at the bar, two for the one had by everyone else.

“A bird never flew on one wing,” he liked to say.

Whiskey as an apéritif, a digestif and, more often than not, to accompany the main course.

Liz had lived with his mood swings, his incoherent rants and savage remorse. His self-abuse had left her feeling undesired and superfluous. Whatever thoughts she'd had of leaving Quinn were fleeting. She drew sustenance from acts of tenderness, simple things like breakfast in bed.

“You deserve a lazy morning, just leave it to me.” The offer from a hungover Quinn was always well meant.

She'd doze while he made a mess in the kitchen. At some point, he'd appear, carrying a tray loaded with plates and cutlery and too many napkins.

“How's that?” he'd ask.

“Perfect,” she answered, no matter if the toast was burnt or the eggs undercooked.

While Quinn was still in hospital, Liz received a phone call from Tom McCormick.

“How's the patient doing?” McCormick asked.

“Fine,” she said.

“Hospital food not getting him down?”

McCormick sidestepped the reason for Quinn being in hospital. Everything was a joke to Tom McCormick. A shambling bear of a man and a heavier drinker than Quinn, but Liz had never seen him drunk

or even confused. Quinn looked up to him and though he liked to think of the two of them as a double act, Liz knew McCormick took the lead and Quinn followed. She couldn't imagine Tom McCormick lying apathetically in a hospital bed.

“You'll tell the patient I called.”

“Sure, Tom, of course I will.” Liz wanted to say something about the liver transplant, holding McCormick at least partly responsible. She hesitated, and the opportunity was gone.

“The patient won't know himself when he gets out.” McCormick laughed. “If you need anything just give me a call.”

Philip brought Quinn home from hospital. Liz had the house ready for his return, the futon in the study converted to a bed so he didn't have to climb the stairs. Quinn shuffled past her, arms outstretched to keep his balance.

“He seems so delicate,” she said to Philip.

“Don't worry, sis. He'll be all right, so long as he stays on the wagon.”

Quinn took his medication and sat, heedless, in front of the TV. Liz accompanied him on short walks, drawing his attention to a house for sale at the end of the road and the hyacinths that had come into bloom in the front gardens. He kept his eyes on the ground. It distressed her to see this unresponsive simulacrum of her husband.

“It's a little chilly,” she'd say. “We should go home.”

What mattered now was his recovery. He had to change his outlook, find other interests and learn to live a sober life. They could begin again with the benefit of hindsight.

Gradually, Quinn's strength returned and he was able to go out by himself. Liz watched for tell-tale signs of clandestine alcohol. She checked his old hiding places: behind the kitchen dresser, in the suitcases stored in the spare room and the tool chest in the garage. She found nothing, no stash of whiskey, but it didn't stop her worrying he would start drinking again.

Nine months after the operation, she stopped worrying. Devoutly abstemious, Quinn was nothing short of zealous in denouncing booze. He frowned whenever she treated herself to a glass of wine. One Sunday afternoon, he confronted her as she took a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from the fridge.

"Show some self-control." He gestured to the bottle. "You need to curb your craving."

She discussed it with his doctor who saw nothing wrong.

"It's a natural reaction," he said. "Your husband is bound to be guarded and sensitive to the threat of alcohol. His caution is understandable. There's no cause for concern. He's responding well, and has resumed normal activities."

That's not how Liz saw it. Nothing was normal. Quinn was no longer Quinn.

She observed him as he methodically coated the bookcase with varnish. He chose one of the brushes, laid out in order of increasing size. A drop of varnish stained his neatly pressed overalls and he tutted his annoyance. She remembered the night Quinn upended the bookcase in a drunken stupor. Books and shelves came crashing down, smashing a glass vase. In bed at the time, Liz rushed downstairs to see Tom McCormick picking books off the ground.

“Your husband’s had a little accident,” he said.

Brandishing a bottle of whisky, Quinn crunched glass underfoot and stood on books.

“Sorry about that,” he slurred.

The two had been drinking all day, and came back to the house after the pubs closed to continue their session.

“A nightcap and I’m off,” McCormick announced.

“What’s your rush?” Quinn poured two full glasses of whiskey.

McCormick caught her eye and shrugged. Quinn fell into a chair, bottle left uncapped on the coffee table.

The next day, she found Quinn apathetically sweeping the broken glass.

“No excuses,” he said. “Unacceptable behaviour.”

“Why do you do this to yourself?”

“Good question, and I wish I had an answer.” He squeezed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “Christ, I feel rotten. Worse than rotten, beyond rotten. Nothing is worth this agony.”

That was all in the past, before Quinn’s operation. He had finished with whiskey—no more drunken

abandon, dehydrated mornings and crapulent regret. The sober Quinn did all the shopping, and appreciated a good bargain.

“If you go to Costcutter after six o’clock,” he informed Liz, “you can get a loaf of bread that's still fresh for a fraction of what they charge at the bakery. What I’d like to know is what happens in those shops that don’t offer these deals. What do they do with the bread that isn’t sold? Is it binned or reprocessed?”

The sober Quinn proved to be a stickler for punctuality. Shaking his head, he’d tap the face of his watch. “Why can’t you be on time? It’s the least I ask.”

It wasn’t all he asked. He demanded nothing less than total abnegation. The drunken Quinn never cared about time and didn’t own a watch. Impetuous, always up for trying new things, exotic dishes and obscure restaurants. He surprised her with gifts of books and flowers. Theatre tickets left for her to find on the kitchen table or scarves that were the wrong colour or sweaters the wrong size. He didn’t keep the receipts so she couldn’t exchange them. That Quinn never thought about receipts.

This Quinn planned everything, leaving nothing to chance. He made lists of things to do, repairs to the garage roof, cracks to be sealed in the driveway, dates for planting bulbs to flower in March or June. It kept him busy as the house was falling apart after years of neglect.

“No harm in a little disrepair,” the old Quinn used to say. “Gives the place more character.”

The new Quinn developed a habit of grunting as he hitched up his trousers. He ended his pronouncements with an emphatic, "That's right." Other mannerisms Liz noted with a sinking heart, like slurping his tea and grimacing when she filled the kettle for only two cups or ran the washing machine with a half-load. Hands raised in exasperation when he noticed the boiler was on too high a setting or he found a pair of scissors in the wrong drawer. He always turned off the light in the hall.

"What have I told you about wasting electricity? We must cut our cloth to suit our purse. That's right."

Domineering and uncompromising, the only time she witnessed a chink in his armour was the day Tom McCormick visited. Liz answered the door.

"Has your husband gone into hiding?" McCormick gave her a broad smile. She could smell alcohol on his breath. "Is he accepting callers?"

"I'll go and see." She went back inside, leaving the door open.

In the front room, Quinn watched McCormick through a gap in the curtains. "Get rid of him." He waved her away.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked, taken aback by Quinn's panic, the desperation in his eyes.

"Anything. Just get rid of him. I don't want anything to do with him."

Back at the front door, McCormick met her with a grin.

"I'm sorry, he can't see you," she said.

“Don’t worry about it.” McCormick put a finger to his lips to stop her from saying anything else.  
“Remember, give me a call if you need anything.”

Quinn scrutinised every bill and sighed over each bank statement. He made her feel like a scrounger, an unacceptable burden he had to bear.

“You need to make a bigger contribution to the household costs,” he said.

To satisfy him, she took on extra translation work. She had studied French at university, which was where she met Quinn. He stood out from the other students. Self-deprecating and witty, he spoke knowledgeably about different writers and had read all the difficult books. His drinking was part of his charm.

Quinn with his new liver took no risks. Fearing infection, he lectured her on cleanliness. His dietary requirements governed what they ate. Salt was forbidden, meat over-cooked and vegetables over-boiled. He held the purse strings and pulled them tight. Liz started giving private lessons in French and didn’t tell him. It provided her with money for lunch with girlfriends and a relaxing glass of wine.

No more impromptu meals out or bright yellow scarves. Quinn pored over home improvement manuals and announced planned refurbishments, expecting her to assist him. She held nails as he hammered and gripped planks as he sawed, constantly subjected to his disdain.

“Concentrate. You’re here to help me.”

She could taste his sourness.



They went to bed at different times. Liz took a glass of wine with her, which she concealed from Quinn, and read for an hour. She worried he would sneak into the bedroom one night and into bed, sliding under the duvet, his skin against hers. To her relief, Quinn stayed away. Since the transplant, he slept in the study and stayed up late, working on the laptop.

She wondered what he could be doing. The last time she went into the study Quinn made it clear she wasn't welcome.

"Don't disturb me, can't you see I'm busy." He turned the laptop so she couldn't see the screen.

In the past, Quinn acted furtively when it came to his drinking but this was different. Liz had to find out what he was up to.

She waited until Quinn was at an appointment with his doctor. Sitting at his desk, she made sure not to disturb his arrangement of complimentary pens and to-do lists. Using the history tab, she went to the web sites he'd visited. She clicked on links that took her to pages on insulation, energy efficient light bulbs and timers. Images of thermostats and radiators. Advice sheets and blogs on ways to cut fuel costs, *FAQs* about water meters, tax credits and tax returns, savings accounts, broadband deals, free events and recipes using leftovers. She closed each window on the screen and shut down the computer. This was not her Quinn.

The following Saturday morning, Quinn showed up in a sweat-stained old T-shirt and tracksuit bottom,

the free local newspaper under his arm. He ran one mile each Saturday. On his return, he ate a bowl of porridge Liz made to his exact instructions, not too thin or too chewy. With each spoonful of porridge, he smacked his lips, a wet smacking that shredded her nerves. Reaching for a slice of toast, his hand brushed her arm and she flinched.

Quinn commented on offers and advertisements in the newspaper. “There’s a sale on firewood this weekend. We should stock up at these prices.”

He was wearing the glasses he had bought in the supermarket. It cost less than going to the optician even with a discount coupon. Using glasses now, he decided, would preserve his eyesight and save money in the long run.

“I’ve been talking to some people on the road. We’ve agreed to start a Neighbourhood Watch. They asked me to be chairman. It’s important we protect what’s ours. That’s right.”

Liz avoided his dead eyes behind the cheap lenses. How she hated him.

That night, she lay awake thinking about Quinn. She had wanted him to change, to drink less, look after himself, and pay her more attention. Not change into a soulless, penny-pinching monster. She could hear him moving about in the study. Some night, he was bound to come up the stairs, linger outside her door, hitching up his trousers, grunting and telling himself, “That’s right”, as he built up his courage. She drank more wine, it helped her sleep.

When Philip visited, he asked how Quinn was doing.

“Healthier than he’s ever been,” she said. “He follows the doctor’s instructions religiously.”

“You don’t sound too pleased.”

She let that pass and avoided Philip’s watchful eye.

“Has he got himself an organ donor card?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Considering the second chance he’s been given, surely he’d want to do the same for someone else.”

She said nothing, keeping her thoughts to herself. There was no likelihood of Quinn donating his organs. He would never give anything away.

Quinn acquired some Neighbourhood Watch signs, *free gratis*. Liz held the ladder as he stood on the top step, stretching to attach the sign to a lamp-post.

“Hold it steady.”

It was so tempting to tip the ladder forward. Liz imagined the satisfaction of seeing him fall and hit the ground.

“Steady, I told you. Hold it properly.”

What would it solve? Nothing, only make matters worse, give him more reason to be sorry for himself, and whine and complain.

She looked at the tightly clipped hedge and manicured lawn, the geraniums and verbenas, enclosed in straight-line borders. Order and routine were what mattered in this purgatory. It struck her how much she missed the chaos that had been her life with Quinn. More than that, she yearned for companionship,

someone who didn't judge her. If he had faults, it didn't matter so much. She could learn to love his faults.

It felt strange holding the telephone and pressing the numbers. Listening to the ringtone, Liz poured herself another glass of wine.

"Hello." The voice that answered was good-humoured.

She hesitated before speaking. "Tom, it's Liz."  
Silence at the other end.

"How are you, Tom?"

"Same as ever."

Liz took a gulp of wine. "Could we meet, for a drink say?"

"This is unexpected," he said but his tone suggested otherwise.

"What's the name of the pub on the harbour you always talked about? The one with seafaring gewgaws and a library."

"Do you mean The Yacht?"

Liz drained her glass, the wine rushing through her blood. "That's the one. I'll see you there on Saturday at eight. We can make a night of it."

"What about your husband?"

"Don't worry about Quinn," she said. "It will just be the two of us."

# The Golden Egg

by T. M. Bemis

NEWT WAS MAKING yummy noises across the table, but Jimmy wouldn't look up. He didn't have to. He knew what he would see: Newton Brisbane, eating. Eyes aglow, jaws grinding, an expression of contentment on his face like Bowser at the feed bowl. And it didn't much matter *what* he was eating; filet mignon or Cracker Jack, if it could be chewed and swallowed, it was a hit.

*NATILIE RYAN: Licensed Real Estate Broker,  
NatilieRyanHomes.com; TOP FLIGHT  
CONSTRUCTION: Roofing, Siding, Sheetrock, Windows;  
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Silver...*

Though he wasn't the least bit hungry, Jimmy took a bite of his cheeseburger. He'd be needing the energy, he knew, back at Holcomb's, the department store where the two of them worked. Unloading trailers, sweeping stockrooms, hauling skids of fertilizer around on pallet jacks—grunt work. And him with a higher education, no less. Or almost. Alright: one semester of community college. He should have stayed in there and toughed it out, earned a degree in something. Anything. You had to have a diploma these days for a decent job...

"You gonna eat those?"

"Huh?"

"Those fries. You gonna eat 'em?"

"No. Here, make room." He lifted his plate and

shoved them off onto Newton's; the kid was already drooling. But he wasn't a kid, was he. At nineteen, he was a full-grown man. He himself was twenty-five, halfway to fifty, one foot in the grave already. With no degree, no girlfriend, no prospects...

What did people do when they were adrift in life, and needed to refocus? He snapped his fingers. They joined the Army, that's what! He imagined himself in a jaunty uniform with those things on his shoulders, what were they called again? *Epithets*, yeah, the girls went nuts for those! Learn a skill, see the world, meet people—sure, why not? He could do that!

But even as he pictured it, his scheme began to fizzle. No way could he do that. *Hut-one, hut-two*, some doofus shouting orders—he'd be AWOL in a week. His gaze returned to the placemat.

*METRO FITNESS: Free Weights, Cardio, Personalized Training; HERITAGE FUNERAL HOME: Serving the Community for Three Generations; STAR STRUCK DANCE STUDIO: Where Your Feet Follow Your Heart up to the Clouds...*

Brisbane was scratching himself like a dog with the mange; Jimmy couldn't resist. "So, Newt," he asked him. "What are your plans for the future?"

"I was thinkin' of gettin' me a slice of that cherry pie they got over there. With a big ol' scoop of whipped cream on top."

"No, I mean big picture. The rest of your life. You going to stay at Holcomb's, or what?"

His lunchmate frowned. "Gee, I don't know. I guess. The money ain't so hot, but I get by."

"You're living at home with your parents."

“So are you.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And it bothers me.”

“How come? They probably like having you around. You know, for company.”

Jimmy was scanning the diner. There were about a dozen patterns going on here, all clashing: pink-and-green floor tiles, copper-colored counter, checkerboard ceiling—as if they’d picked them out of a catalog blindfolded. Dominating the rear wall was a six-foot panorama of the owners on a sandy beach. But they were as far away from each other as they could possibly get, she in a huff with her arms crossed and he in a moody slouch—why would you even *want* a picture like that?

“Only losers live at home with their parents. I want to make something of myself.”

Brisbane bristled. “I ain’t no loser. I *like* Holcomb’s. They treat me right and the work’s okay, and they got foot-long chilli dogs at the Snack Bar, and those big soft pretzels with the salt on ‘em—” He lit up at the thought of it. “I love those things, man.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. *Pretzels...*

*SCALFANI ENERGY: Diesel, Kerosene, In-ground Tank Replacement; ASAP*  
*MORTGAGE: Condos, Co-ops, Finance Guaranteed; BIG MONEY IN SALES: Motivated Individuals, \$60-\$80K, No Experience Necessary...*

He read that last one again. A thought formed, simmered, boiled over onto the stove. That was him. It was *him* they were describing. Motivated? For eighty grand he’d climb Mt. Everest! Swim the Nile! Wrestle a turtle! Or an alligator, rather!

And sales, boy, that was right up his alley! He was a good talker, people liked him, he looked sharp in a tie and jacket—wait a minute. Did he even *have* a tie and jacket? Because he'd need one for the interview... Sure he did. The blue blazer Mom had gotten him for Uncle Roy's funeral. With Dad's red-and-gold necktie. Bingo!

His mind ran wild with the possibilities: nice clothes, nice shoes, nice... *So, what do you do for a living, Jimmy?* I'm a salesman. I'm in sales. *Say, that's a swell car you're driving.* Want to go for a spin? *Oh, can I, Jimmy?* *Can I really?* Sure, babe, just let me put the top down...

"What's so funny?"

"Huh?"

"You're sittin' there grinnin' like you got a boner or something."

Jimmy smirked. "Yeah, that's right, Einstein. I got a boner. You know what's wrong with you, Newt? You think small. Miniscule. Grains of sand, you know what I mean?"

Brisbane shook his head.

"I didn't think so. Now me, I think big. Real big. I'm going places—" He noticed the clock. "Speaking of which, come on. We're going to be late."

"What about my pie? I don't care if they dock me ten minutes. I'm hungry."

"Well, I care. I'm calling in sick tomorrow, and I don't want any trouble over it. Get it to go. Lunch is on me."

"Gee, thanks!" said Brisbane. "You win the lottery or something?"

"Not exactly," said Jimmy. "But you know what? I think I might. I think I just might." Tearing off a corner of the placemat, he folded it in half, and slipped



it into his shirt pocket.

\* \* \*

He wasn't too familiar with Flucksburg, having only been there once for a pair of boots that had given him blisters on both feet. But he'd gotten directions from the lady on the phone (if only he could remember them), and what was her name, again? Wanda? Sandra? He had to get better with things like that. A good memory was important for a salesman, one of the skills he'd need to make this gig work. And he *was* going to make it work, by gum, no more backing down or chickening—

Wait a minute. Where was he? Had he made a wrong turn? He couldn't be late for the *interview*! Let's see: he started out on Lexington and followed that down to Main, made a right at the light and a left at the church, and he was supposed to turn again on—what was it? Some kind of fish. Tuna...trout...tilapia... *Walleye*! There it was! He made a screeching right as a flashbar flared in the rearview mirror. Oh, no! Not *now*— But the cop went around him and zoomed off down the road.

He pulled into a slot and listened to his heart hammer. When he checked his reflection, he was beet-red and sweating. That wouldn't do; they'd think he was sick or something. He found a tissue and wiped his face. Then he remembered the water on the back seat. He grabbed the bottle and took a swig—*yecch*! How old was this stuff? Oh, great! Now he'd have food poisoning! But he couldn't think like that, he had to be positive; this was crunch time. He rolled down the window for a deep breath. There, that was better. Now

all he had to do was to find the Armstrong Building, Suite 2B. It had to be around here somewhere. He pictured a shining tower of glass and aluminum, but that didn't seem right for this neighborhood. Across the street was a boarded-up tire shop, and next to him was another dump: flaking stucco, sagging gutters, a window fixed with duct tape—and then he found the sign: *Arm-trog*, it read. Holy mackerel! This was the place!

\* \* \*

The hallway stank. Of mildew and old food. There was an elevator there and he pressed the button, but when nothing happened he took the stairs beside it two at a time. He paused at the entrance to Suite 2B, mesmerized by the placard: *Di Vinci International*. Wow. This was the big time, alright. Paris, London, Hong Kong, who knew where? Exotic food, exotic climes—exotic *women*...

With exotic diseases, he thought next. And jet lag, bedbugs, foreign policemen with scars on their cheeks—could he even handle a scene like that? He'd seen a show once where a tourist had ended up in a real, old-timey dungeon—

“Help you, sport?”

The man at his shoulder was in his forties, balding, in a red-and-green sport jacket with collar points over the lapels. He wore loafers with tassels, but no socks. “I have an appointment with Mr. Di Vinci, sir. I'm applying for a job.”

“An appointment? Oh, sure, I get it. Come on in.” He opened the door for Jimmy.

In the far corner of the reception room was a secretary with her head down on the desk. Beside her

was an inner door topped in frosted glass, and against the walls were couches and coffee tables with vases of flowers on them. The man extended a hand. “Sterling Forrest,” he said, revealing a gap-toothed grin.

“Jimmy Stuart, sir.”

“Ah, like the actor.”

“I spell it the other way.”

“Sure you do, I get it. Well, have a seat, here, kid, and I’ll see if the boss is decent.” He started across but veered off to rap knuckles on the desk. “Up and at ‘em, lover. It’s showtime.”

The woman awoke with a start. She wore pink, cat-eye glasses with matching lipstick, and her hair was done up in a bun, with a plastic arrow stuck through it. “Thanks, Forry,” she said, beginning to type. “I have to finish this.” He entered the office and closed the door behind him.

Jimmy took one of the couches. It was stained and threadbare, he noticed. In fact, the whole establishment looked kind of shabby: peeling paint, flowers wilting, the hanging prints crooked and smudged. All of which made perfect sense; in a busy sales operation, there wouldn’t be a lot of time for housekeeping, and the pace would be enough to burn anyone out—just look at their secretary. He *was* looking at her, in fact, when she jerked her head around and gasped.

“How long have you been here?”

“Oh—just a couple of minutes, ma’am. I arrived with Mister—” But a hail of laughter cut him short, and they both swung to the office. The woman stood up, smoothed a snug red skirt, and went over to tap on the door. When there was no response, she tapped a little

harder. When there was still no response, she hauled off and pounded on it with a fist: BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Silence fell. She opened the door and spoke harshly to someone, then pivoted back to Jimmy. “You may go in now,” she cooed.

Three scowling faces awaited him like a court martial; he froze in the doorway, unsure what to do. After a second they all started laughing. In the center, at a big, imposing desk, was a man in a sky-blue jacket and string tie. He had blazing dark eyes, a pencil mustache, and an arching black pompadour like Elvis. Slouched to his right was Sterling Forrest, and on the other side, overflowing a director’s chair in a cream-colored suit, was a massive individual with a comb-over, bulging eyeballs and lips like blood-sausages. The one at the desk reached out to him. “Leo Di Vinci,” he said. “First among equals. I believe you know Sterling, here, our vice president, and this is the corporate fixer, Mr. Naugahyde.”

“Call me Stavros.”

“And what shall we call you, young squire?”

“It’s James Stuart, sir—”

“Like the actor.”

“I spell it the other way.”

“Of course you do. Sit down, sit down,” he directed, waving to an empty seat. Jimmy looked around him. There were photographs of business people: in cubicles, at meetings, chatting at the water cooler—but they all looked false, somehow, like pages torn from a magazine—

“So, you want to be a salesman, is that right?” Di Vinci fingered a tie clasp shaped like a mermaid.

“Oh, yes, sir, very much,” said Jimmy, trying to smile. His gaze kept darting to Naugahyde, who regarded him strangely as he licked his lips.

“Fine, fine,” said Di Vinci. He picked up a bell with a handle, rang it resoundingly, and set it down again. Jimmy expected something to happen now, but nothing did.

“You got a résumé on you?” This from Forrest, over his shoulder.

Jimmy’s heart sank. “Well, I— No, sir. I forgot it. But I can get it to you this afternoon—”

Di Vinci arose for a seventh-inning stretch. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary, son. I’m a pretty good judge of character, and what I’ve seen so far augurs well for your success. You’re a cab driver, is that correct?”

“No, sir. I work at Holcomb’s. In the receiving department.”

“Even better.” He circled behind Naugahyde to the window. When he depressed a slat in the blinds, motes of dust filled the air. “Just look at them out there, intrepid knights of free enterprise. Barber, haberdasher, delicatessen man—even young Johnny Jones, hawking the daily rag. Each of them an essential cog in the great, meshing gears of prosperity. Very inspirational.” Instead of returning to the desk, he strode to the center of the room, and took hold of his lapels.

“Trade, barter, commerce, call it what you will. From Johnny Jones to General Motors, it is a core philosophy, a defining ethos. Both the potting soil of the seedling, and the latticework of the vine. The fountainhead of production. The keystone to advancement. The *provenance* of art and culture, science

and industry. And it's men like yourselves, entrepreneurs, movers and shakers with vigor and foresight, that have made it all possible.

"In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that this beloved nation itself, this land of milk and honey, of Old Glory, America the beautiful, purple mountains' waves of grain, is built upon those very same, time-tested principles. Why, just think of it, man! The implications! Washington! Lincoln! Plymouth Rock! Baseball! Bikinis! The Liberty Bell—"

He stabbed a finger at Jimmy. "But you'll say that I've gone too far. That I exaggerate, pontificate, that I've lost my marbles. Admit it, embrace it, I won't be offended. But the nut of my argument rings as true today as it has throughout the ages. Mutual needs. Reciprocal desires. That's the ticket. I have something you want, you have something I want; we haggle and flatter and threaten and cajole, and before you know it—*bingo!* The golden egg!"

"*Reverend!*" shouted Forrest.

"Why, the very notion of what we do here gives me the willies! The *willies*, I tell you! I lie awake nights! How is it conceivable, I wonder, that we have come so far? Reached such heights? Amassed such laurels? And *you*, my eager beaver—unless I'm wildly off the mark—would like to become a part of it! An abettor! A minion! A plodding ass in the mule train of Di Vinci! Am I mistaken?"

"No, sir! Count me in!"

"Then *IN* you shall be *COUNTED!* And now, my young buck, for the test of fire. For we shall presently embark upon an actual sales call, right here in town, and

you yourself shall be riding shotgun. Pendergast is the fellow's name, an oboe player, you'll like the chap. Oh, how I envy you, James. I remember my first sales call like it was only yesterday. Wait a minute—no I don't; can't even say what year it was. I was closer to your age, of course, had my own teeth then, and—”

“Excuse me, Leo,” said Forrest, glancing at his watch, “but there's a certain amount of hurry-up involved here.”

“Quite so. Salesmen, on your feet!” They were all up in a flash except for Naugahyde, who wobbled ominously in the director's chair. After a series of cracking noises, it dropped him to the floor like a sack of potatoes. The others rushed to help him as Jimmy backed away. By the window now, he peeked through a gap in the blinds; there was nothing to see out there but a solid brick wall—

“Hey, kid,” called Forrest. “Lend a hand, would you? We got hernias!”

\* \* \*

When the four men filed from the office, the secretary was awaiting them, bag in hand. “Jimmy,” asked the boss, “have you met my sister, Rhonda? Cute as a button and quick as a rattlesnake.”

“Yes sir, we uh—” But she was approaching him with an elbow bent, like a date for the prom. Flabbergasted, he took it.

“Where do you find these specimens, Leo?”

“Roll of the dice, my dear. Loaded, of course.”

The next thing Jimmy knew they were cramming into a white-and-rust Cadillac, Di Vinci at the wheel, he and the girl beside him, and the springs groaning audibly

as Stavros climbed aboard. They departed the curb in a flatulent blast of backfires and blue exhaust.

“Well, son, how does it feel to be on your first expedition?”

Jimmy was trying to see through a scrim of dirt and bugs; it seemed like they were traveling much too fast. “Pretty exciting, sir!” he yelled, above the roar of a perforated muffler. “But I’m still a bit confused. I mean—what do we sell exactly?”

Di Vinci exploded in laughter. “What do we *sell*? What *don’t* we sell! Hard goods, soft goods, commodities, antiquities—”

“Sold an airplane once,” hollered Forrest, “in Guadalajara. Little prop job with all the trimmings.”

Wow, thought Jimmy. *Airplanes, Guadalajara—*

But they were already pulling over. “Well, here we are, kids,” said Di Vinci. “The stomping ground of legends, great and small.” Jimmy couldn’t say what he’d expected, but it sure as heck wasn’t the *Crazy Legs Lounge*. They emptied out of the car—Naugahyde like a beaching whale—yet once his shoes hit the sidewalk, he seemed to transform completely: back went the shoulders, up went the chin, and he entered the club like a VIP.

It was gloomy inside, with a dim reddish glow from Chinese lanterns behind the bar. There was music playing (a tango?), and a hatchet-faced patron in a vest and bow tie hastening forth to greet them. “*Leo!*” he gushed. “Welcome back! Let me look at you. How long has it been?”

“Ah, about a week, I’d guess. But I have a surprise here, Hoot. In addition to the usual suspects, we’ve



brought along our newest inductee, Mr. James Stuart.”

“Ah, like the actor!”

“Spells it the other way. Jimmy, allow me to introduce Colonel Hoot McCloskey, peerless proprietor, heralded huckster, and persona non grata in fourteen states.”

“I don’t like to brag,” said McCloskey, “but you’re forgetting Puerto Rico.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise, chief. Now, if you folks will follow me, I have a special table ready, right by the stage.”

Rhonda perked up. “Ooh! We’re going to have entertainment?”

“That all depends, sugar. Can you carry a tune?”

She stared at him a moment, then giggled and touched his arm. “Oh, *Hoot*.”

No sooner had they been seated than a pitcher of beer arrived, and the waiter began doling out shots of some greenish liquor. Jimmy said, “Gosh, Mr. Di Vinci, I don’t usually drink during the day—”

“This isn’t *drinking*, son, it’s a tongue loosener. Salesman’s grease. A Continental practice, like bangers and mash.” He raised his glass and held it aloft until his protégé had followed suit. “Anchors aweigh,” he sang, and the bottoms went up. A chorus of contented sighs ensued—except from Jimmy, who choked and lunged for his beer.

“You were a sailor?” said Forrest. “You’ve been awful tight-lipped about it.”

Rhonda laughed. “Leo was in the *Army*,” she explained. “Until he went *AWOL*, that is.”

“Had to,” said the boss. “A matter of personal

dignity. *Hut-one, hut-two*, some doofus shouting orders—it was more than a man could bear. But they rounded me up quick enough. Six long months I spent in the brig. Ate rats while I was in there, like Papillon.”

Jimmy was agape. “You ate *rats*?”

“Well, not really. You’ve caught me out. There weren’t any rats, only mice. And lice. And chiggers.” When he reached into his jacket, the jolly front collapsed. “Egad! I’ve left my billfold on the chifforobe! James, my good man. Could you spot me a couple of Jacksons? A pair of twenties, that is? Just until your first advance, of course.”

Jimmy was grinning helplessly as he forked them over. “Gosh, Mr. Di Vinci! I get an advance?”

“Does he get an *advance*,” mugged the boss. “Why, once we’ve made this transaction, lad, you’ll be swimming in it. The world shall be your oyster. Your *oyster*, I tell you!” (Jimmy was beside himself; he loved oysters! Or were those clams?)

The waiter was back to fill their glasses. Now it was Naugahyde’s turn to toast. “To hanky panky, hocus pocus and the ol’ switcheroo!”

Jimmy didn’t know what that meant, exactly, but it sure sounded swell. In fact, from where he was sitting, things just couldn’t be better. Rhonda was playing footsie with him under the table, his three new partners were buds already, and his future looked bright as a Harvest Moon. Whatever that was. He loosened his tie and leaned back. An hour went by, and then another, with the music playing and the liquor flowing and the rest of his paycheck duly donated, and when it finally occurred to him that the man they’d come to meet had

never actually materialized, it didn't seem to matter one iota.

No, sir; he was sold.

# Soundcheck

by Lily Swanson

AFTER THE DIAGNOSIS, Mark couldn't leave me alone. While I checked my purse, he tended to the living room like it was a garden, rearranging cushions and preening loose hairs from the coffee table.

"You always said you'd feel guilty about it. Sea levels rising and all that."

"I know."

"Besides, I'm awful with babies," Mark said. "Too many rules. They can't be on their stomach for too long and they can't have a blanket and they can't wear a seatbelt or they'll explode."

"Sounds like we dodged a bullet," I said.

Mark moved in for a hug. I threaded my arms through his and let him squeeze me to his chest.

"You can stop taking birth control."

"You don't have to wear a condom anymore."

"Oh, yeah," he said, pretending he hadn't been thinking it.

When he finally let go, I fished my keys from their hook by his shoulders and made for the car. I had to go do an interview.

#

The band floated in on sparkling mohair jackets that were tight clipped, effortlessly genderless. I thought I might piss myself. Somewhere deep inside me was the flat-chested burnout kid who cut her hair like Patti

Smith with her roommate's fabric scissors. College life had its charm, but you can't have everything.

Paulo, the photographer from our magazine, started messing with his gear. The talent lingered by the entrance. Techies did their thing and I did mine.

"First time in LA?" I asked.

They grunted in the affirmative. They're *Rebel Rebel Ohio*, a four piece post-punk outfit that met in art school. Nobody's more than twenty-five.

"Spend any time in town? Hollywood Boulevard? Madame Tussauds? Hard Rock Cafe?"

"We went to that place with all the stars on the sidewalk and got pulled pork sandwiches," the singer said. "Tony wanted to see the river."

"That pee stream? Why?"

"I didn't know there was one," Tony, the drummer, said.

The frontman, Niko, unloaded his beat up Stratocaster while the keyboardist ran baroque synth loops. Niko is the group's celebutante. He's a real church crooner.

"I'm leading a congregation," he said. "I don't wanna half-sing into a fuzzed out synth riff. It's like a cult, I'm their cult leader."

What a starling. All baby-blues and furtive bowlegs. When I was younger I might have drank that Kool-Aid.

"Would you say your songs are a call to arms?"

"Hell no. We don't buy into violence."

"Your album's called 'Motherfucking Shoot Him In The Jaw'."

“It’s a metaphor. We want people to examine what society tells them. We’re living in a consensus reality. You gotta disconnect yourself.”

“Are you disconnected now?”

“Too much. I have to call my mom sometimes.”

Paulo took shots of Niko for my profile while the roadies and the venue guys argued about stereo hookups. The rest of the band took turns hitting off a vape pen that looked like the hilt of a lightsaber. For a second I thought about joining them.

#

Mark and I laid side by side in our Japanese style king bed, our shoes lined up against the opposite wall. Oxfords, penny loafers, little black pumps.

“I’m gonna get a tattoo,” I said.

“Where?”

“My arm. Roses or something.”

“You wear a lot of short sleeves.”

“It’s my body.”

Mark shut his laptop and looked down at me. His black eyes held something next to pity.

“I know what you want and there are other ways to get it,” he said. “We could go to South America.”

“We can’t afford it.”

“We’d stay in hostels. Hike the Andes. I don’t know.”

“I’m pointless.”

“Shut up.”

“I am,” I said. “I used to publish zines. Feminist, Marxist but with pretty little words. I don’t know why I stopped.”

“You were being practical.”

“I was being lazy.”

He kissed my forehead. Rubbed against my thigh. I was like a glowing thing, so much light expanding.

“We can still do things,” he said. “There are plenty of things we can do.”

I pushed his sweaty palms away so they rested on my stomach.

“I want a tattoo,” I said.

His fingers slid thickly off me.

“Alright,” he said, “Alright.”

# Excerpt from *Forget-Me-Nots* (a novella)

by Steven Mayoff

ON THE LATE winter afternoon that Gordian Fray lost his footing on the rear fire escape leading to his studio's entrance and fell down a flight of icy metal stairs, it never occurred to him that his work or his life would be impacted in any major way.

He was initially concerned that he might have damaged the wrist of his preferred brush hand, possibly impairing its flexibility (being ambidextrous, his concern was not great), but once at his easel he found it functioned without any problem. In the ensuing days he did find some difficulty with his concentration, as well as an issue with his vision. It's not that he couldn't see in the normal fashion, but the longer he stared at whatever he was painting, the less detail he could discern. With some trepidation, he made an appointment to see a doctor. For much of his life, he had rarely seen a doctor and had never been stricken by any major illness or minor malady. The doctor gave him a thorough examination, but could find nothing wrong. Gordian was sent to an ophthalmologist, who checked his eyes yet found no problem. A CT scan yielded no irregularity.

As an artist, Gordian Fray knew his overly realistic style of painting, virtually photographic in its detail, was not very fashionable. The representational nature of his creative impulse seemed too quaint for the critics, dealers and patrons in his immediate sphere. One might



argue, and indeed some had, that the slavish banality of his work carried within it a spark of originality.

Unfortunately, the argument gained only a modicum of traction at the onset of his career, his pictures having been greeted by a wary curiosity. His reputation quickly slid off track into the icy shadows of obscurity. Why commit to canvas an image that was, for all intents and purposes, a carbon copy of something?

While he did sustain a brief cyber-following, even that interest (from what were essentially gawkers and trolls) waned to practically nothing until there was no point in maintaining a web site or any of his social media platforms anymore. And yet, the creative urge was so strong in Gordian that he continued to paint, knowing that he himself would be the only one to view and appreciate the final products. Rather than filling him with loneliness and despair, he was energized by the belief that he was blazing an artistic trail all his own, a bold and daring path that eschewed the world's approval. He even gave this movement a name: Solitarism.

After the CT scan, the problem of his vision not only persisted, it grew worse. The length of time that he was able to study an object grew shorter. He became increasingly frustrated by the lack of detail his eyes could pick up. It baffled him. He could see perfectly well. There was no blurring or any kind impairment away from his work. It was just that when he laid paint on canvas what resulted was flat and disappointing to him. Something had been jammed in the transmission from object to eye to hand to brush to canvas.

He eventually stopped painting. For the first time in his life, he suffered a creative block and spent days moping around the studio. When that threatened to drive him around the bend, he took to going for long walks, hoping for some kind of inspiration. He went to museums to see his favourite works of art. He went to libraries and whiled away whole afternoons leafing through large volumes of art books. He went to the movies, sometimes two a day, in the afternoon and the evening, because he couldn't stand the thought of returning to his studio.

Finally, he had had enough. There must be some way of getting back on the horse. He felt like an invalid who struggled to find the strength to take that first step. If it meant starting over somehow, relearning how to make art, then that was what he would do. He decided to try something he considered drastic and yet quite simple. He would not bother with having an object before him. He tried to paint from photographs, something he had never done before, but quickly grew impatient with that. To Gordian, it was like being a potter who was forced to work with oven mitts on. There was nothing else but to try to paint from memory.

He was staggered to realize how terrifying this was for him. He wasn't sure at first whether he could do it. He had never drawn anything from memory. He wasn't even sure how to begin and felt slightly sick in the pit of his stomach, like a high diver at the edge of the diving board staring into the cement depths of an empty swimming pool. He was about to take a step onto empty air and hope against all hope that he wouldn't plunge to his death. Gordian spent an inordinate amount of time

preparing some paints, listlessly mixing them on his acrylic palette, like a diner who pushes the food around on his plate in order to stave off taking the first bite of an unfamiliar and unappetizing dish. He finally positioned himself in front of his easel and stared at the blank canvas mounted on it with all the anxiety of an agoraphobic staring out the window of his house. The blankness of the canvas chilled his heart. In some way he felt like he was staring at his own soul.

Still in his late twenties, Gordian was three years out of art school when he decided on his lonely aesthetic journey. He told himself that this was a necessary rite of passage for any artist and perhaps one day he would be recognized by the world for his singular originality. At those moments, when he did lapse into such impulsive yearnings for fame, he immediately chastised himself, as if waking from some kind of drug-induced dream, for giving in to the lazy whims of his ego. He considered this discipline, the ability to waken himself from the predictable wishful thinking of most humans, his greatest strength as a creative being. He believed that it was the counter-intuitive backbone of his nature that set him apart from everyone else.

Having lost his parents at a young age (the phrase always reminding him of Lady Bracknell's admonishment: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."), he had been raised by an aunt of independent means (his mother's sister). She had never married and bore no children of her own. It could be argued that her appreciation of all things artistic was

Gordian's greatest influence. She certainly encouraged his creative aspirations and happily paid for his tuition to art school, proud of how deeply her nephew threw himself into his studies. When she too passed away, shortly after Gordian had graduated, she left him with a generous inheritance that, if he were frugal and invested the money wisely, would sustain him for many years to come.

Being focused solely on his art and caring little for the other diversions that life had to offer, he realized he would not have to commit himself to the usual struggles of the penniless artist nor have any need to support himself by teaching or holding down some menial job. He maintained a reasonably sized studio with large windows in a warehouse, which had been divided up and also included a Pilate's studio, a company that silkscreened tee shirts for rock bands and a centre for practitioners of Falun Gong. The warehouse was situated in a remote industrial area of the city. It was here, in a far end of his studio, that he set up modest living arrangements for himself and rarely had visitors.

He stared unflinchingly at the blank canvas for some time without knowing how to start. Then something interesting happened. He could only describe it as a kind of thaw, that is to say an actual warm sensation began to generate from the nape and rose, in not unpleasant waves, along the back of his skull and soon surrounded his cranium like a snug and comforting cap. He closed his eyes and tried to conjure the image of a simple bowl. It was a ceramic bowl that his aunt had kept as a centrepiece on her coffee table. She bought the bowl

during a vacation in Mexico. It was decorated with an Aztec design in vibrant yellows, reds and greens. The clarity with which his memory recreated the bowl's details – down to the light-reflected sheen and miniscule irregularities on its surface – took him aback, but what was more alarming was that the image was upside down.

He was immediately reminded of a camera obscura, a darkened room with a pinhole to let in light and an image that could be traced, which he had researched because it had been alleged that Vermeer, one of his favourite artists, used one to paint his luminous images. Like many art historians and critics, Gordian Fray pooh-poohed the idea that an artist as great as Vermeer would stoop to tracing images from a reflection in such a contraption. He considered it sheer blasphemy to even suggest that artistic wonders such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* or *The Milkmaid* could be reduced to mere paint-by-numbers. He had never pursued his research of the camera obscura far enough to try the technique itself, but knew enough about it to understand that light travelling in straight lines, known as rectilinear propagation of light, produces an upside down image that is sharper, the smaller the hole. That such an upside-down image of his aunt's bowl was now projected in his mind made him feel slightly violated, as if his mind was betraying every ounce of artistic integrity that he had worked so hard to earn.

He wondered whether the bowl might right itself if he waited. When that didn't happen, he decided to see if he could paint it. The strangeness of painting with his eyes closed caused him to reflexively open them. But when he did, he found that the image disappeared and he

could not bring it back unless he closed his eyes again. His only recourse was to dab his brush in some paint on his palette, ignore the strange sensation and paint the details that were clearly visible to his mind's eye. He recalled his early training in drawing when he was instructed to keep his eyes on the subject and let his pencil move automatically, in conjunction to what he saw. In a way, what he was doing now could be called a kind of tracing, allowing his brush to follow the lines of the bowl he saw in his mind, but it was nowhere near as simple as he imagined it to be. If this form of tracing was indeed the technique that Vermeer used to create his masterpieces, it was a greater skill than all the historians and critics, and even Gordian Fray himself, ever allowed.

Celebrate the art, not the artist. This was a favourite saying by his first drawing instructor, a retired commercial artist who taught at a local museum where Gordian enrolled when he was seven years old. It was a philosophy that Gordian took to heart.

He was constantly modifying and refining his brush techniques as well as trying out different synthetic and natural fibres for bristles that sometimes included different animal hairs. He even tried to create a brush using his own fine silky hair, finding the results of some interest but ultimately impractical. Aside from traditional palette knives, he also employed a number of different tools for the application of paint, including a hunting knife, pen nibs used for calligraphy, a screwdriver and various coins. He preferred a commercial brand of acrylic paint that came in tubes, but also ventured into

creating his own pigments from materials as diverse as yogurt, beer, condensed milk and a variety of food dyes with all the curiosity and precision of a scientist. He was particularly proud of a gouache he created using a watered down solution of egg whites, dishwashing liquid and his own urine. Gordian considered trying to market it commercially, except the overpowering odour of ammonia (a result of his nitrogen-rich diet) made that venture a non-starter. He liked experimenting with a number of surfaces, including different woods, metals, papers and even treated animal skins, but returned time and again to canvas stuck onto a thick oak board with an acrylic based glue because he didn't like the bounce of a canvas on a stretcher.

As absorbing as his wide-ranging interest in various implements and materials was to Gordian Fray, it was all toward a singular end, which was the paintings themselves and translating his three-dimensional vision onto the flat surface. For his subjects, he focused solely on inanimate objects. Early on, while he was still in school, he did try his hand at portraits and anatomical studies, but found himself increasingly uncomfortable when having to pay attention to the details of living human beings who had to stay so unnaturally still for such a long time. Although the models were professional and could hold the poses, Gordian sensed the restlessness of their thoughts and found this a constant distraction. Through a connection he had (a friend of his aunt's, who worked in the morgue of a local hospital) he did sketches of corpses, but found the exercise unsatisfying, since he was always aware that the corpses had once been alive and couldn't help

wondering what their lives had been like. He felt much more relaxed with inanimate objects, freer to take his time to observe them. He sensed an inner life in the things he painted, but it was a serene inner life (how he imagined the inner lives of highly enlightened monks and lamas to be – as calm as mirror-like lakes). This allowed Gordian Fray to lose himself in his work for hours.

Burdened by neither arrogance nor self-effacement, he accepted his discipline and stamina as gifts, which it was his duty as an artist to utilize to the best of his ability.

As he concentrated on the bowl, his movements were slow and he took great pleasure in the prolonged strokes. In some ways he felt as if he was a blind man who had discovered a whole new sense that gave him the freedom to express something long pent up in his soul. This new way of painting was forcing him to reach down into reserves of patience he had no idea he possessed. Being able to do so gave him a renewed belief in himself as an artist. He wanted to weep with gratitude. Time lost all meaning as he followed the details of the bowl in his mind's eye, stopping at times to change brushes and other tools and remix colours, still afraid that once he opened his eyes, he would not be able to conjure the image again, yet closing his eyes to find the image still there, as if it were merely hidden behind a curtain in a secret cupboard.

In this fashion he worked well into the night, unwilling to stop until the bowl was finished. It wasn't until the first blue incandescence of morning was visible through the large windows that he was finally satisfied and laid



his palette and brush down. Physically and mentally spent, but with no desire to sleep, he stepped back to look at the fruit of his labour and could not believe he was looking at his own work. He suddenly understood why nobody had been impressed by his paintings, why the critics, patrons and dealers saw it as merely banal realism that didn't even have enough character to be called kitsch. He understood that all the work he had produced before paled in comparison to what he beheld on the canvas before him. The inner life that he sensed in all inanimate objects emanated from the bowl as sure as a soul emanated from his own being. He was convinced that this was the dawn of a new stage of his career. Aware of the egotistical pitfalls that came from the yearning for fame, he nonetheless envisioned finding the recognition that had eluded him thus far, and with that, his just place in the art world. He would call a dealer later in the morning and invite him to come over to the studio.

No, it would be better if he waited and produced some more paintings first. His mind was in a muddle from fatigue and excitement. The best thing would be to get some sleep and reassess things once he was rested.

He looked around for a cloth to cover the painting and when he returned, he noticed something strange about the bowl. It had changed somehow, or maybe his fatigue was starting to kick in and his eyes were merely playing tricks on him. He stood for a moment and stared at the bowl. His eyes were not playing tricks. Not only had the bowl changed, it was still changing, and even worse, it was fading.

He couldn't understand it. Was it a problem with the paints? They were the same ones he always used. Maybe it was the canvas. He watched in horror as the bowl's details blurred and slowly disappeared. He would have worried that he was going blind, except he could see everything else perfectly clear. It was as if the bowl was disappearing behind some kind of mist. Why was this happening? All the work he had put into creating the bowl, the intense memory concentration and the patient brushwork. An ache he had ignored during his hours of labour suddenly dug a trench between his shoulder blades. Then the bowl was gone. The canvas was blank once more.

Despair descended on Gordian Fray like a swift and cruel darkness, even as the sky outside his windows grew brighter. Something inside him crumpled. In a mad fit of rage, he balled up the cloth in his hand and threw it at the canvas. When it merely unfolded and fell to the floor he ran at the easel and kicked it as hard as he could. It fell one way and the canvas crashed to the floor another way.

That was when he noticed something on the floor. It was the bowl, the one he had just painted from memory. But now it was real, a three-dimensional object sitting on the floor. Gordian rubbed his eyes. He really needed to go to bed. But there it still was, not a metre away. He approached it, slowly, warily, the way an animal approaches food in a trap. Once he was standing over it, he nudged it with his foot. It moved. He leaned over and picked the bowl up with both hands. It had substance. It had weight. It seemed to be ceramic or some kind of material very much like it. He sniffed it,

but could distinguish no scent. He stopped short of licking it. The colours were as vibrant as they had been in his memory, the intricate design and surface's minor irregularities as detailed as he had rendered it on the canvas.

He turned to carry it to his worktable, but did not look where he was walking and tripped over the canvas he had just kicked over. Gordian immediately lost his balance, as tired as he was, and the bowl slipped out of his hands, flew into the air and hit the floor with great force. He screamed and reached out a hand in reflex. He expected the bowl to smash into pieces, but it only bounced a couple of times and clattered onto its rim.

Gordian struggled to get to his feet. His momentary panic jolting him into a newfound alertness. He picked up the bowl and inspected it. It wasn't even chipped. He rapped on it with his knuckles. He hit it harder with the side of his fist, again and again, until he was in danger of doing more damage to his hand than to the bowl. Finally, he took a deep breath to muster a bit of courage, raised the bowl over his head with both hands and dashed it to the hardwood floor. It bounced, clattered, rolled a metre or two and stopped perfectly intact. Not satisfied, Gordian took it to his worktable and found a hammer. He set the bowl upside down on the table and brought the hammer down on it with all his might. The hammer flew out of his hand with such force it bounced off a wall, leaving a sizable dent, but the bowl remained unscratched.

# Good Grief

by Alan Gartenhaus

DUKE USUALLY GREET'S me after my morning walks. At this stage of his life, the old guy prefers sleeping in the shade to traipsing through fields. Labrador retrievers, especially black ones, aren't bred for a life in the tropics. He must miss Seattle's chilly climate; undoubtedly, he misses Anne too. When he didn't emerge from the cool, dank crawl space beneath the house, my chest tightened. I walked around calling for him and was surprised to find a Polynesian woman with long, graying hair and a broad face on my back lanai, rubbing the dog's stomach.

"I'm Nani," the woman said, smiling. She gave Duke a few solid strokes before standing. "I live on the mauka side of the road." She pointed in the direction of the mountains. The pale- pink hibiscus flower tucked behind her ear matched those on the print of her faded blouse. Though disturbed by her unexpected appearance, her pleasant, grandmotherly demeanor and musical intonation put me at ease.

I greeted her as people in Hawaii do, with a respectful kiss on the cheek. "I'm Perry Hansen."

"For you," she said, offering me a loosely woven basket she'd brought with her. "A *makana*. Poi and pipi kaula. The poi was made yesterday, so if you like it more sour, wait a day or two before you eat it."

"Thank you."

"I would have come over sooner, but I wanted to see what you'd do with the place."

Though honest, I thought her words abrupt, if not rude. “Did I pass your test?”

She shook her head. “No test. My great-grandparents built this house.” She wrapped her wide brown hand around the wooden railing. “Some people who move to the islands knock things down without knowing and take away our history. My grandfather and his family were born here. If my father hadn’t gotten sick, my family would still own this place.”

I nodded, wanting to express that I understood. “You must be an Emerson.”

“On my mother’s side. I’m Nani Lindley.” She dusted the seat of her shorts. “I’ve lived in Makapuna my whole life.” Her expression grew serious. “Why are you here?”

My hand made a sweeping gesture.

She tilted her head and narrowed her almond-shaped eyes. “And you live here alone?”

I nodded. A year had passed since my wife’s death. It still pains me to acknowledge the loss.

“Where are you from?”

“Seattle. At least, that’s where I lived before moving here.”

“It’s cold there.”

“You’ve been?”

She shook her head. “I’ve only left this island once, years ago—to visit an old auntie in Hana.” She faced clouds on the horizon that reflected the sun’s golden light and a landscape that sparkled. “Why would I go anywhere else?”

Meeting a person who had never traveled beyond a rural island in the middle of the North Pacific intrigued

me.

She took a deep breath and walked down the stairs. “I should go.”

“Thank you for the gift. You’re welcome anytime.”

“When?”

I hesitated. “How about tomorrow? For lunch.”

She nodded.

As I watched her leave, I wondered if she would approve of what I’d done to her family’s house. The detailing created by its single-wall construction had not been altered, nor had the two modestly sized bedrooms that shared a small bathroom made crowded by a tall Japanese soaking tub. It seemed that her opinion would matter.

\* \* \*

The next day began clear and bright; nevertheless, the pall that often met me since losing Anne rolled in like fog. I’d come to this remote place hoping to leave haunting memories behind, but fragrant tropical flowers and melodious concerts performed by larks and thrushes provided no more than a transitory escape. Anne had always done the grocery shopping, as well as the cooking; my contributions were limited to occasional barbecuing and the selection of appropriate wines. Since Anne’s death, eating had become more mechanical than pleasurable. To offer Nani something special for lunch, I would have to drive into town.

The winding journey cut through a dense forest, verdant hillsides, and over one-lane bridges that spanned steep ravines carved by narrow streams. Enormous split-leaf philodendrons climbed the trunks of mango, Albizzia, and kamani trees, their vines hanging from the

tall canopies like drapery. Along the way, sacred Hawaiian sites, Portuguese and Chinese cemeteries, a tiny Episcopal church with a stained-glass window, and a brightly painted Buddhist temple testified to the island's patterns of immigration.

My destination, Takashima Market at the opposite edge of town, was a cavernous building of painted steel and concrete block that looked as though it sold used tires. In addition to having such basics as milk, eggs, butter, packaged luncheon meats, and spongy white bread, it carried an assortment of items ranging from metal lunch boxes to fishing lures to fountain pens. Two elderly Japanese women worked the register under tube fluorescent lighting that drained all color from their complexions. Each spoke annoyedly to the other until customers approached wanting to pay—then they directed their irritation toward them. Frequently, they gave out the incorrect change, mostly to their advantage, though sometimes not. Regardless of how it worked out, I'd never heard anyone say anything but "Thanks."

While Takashima Market offered an impressive selection of beer and cigarettes, the produce it sold looked limp and sad. Bags of short-grain rice lay slumped beneath tins of Spam and Vienna sausages, alongside dusty boxes of cereal—mostly the sugary brands kids want. Sparsely stocked shelves held cans of soup, franks and beans, and boxed macaroni and cheese. In spite of its shortcomings, and perhaps because of them, I liked the Takashima Market. Food shopping was a relatively new sport, and its limited selection made deciding easier. Only this time, I wanted lunch to be especially good.

I circled the aisles in search of anything I might have overlooked, but found nothing of interest. Finally, I gathered the courage to ask one of the ladies, “Do you sell fish?”

“Sardines, tuna, and mackerel,” she huffed, flicking her fingers in the direction of cans on a far shelf.

“I’m sorry,” I said, somewhat timidly. “I meant fresh fish.”

The woman rolled her eyes. A local man standing behind me choked back a laugh before mumbling something about an ocean full of fish. He suggested that I go catch one.

I drove home with my “catch”—a canned ham, two bruised mainland apples, a locally grown pineapple, and two heads of iceberg lettuce that had only just begun to wither. On the way, I had one of my talks with Anne. I began by telling her how much I missed her, then wound up pounding my hand on the steering wheel, pissed that she was gone forever.

\* \* \*

Seattle’s rain often fell as a light mist that lasted for days; in Makapuna, the rain came down hard and fast, with hardly any space between the drops. In the time it took to slide the ham from its triangular tin onto a pan and into the oven, the gutters overflowed with rainwater. I washed gelatinous fat from my hands, listening to the torrent drumming on my metal roof and thinking that nothing good ever started with a canned ham.

I had expected bouts of melancholy to accompany my grief, but hadn’t anticipated that a year later, Anne’s death would continue to cast such a deep and imposing



shadow. My neck and back frequently spasmed—stress, I assumed—and emptiness and despair often overwhelmed me. When Nani appeared with jeans rolled up to her knees, holding a tattered golf umbrella in one hand and a covered casserole in the other, I blinked, guiltily wishing her away, no longer wanting a visitor, not wanting to talk. But there she remained, at my invitation, upending her umbrella and setting it on the lanai.

She hesitated in the doorway. “Sorry, I’m a little wet.”

I handed her a towel. “So, what do you think?” I asked, inviting her inside.

“About what?” she said, drying her feet.

“The house.”

“I love this house.”

“Do you like the way I fixed it up?”

She returned the towel. “I will always love this house.” She went to the casserole dish I’d set on the counter and lifted the lid. “Sweet potatoes.”

“They’re purple.”

“Yes, I grow the purple kine sweet potatoes.”

I chuckled. “Want to see the rest of the house?”

“No need.” She leaned against the counter separating the living room from the kitchen. “You’ve painted it a nice color.”

“I want you to know that I’m taking good care of this place.”

She nodded, frowning slightly.

Believing it best to shift the topic, I opened the oven door and peeked at the ham. “Apologies in advance. I’m not much of a cook.” I smiled. “Can I

offer you a beer, some wine, or a glass of water?”

“Water’s good.”

When I put the glass on the low table beside her chair, my lower back cramped, causing me to issue a sharp cry. “Sorry,” I said. “This happens every so often.”

“But you’re young,” she cooed sympathetically. “I can help. I do lomilomi. Hawaiian-style massage.”

Since I anticipated running out of conversation within minutes, her offer seemed well timed.

“Take off your shirt and lay facedown on your bed,” she said. “Put a pillow under your chest so your head can hang.”

She followed me into the smaller of the two bedrooms, which I had set up as a guest room. It occurred to me that Nani was getting a tour of the house after all. I removed my shirt. Had we been at the beach, I would be far less clothed, and yet I felt awkward.

“Relax,” she whispered. “Breathe in and then out, like waves washing onshore.” She made soft swishing sounds as she dragged her heavy fingertips up and down my spine. “Let the muscles in your body go, one at a time. Start with your head and work your way down.”

I did as she said, first releasing the clenched muscles around my temples, between my eyebrows, and in my jaw—finding more tension there than I’d thought. I focused next on my neck and shoulders. I’d never tried to consciously release muscle tension before, but it seemed I could.

“Good,” she encouraged softly. “Good.”

I thought so as well.

She placed her hefty forearm across my shoulder blades and, like a rolling pin, ran it down to my tailbone and back up to the base of my neck. After a while, she positioned her forearm vertically and pushed her elbow into my back, following the long muscles that ran lengthwise, taking me to the edge of discomfort but not over it. I imagined her elbow an old-fashioned wood planer, smoothing ridges and shaving knots.

At some point, my thoughts drifted to Anne—her face, the sweep of her auburn hair. I saw us skiing together on that black diamond trail, our vaporous breaths making clouds in the frigid air, and how I had goaded her into going faster than she liked. I relived my alarm at seeing a kid in a red knit cap cut directly in front of her, sending her swerving into a stand of pine trees. That's where I found her—lying on her back in the snow, her blue eyes so dilated they looked black. She'd died on impact—at least that's what they told me.

"It's okay," I heard Nani whisper.

I was weeping and had lost track of where I was or what was happening.

"Who is Anne?" she asked.

I rolled onto my side and wiped my nose and face with the palms of my hands.

"You were calling for her."

"She was my wife. She died a year ago."

Nani stood and looked down at me. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"What about lunch?"

"Tomorrow."

\* \* \*

I stepped onto the front steps of the house, a mug

of morning coffee in hand. I thought Duke had business to do, but he wanted to greet Nani, who was walking toward the house carrying a small box, and with a shovel and hoe slung over her shoulder. Silhouetted in the morning light, she appeared bigger, squarer, and stronger than she had the day before. Her early arrival, and Duke's apparent delight at her approach, irked me. Mornings without Anne could be difficult. Today was no exception.

"A little early for lunch." I managed to sound upbeat, but there was irritation in my voice. "What are the tools for?"

"Your garden," she replied.

"I don't have a garden."

"We're going to make one—for Anne."

Hearing Nani speak Anne's name was a puncture wound. Anne was dead. "Maybe you didn't understand..."

"I do," Nani said, looking around. "Where would you like to put her garden?"

Resisting seemed too effortful, and would require conversation. "You suggest."

"I brought a few starters and some seeds—peas, beans, peppers, onions—plants to *mālama* your body, as she did your soul." Nani pointed decisively. "My grandparents had their garden over there."

At that moment, one place seemed as good as another. "Fine," I said, wondering if this garden wasn't a way for Nani to work through her own grief at her family's loss of the house.

\* \* \*

Nani staked out a four-by-six-foot rectangle. She

used the hoe and shovel to rip up sod, while I pulled at roots that had grown deep and clung tightly, a demanding task. Neither of us spoke, though I was tempted to tell her how much I admired her strength and deftness with the hoe—furrowing the soil into neat mounds. She put a packet of seeds in my hand. “Go down the rows and push your finger into the dirt. Put a seed or two in each puka.” She did a couple to show me how deep and wide-set to make the holes. “Do you have a watering can or bucket?”

I filled a bucket with water and got an empty tin can.

“Was Anne sick for long?” she asked when I returned.

“No. She had an accident.”

Nani followed me, spilling water on the seeds. “Harder still.”

I moved down the row, pushing seeds into the ground and covering them with dirt. When I saw Duke shaking off billows of dust, I thought of how Anne’s off-key singing had made him shake and howl. She used to say that he was singing along. I knew differently. The memory made me laugh.

Nani nodded when she heard me and saw my expression. “I didn’t forget,” she said. “You promised me lunch.”

# Test Anxiety

by Emily Bonner

WHEN I TELL David that my period is late, there is something strange in his eyes – a glint, golden, pewtered. It makes me shiver.

“Are you sure?” he asks. His voice is honey. His hands grasp for mine. They are hot and electric. I nod.

We don’t have any tests on hand, so we decide to go to the grocery store. It is October. The air folds over me when I step out of the house. It is cold and bright. I can smell the leaves on it, the sharp scent of the season turning and dying, that will give way to winter. I pause and wonder if I should go back inside for a jacket. But David is already in the car, and the keys are already in the ignition.

He looks over at me as I slide into the passenger seat. “Ready?” he asks. I nod again. He lifts his eyes to the rearview mirror and begins to back the car out of the driveway. I watch, my hands still in my lap. We pass slowly by the rest of the houses in the neighborhood, and then the small cemetery at the end of the street. The sky above it is a heavy gray. The clouds are drooping. I wonder when they will open up and rain.

I keep my eyes centered out of the window. David drives slower than usual. The car floats like it is on water. I press my back into the seat and try to remember when it happened. When time started to move in fits and starts. Slow during the days, quick during the years. Sometimes, I feel like I am old and wise. That I am a

Woman, fully grown, with a grasp on the world and my place in it. But most of the time I feel like I am small, shriveled, insignificant – a snail being kicked down a road with blinders on.

I was alone the first time I bought one. It was at the pharmacy near campus. They kept the tests in the Family Planning aisle. But I didn't have a plan, so I slipped off the tiger's eye ring I wore on my index finger and placed it backwards on my ring finger. It was heavy and awkward between my sweaty knuckles.

There were a lot of choices. The boxes were all pink. Next to the shelf was a picture of a smiling white woman holding up a positive test. She had brown hair and blue eyes and she was thrilled. She'd never been happier. Life was exactly what she expected, and she was grateful. I wondered who she'd had sex with, to make her feel that happy. I thought of the sex that led me there. A fast fumble in a dorm room – a boy from my American Literature class, who wore corduroy pants and said words like hegemony, and who had the kind of chin that tipped upwards, so that his eyes were always looking down at you – hurrying to finish up before his roommate got back. We did, just barely. He came and I watched his face squeeze into itself and then collapse.

The guy at the checkout counter was older, maybe in his 40s, with a ring of gray-brown hair that made a circle around his head, empty in the middle, like a friar. When I put the box down, he looked at me, and then my left hand, and then raised his eyebrows. He smiled in a way that was long and slow and silent and didn't seem directed at me, but at the space around me. When he

reached over to pick up the box, his hands crawled over the counter like rats. He watched me watch him scan it.

“You’re young,” he said.

I didn’t answer. I was young. It was my freshman year. I was eighteen. The age where everyone says, you have your whole life ahead of you! But I never knew what that meant. Life never felt like it was ahead of me but just kind of on top of me. It was a slow cracked thing that I had to get through, one day at a time.

“Are you a student at the university?” His voice sounded like it was coated with algae.

I looked down. I didn’t want to see his eyes. I could feel them on my cheeks and my shoulders and my stomach. I pulled out my wallet. It was the same one I’d had since I was fifteen – canvas and velcro, with a daisy on the front.

He placed the box in a thin plastic bag. The bright pink words were still visible through it. Early Response. I reached out to take it. His rat-hands moved quickly to grasp mine. I pulled back, but his fingers were too quick. I looked up. His pupils were small and drawn. I could see myself in them.

“We’re all children of God,” he said.

I washed my hands as soon as I got back to my dorm room. Then I took the test. I shared a bathroom with four other girls. I peed on the stick and then laid it on the tile floor in front of the toilet. I stared at Chelsea’s shower cap and Kini’s flip flops and Maria’s dandruff shampoo. The room was so small, all of a sudden. I was squashed up with my knees in my chest. Sweat dripped down the ridge of my spine. The ends of my fingers were fuzzy and numb. I could barely move



them. It felt like someone had stuffed my hands with lead.

The timer on my phone went off and echoed against the cinder block walls. Three minutes. I picked up the test. It was negative. I stared at it for a while. The air slowly returned to my lungs. I stared and stared, trying to burn the image into my retinas. A single pink line. I wrapped the test up in toilet paper, and threw it away in the trashcan next to the toilet. Then I went to ask Chelsea for her biology notes. We had an exam the next day.

Now I'm in the Hygiene aisle with David. In the grocery store, they keep the tests between the shampoo and the tampons. The aisle smells like cucumber and tea tree oil.

"Why are there so many?" David asks.

I shrug. "It doesn't really matter which one you use."

He looks at me. "Do you have a preference?"

I pretend to consider. Eeny, meeny, miny, moe. Clear Blue. I pick it up and hand it to him. "We should get some milk, too."

We get milk and bagels and sweet potatoes and ice cream and all of the other things we need for the week. We didn't bother to pick up a basket, so we clutch everything to our chests. The ice cream is cold and sharp against my collarbone. It makes me want to weep.

I let David run everything through the self-checkout. I look around while he scans our items, one by one, and bags them in the careful way he likes to bag things. I feel a quick rush of panic when he holds up the

test to scan it. But nobody is paying attention. They are immersed in their own groceries, scanning dish soap and toilet paper and uncooked chickens. The attendant leans against an empty counter, staring at nothing, her arms folded over her chest. She looks young. I don't know what young means. I just know that her cheeks are soft and pink. That she doesn't have any wrinkles in her forehead. That her hair is braided into two pigtails, blue at the ends, tied with green hair bands.

David looks over at me. He has the receipt in his hand. "You ready?" he asks. I nod. We walk outside. The cold air grips me. I wish I had my jacket.

The second time I took a test I was twenty-two. I was in a relationship, sort of. His name was Nick. We met through mutual friends at a party where everyone drank whiskey and pretended to enjoy it. We didn't call each other anything, but we didn't call anyone else anything either. It went on that way for a while. I never asked about it because I never wanted to hear the answer. So I pretended the question didn't exist. It floated up in the sky above us, behind a cloud somewhere.

When I told him my period was late, he didn't say anything. The words melted down over his cheeks. I told him I was going to take a test and pulled out the box from my purse. His face shriveled up. "You're going to take that here?" he asked.

"Yes."

He seemed to gather himself. Something washed over his face. He remembered something his sister or his mother had told him, or something he'd read in a

New York Times opinion piece, or heard in the Women's Studies class he took in college.

"Okay," he said.

"It will only take a few minutes."

He nodded. His hands paused in the air, hovering above his stomach. He held them like bird claws. The fingers grasped at nothing a few times, then he forced them down into his pockets. "Okay," he said again. "I'll order some food."

The bathroom was dirty, like it always was. There were damp towels on the floor. The counter was covered with deodorant and curled up toothpaste tubes and an empty cereal bowl. There were blue stains around the rim of the white porcelain sink. It smelled like sweat and semen and Old Spice body wash. I inhaled deeply. I loved the smell and was repulsed by it.

I turned on the fan. I tried to remove the plastic wrap from the box, but my hands were shaking. I grabbed nail clippers off the sink and made a small cut in the top. I winced as the plastic crinkled. It was loud, like static on the radio.

I pulled out one of the tests. I peed. I set the timer.

I heard the front door to the apartment open and slam shut. It was Nick's roommate. Their voices, low and gruff, poured over each other. Their laughter sounded like a buzzsaw. Sweat pooled under my arms. Hard footsteps padded down the hallway.

I didn't think of it until the door was already open – that I had forgotten to lock it. That I was still sitting on the toilet, my underwear down around my ankles, the white stick cradled in between my palms.

"Oh shit!"

The door slammed shut.

“Fuck, sorry dude, I didn’t know she was in there.”

Their laughs echoed against each other. The air shriveled inside my chest.

The timer went off. I looked. I pulled up my pants and opened the door. I held up the stick. It was heavy.

“It’s negative,” I said, out loud, to both of them.

The roommate brought his fist up to cover his mouth, his eyes wide but still laughing. He looked at Nick. “Damn,” he said.

I laid it down on the coffee table and stared at it for a moment. They both grimaced.

“Don’t put that there,” Nick said. “Throw it away.”

I stared at it a moment longer. Then I left. On the sidewalk outside of his apartment, the air smelled like gasoline and laundry detergent.

David and I drive home in the quiet. Without the radio on. Without talking. The air holds still between us. I look over at him. His hands are soft on the steering wheel. He turns into our neighborhood. He smiles, first at no one, and then at me. A sharp ache rips down the center of my chest.

For a while, in the middle of my twenties, I took tests every month. Even when I wasn’t having sex with anyone. I couldn’t get rid of the idea that it would be positive somehow, magically, horrifically. That the god I didn’t believe in would have chosen me, of all people, for his second immaculate conception. That I had already been pregnant for months without knowing. That it was too late to do anything about it. That I

would be stuck, with a secret surprise melon in my belly. One that I didn't ask for. That someone else had given me in the meanest form of vengeance, a cruel lesson, for a crime I didn't know I had committed.

Every time I took one I felt sick. The world lost color. I held myself hunched over the bathroom sink. Every part of my body became foreign. My ears, my legs, my shoulders. None of them belonged to me. I wondered if I could trust it, this body that had formed around me as I aged. I would hold up my hands to the lights over the mirror. The thin webbing between my fingers shone pink. The fingers burst out from my palms like tendrils. I often wondered if I was even human.

David carries the tests into the house, cradles them against his chest along with a loaf of bread, five bananas, and a box of crackers. I carry the cat litter and a pint of ice cream. In the middle of the kitchen, we trade – the pint for the tests. He holds the box out tenderly. I receive it gruffly, crushing the corner against my palm.

“Do you need anything?” he asks.

What do I need? I need more time. I need to put the test in a drawer somewhere, for a while, a few more years. I need to think. I need to be separate from my body. To ignore it for once, just for a moment. To forget its quick, circling, nauseating rhythm. To not feel the same curdled, prickling fear at the end of every month, like my chest is filled with thumbtacks.

But instead I say no, and smile and lift up on my toes to give him a kiss on the cheek, and walk to the bathroom.

I turn on the fan to cover the sound. It whirs inside my head and makes me dizzy. I unwrap, I pee, I wait. The world stops all around me. The atoms in the air move inward, closer and closer together, until they are crushing, heavy as an elephant, barreling down on the top of my head.

Three minutes. I look at the test. Two lines.

There is a loud clattering in my ears. My vision goes black and then blue and then green. I hold myself up with the corners of the bathroom sink. When I can see again, I look in the mirror and see something haggard, ragged, with purple bags under its eyes and slick, drawn cheeks.

There is a knock at the door. Words, muffled. Another knock. “Are you okay?”

I open the door. I hold out the test.

There again – the glint in his eyes. Bright, wide, sparking. He smiles in a way that makes it look like his face has cracked in half.

He reaches out and draws me to him. His arms wrap around me like wire. He is crying and laughing and saying something, but I can’t make out the words. I can only feel the thumping of my own heart, rattling like a stone in my chest. It knocks and knocks and knocks, but no one answers.

# Boomerangs

by Max Sheridan

I MADE A living selling boomerangs for eight good years, until Marvella came along and got me out of boomerangs and into door-to-door tropical drink enhancements. Out of a suitcase, goddammit, because you couldn't fit those drink enhancers into a briefcase of standard dimensions, not even the ones Denny would give you.

Marvella called herself a stay-at-home mom. In a sense this was true. She'd wheedled spousal support out of her first and only husband that the fool hadn't yet managed to shake. Imagine that. No kids, no psychological or physical trauma. She said so herself. I suspect the judge must have read her plight as one of wrecked working ambitions and stifled natural ability. This husband of hers was the manager of a carwash after all and Marvella says he showed up for the divorce hearing in an azalea-colored tennis shirt looking like he should have been selling cellulite-eradicating pills on TV.

And he had small hands.

Maybe she was smarter than all of them. I don't know, but this tiny-handed Job was still paying for Marvella's breakfast at Jimmy's Egg in Norman six years after the fact when I rolled in on my way west through Oklahoma.

I was red-eyed and sleepless from my monthly Missouri run, a straight shot east across Utah, Colorado and Kansas, three states I have no time for. My brake

foot was jittery from speed trap sightings and phantom speed trap sightings and I gravitated towards a back table in a daze.

I never was a big eater. My suit pants might have been a size wide at the waist and my hems all wrong, but I tend to think there was nothing visibly awry, that it was just Marvella watching like a hawk from behind her stack of chocolate chip and banana pancakes for some vulnerable windblown male to dig her talons into.

Marvella devoured me in the sack on my monthly visits to Norman. I was eating like they do at IBM and there were stirrings of a burgeoning plumpness. I should have had my eyes open, I know it now. But you throw a fish a stale cracker and he'll always swim back to your hand. The old girl knew what she was doing. In no time she got the idea that she would accompany me on my selling trips, riding shotgun in the front seat of my Chevrolet Fleetmaster.

To put this into perspective, you need to see the Fleetmaster as it was then, the poor man's Biscayne with no passenger armrest or sun visor and no cigarette lighter. Marvella smoked like a hog. I foresaw conflict. The sighs and fidgeting when the butane ran out on her 59¢ replacement lighters. The ticking by of those anxious, hell-bent minutes while we coasted along looking for a 7-11 open at three in the morning, Marvella with her head hanging out the window like a sick St. Bernard. I was dead against it.

She won in the end, of course. After eight years of meritorious service for Charlie Boon Leisure Projectiles, my professional demise was a record-making event. But did Marvella really think peddling cocktail accessories



door-to-door was a sensible alternative? If speeding down South Bay Freeway with Skippy Mintumno's half-dead pet rat Little Boppo in my jacket pocket is any indicator, it was not.

Skippy Mintumno was actually Denny's second cousin, if you remember Denny. But Denny's side of the family had shunned Skippy. Skippy wasn't wanted but he still squeezed himself into business deals when they came along and they couldn't manage to get rid of him. I knew Skippy from back in the day when he was Charlie Boon's golden boy, offloading a hundred plus boomerangs weekly. But times had changed. Boomerangs weren't the cash crop they had once been, and now Skippy was selling cocktail enhancing equipment for Denny.

Don't think I was a fool. I always managed to pack Marvella off at the motels while I was out on my selling trips—in case I fell prey to the blandishments of drink. The Southwest is a long, dry place. We had thousands of those collapsible tropical umbrellas to burn through.

But Marvella could smell peppered vodka on a bath mat. She got wise quick and threatened to tell Denny everything unless I got my act together and stopped following Skippy around like an organ grinder's monkey, drinking away my commissions. I told her I would, and firmly believed it at the time.

In my defense, I was pushing fifty. Skippy was a decade and a half younger and had reached that point in his life when men who haven't done much become desperate and foolish, rekindling in us older fools memories of the sweet lost episodes of our youth. So when Skippy decided it was time for me and him to load

up our suitcases with as much cocktail enhancement as they would fit and drive off in search of a chimpanzee assistant, our passport to a life of ease and executive status, I was an easy mark.

It was a clean shot to the Pacific from where we were at the Best Western Space Age Lodge in Theba, Arizona, no more than a day's drive. I didn't even think about leaving word with reception. I left all my suits on the hangers, along with Marvella and a half-finished case of Rothmans unfiltered cigarettes.

\* \* \*

Skippy never did find his chimp, but he was spreading his influence in Chula Vista, where we'd landed a one-bedroom apartment within walking distance of a beach where they let their dogs run and void. \$350 up front. There was a liquor store occupying the ground floor of our building, Guzman's. A block down the road was an all-day bar called Flo's.

Skippy knew where to look, who to hit. He quickly acquired a coterie of minor derelict figures that gathered around his table at Flo's Bar in the late afternoons in search of promising business leads. Skippy even bought a rat, the famous Little Boppo, to make up for the theoretical loss of his chimp. The first thing he did was train Little Boppo to bring waitresses his drinks orders on little scraps of folded-over paper.

I wasn't getting much sleep on the terry cloth pullout bed in the living room, but it was sunny and dry in Chula Vista and you could smell the beach on the breeze from the third-floor portico. I got out from time to time. Skippy managed to keep us in the green. We never wanted for Martinis. Things were good.

Until Feliza came along and they all went to hell.

Feliza was Guzman's day assistant. I suspected at first she was also Guzman's wife. Guzman wouldn't be the first Mexican shopkeeper to keep his wife bound to a stool and in earshot day and night. But would Guzman's wife have told me about a nubuck couch for two she'd recently driven in from San Jose on the back of her Toyota Celica? While Guzman was pricing liquor? I certainly hoped not.

Feliza had a high narrow waist with a big soft caboose and chocolate-colored eyes with that slender pouch of tender lower lid meat that drives me crazy. To this day I have no idea what she saw in me. I had an automobile and perhaps in Mexico City a Buick Fleetmaster meant something. It wasn't long before Feliza called on me at the apartment with a jar of pickled eggs.

She came back the next day, and the day after that.

A month into our fling I awoke on the pullout bed late one morning with hard eyes and an aching head, naked from the waist down. We'd been trading tequila shots again. I'd fallen asleep on Feliza's shoulder and I was staring up one of Feliza's nostrils. Feliza slept with her head tilted back, almost chinless this way. Her nostrils looked to be shaved. She'd grown a little pot belly from this angle and her eyes, under their sleeping mocha lids, were a little beady and vengeful.

There were no words for this, obviously. We both knew where we were at. Feliza was looking for a proper American male so she could get her green card stamped and filed before they put her back on a beetroot truck bound for Los Mochis. I would be her sugar daddy. We

slept together on that couch for a year and a half before proof of my manhood was substantiated.

Skippy and I celebrated with a quick spree across the border that stretched into a month-long cross-country bender with trunks full of Denny's dusty drink enhancers. Feliza's belly was already beginning to swell and she was complaining of lower back pains when I got back to Chula Vista. She'd put up a curtain rod around our little sleeping area in the meanwhile. She'd attached a sheet to the rod and decorated this sheet with long strings of elbow macaroni painted blue and pink. The baby room.

I nearly died of shame from the beauty of it all. I climbed back onto our couch vowing to find Feliza a proper room before the month was out. The very next afternoon I went to Flo's Bar to find Skippy.

\* \* \*

They were all still there, Skippy's followers in financial distress. Skippy pulled up a chair for me. He introduced me as "The Professor" and he told those crumbling men that I'd once decapitated a car thief in Lake Havasu City with a Thai boomerang I kept disassembled in an ostrich skin case.

Soon talk turned to Skippy's latest scheme. Rather, it turned back to Skippy's latest scheme because I'd interrupted a demonstration of some kind. I finished my vodka too quickly and went to find another before Little Boppo had the chance to tell the waitress for me.

When I got back, Skippy was winding up a mouse trap that had a tiny translucent shovel head instead of one of the customary wire guillotines. He was telling his

men about the latest advances in rodent-baiting technology.

I was floored. I'd sold Skippy's party peanut eaters' finger caps. I'd sold his glow-in-the-dark hairnets to half of Sylmar and most of what was left of Denny's stash, a \$4000 haul. Did he now expect me to spread my wings on commissions from designer mouse traps?

It didn't make me feel any better to learn that I'd gotten the scope of the project all wrong. This wasn't a mouse trap at all, Skippy said, it was a mouse *destabilizer*. The fiberglass shovel heads were designed to hit your average *mus domesticus* square in the forehead, shaking up the frontal lobe. You could modify the torque to produce whatever effect you were after. Mild disorientation, wobbliness, shock, memory loss.

Skippy gave a demonstration. He used a mouse he'd made from child's clay. He called the mouse Mr. Dooley and set it up on the edge of the table across from his destabilizer and he had his men make some space.

Mr. Dooley was blue with green ears. Skippy had added a tiny yellow clay bulls eye to Mr. Dooley's forehead. He launched the shovel in shock mode.

I was actually impressed by its concise trajectory, by the solid *plocking* sound it made when it connected with its target. You could barely see the indentation in Mr. Dooley's forehead. There was a generous round of applause.

Skippy left the next day with his trunk full of destabilizers. He said he was off to Norco for a few days where he'd gotten a line on a thriving population of nutrias wreaking havoc on refrigerated storage containers. He left me with his rat Little Boppo and

twenty boxes of destabilizers addressed from Norquist Domestic Pest Technology in Temecula to a Hanson Pennywaithe of Cleveland, Ohio.

Those days were fraught with nerves. I left Feliza in the apartment while I spent the mornings and afternoons coddling straight vodkas at Flo's, thinking about the baby. I had no idea how long Skippy would be gone, but I decided I would move as many of those hot mouse traps as I could and whatever cocktail junk we still had left so we could put down a deposit and first month's rent before Skippy was back. We would move across town to a building without a liquor store for a foyer, to a beach without dogs or dog turds. We would get married and Feliza would get her stamp and we would raise that baby in respectable circumstances.

\* \* \*

The first two days I sold eight units, obviously eight more than I'd expected. The thing these Californians wanted most of all, I discovered, was to disorient their vermin and leave them on the stoops of hated neighbors. I brought Little Boppo with me for my demonstrations, in my coat pocket. I even trained Little Boppo to collect Skippy's tiny fiberglass shovel heads.

We were in Santee, on the outer fringes of a La Mesa selling trip, when I was asked to give a live demonstration. Now, I'd seen Skippy's destabilizer function at all levels, from the equivalent of a bump on the head to instant brain fry. I'd seen the commensurate indentations on Mr. Dooley's blue clay noodle. I set the switch to something lower than the head bump and I had Little Boppo stand at the edge of the table with his front paws raised like a kangaroo.

When I launched the shovel, it made a new sound, a chuffing noise. It caught Little Boppo a little high and wide and he let out an almost inaudible rat sigh. We'd been on the road for most of the afternoon and I took this sigh to mean Little Boppo was tired of our demonstrations and wanted some well-deserved rest.

But then Little Boppo's upper skull separated from the rest of his head like someone had pulled an invisible cheese wire. Little Boppo's head rolled off onto the tabletop without a single drop of blood. Little Boppo, ever the performer, didn't even let on that he was now partially decapitated.

I gathered Little Boppo and the top of his tiny skull and raced back out to the Fleetmaster, where I kept a cooler of fortified lemonade. I put Little Boppo's head in a Ziploc bag with some ice chips. Little Boppo I put in my coat pocket with just his eyelids and front legs peeking out. Little Boppo's exposed brain was about the size of a fava bean.

When I hit Route 125, I jammed the Fleetmaster into fifth and road her like that to South Bay Freeway. I knew I couldn't take Little Boppo to an urgent care. I wasn't going to risk getting tossed out of the vet's either.

Then I thought of Feliza. She would surely know what to do. She always did. That thought cheered me up, that there was a woman waiting for me at home who hadn't yet grown revolted by me or ground me down to dust.

I was coasting down Palomar Street a few blocks from the apartment when I saw what I'd long feared, what I'd long and foolishly convinced myself I would never see again: Denny's Daewoo Tacuma parked

outside our apartment. In Guzman's parking space no less.

I passed the Tacuma with my head mostly turned towards the liquor store across the street, Cabo's 24 Hour, Guzman's competitor. I did manage to see that Denny had brought along some hired help, a big anvil-headed man in a loose papery sweat suit. This man was following directions of some kind, nodding slowly at whatever Denny was telling him. In the backseat was Marvella.

Marvella would give no quarter, that was obvious. But I did wonder who Denny would be angrier at, me or Skippy.

I turned the corner and parked.

My eyes dropped to my coat pocket, where Little Boppo was still in the same position, gripping a single lapel with his shivering claws. The thought occurred to me that I could just toss Little Boppo out the window and be done with the thing.

Part of the thing.

My woman was around the block with my seed in her belly and all my new suits.

I'm ashamed to admit that I thought of my suits at all, but I'd lost a good many in Theba. I'd had the feeling at the time that when the extent of my great treachery became apparent, when Marvella woke the next morning to find our bed empty and the Fleetmaster gone, she went to the nearest seamstress's and bought a high grade cloth shears and shredded my suits into a blue and gray confetti and clogged the toilet with them. To say nothing of my shirts and underwear and toiletries, the meager effects of my existence.



How long can a rat go with his brain exposed, do you think? A human for that matter? How had it come to this? I needed to think things through. I started up the Fleetmaster and circled the block.

I was sure I'd left no tracks for Denny to follow. A man on the lam that close to the border would cross it and lose himself in Mexico for a while. Or he would head north to one of our more populous cities where a door-to-door search would be futile.

I did nothing of the sort. I'd already decided to follow Route 8 east to Dale City, where I'd cut north to Palo Verde.

I remembered Palo Verde from a selling trip years ago as a town of higher than average aerial advertisement figures. Banners, not smoke. Their popcorn wasn't bad either, the stuff at the local theaters after the matinee, which is your litmus test for theater popcorn.

I was in my prime back then. They would call to me from the basketball hoops, asking for a demonstration. Or someone, some future boomerang star, would give one. Yes, a man could start fresh in a town like Palo Verde.

Things were looking better already. I had a tank of gas. The wind was good on my face. Soon it would be dinnertime.

And then I remembered those strings of blue and pink elbow macaroni hanging around the pullout bed and the dying rat in my front pocket and I thought, *Good lord, what have I done?*

# Non-Fiction

# Stealing From the Thrift Store

by Emma David

I PUT THE earrings in my pocket. I went into the changing room, tried on a stiff dress and some clunky shoes, then put the dangly \$.99 faux gold earrings into my right jeans pocket. I had never stolen anything before, I wasn't someone who went through a klepto phase even when my middle school best friend was cutting holes in shirts and wearing multiple pairs of jeans out of hot topic. I didn't once stuff a skirt into my purse at forever 21 or snag a discount bra from an urban outfitters rack, no matter how tempted or broke I was. I liked to think of myself as a sort of cool chick, a bit of a badass, a young riot girl who didn't give a shit about what others thought. My secret, like many of my kind, was that I was actually just a child, afraid of fucking up, of disappointing everyone, of not being who I thought I would be.

I was 19, maybe 20. Things had not been going well. I was jumping from job to job, had already moved four times in two years, and was in love but things were complicated. College did not agree with me and my credit card was maxed out. I was feeling pretty fucking lost. So I stole the earrings. I wasn't planning to when I walked into St. Vinny's that day. I had the day off from my shitty café job, so I did what I always did on my day off. I got a coffee, smoked a bowl, then went to a thrift shop.

I had been diagnosed with ADHD earlier that year by a condescending old man playing doctor with the 1980s degree on the wall to match, hanging over his head like a beacon, a halo, a crown, a mirage, a warning. My mother was afraid for me, my therapist was determined, and I had nothing to lose. Things had not been going well. Calling panic attacks intuition and intrusive thoughts premonitions were starting to feel like bringing marshmallows to a house fire.

So I stole the earrings. A small claim that I took without asking, a secret with myself. I walked out the door and crossed the parking lot, got in my VW Jetta with the witch stickers on the dented bumper and the missing hubcaps, and fished the small treasure out of my pocket like a bandit post bank job admiring their loot. I felt righteous. I put them in and liked the way they glinted in my rearview mirror. It was a moment of self-affection, a small revolution not against anyone, but just for me. I didn't feel guilty or regretful. I felt like a goddamn woman. It sounds dumb or unnecessary to the third perspective, after all it was a \$.99 pair of shitty earrings that would turn my ears green and barely touch my wallet, but that's entirely beside the point. This was an allowance to me, realizing I could do something without asking, without permission, something I decided on my own that I could be okay with. It was proving something to myself - that I was capable, brave, and bold. That I was an adult but that meant whatever the hell I wanted it to mean. Yes, this can be done without committing minor criminal offenses, sure, but everyone has their coping mechanisms and on that day in the summer of 2017, this was mine.

So yeah, I stole the earrings.  
And they looked damn good on me.

# The Delicate Line...

by Eleni Stephanides

RIDING MY BIKE through North Beach on a (rare) San Francisco sunny day, I stopped in Washington Square Park to eat my lunch. While chewing my sandwich on a sun-soaked bench dedicated to Juana Briones (“pre-eminent woman of the 1840s”), I watched as a seagull flew down from the sky and landed on a patch of concrete a few yards from my feet. Following him were two pigeons. Heads poised toward the sandwich in my hand, all of them looked up at me expectantly. Meanwhile, a sparrow hopped its way into the group from the periphery of my vision.

Myself an animal lover and former owner of parakeets, I felt an instant connection with these quiet pleaders. After tearing off a piece of crust and further dividing it into four smaller pieces, I then launched three towards the pigeon-seagull-pigeon trio and one towards the smaller puff of feathers skittering around on the outskirts.

What happened next both surprised and unsettled me.

I watched as Pigeon 1, after finishing his piece, lunged for Pigeon 2’s half-finished portion. The ensuing struggle involved a tug-of-war between their two beaks, which concluded with one pigeon biting the other’s wing—causing Pigeon 2 to drop his bread in order to tend to his now wounded wing. This granted Pigeon 1 the perfect opportunity to snatch it up.

The aggressiveness took me aback. It wouldn't have surprised me so much had the seagull been the one to coerce the food from the two smaller birds. The fact that a member of Pigeon 2's own *kin* had been the one to bully him, though, felt unsettling to watch. Where was his empathy towards his fellow bird?

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I think back to this incident sometimes, wondering if what happened with the pigeons plays a role in why many introverts and HSPs tend not to enjoy crowded places, or venues where the high volume of people places limits on available resources.

Like Pigeon 1, maybe we often feel pin-balled, or pushed out of the way. The bread is our well-being, representing the thoughts in our head. The bully pigeons are the unending stimuli of modern living, with so many things feeling like an assault on the nervous system. Provocations that run the gamut from mildly irritating to overwhelmingly upsetting can occur in as little as under an hour. As Svend Nelson has put it, "for the highly sensitive person, pain from loud sounds or any noise is amplified. Noise can be overly invasive, extremely distressing, and extraordinarily overstimulating."

HSP psychotherapist Michelle Woodall wrote that the "sheer force of noise can leave us feeling totally off-centre. When in a noisy environment, I can find it difficult to root myself in this body of mine. It feels as though the commotion carries me off and away, when I want me back *here*."

My own high sensitivity initially made shelter in place, truthfully, a bit of a blessing. Quarantine offered protection against the onslaught of the outside world,

the walls of my apartment Saran wrapping me into a tiny pocket of safety. Upsetting events were clearly still happening, but I could control the amount of them I wanted to consume. I could take in as much or as little as I wanted.

And yet in time, it began to feel like something was missing. It was similar to how years before the pandemic, I tried to shut the world out by moving to a studio apartment up in midtown Sacramento. I became hermetically selective about who I chose to spend my time with, shutting out almost everyone. Needless to say it turned into a lonely year. My mental health worsened. It didn't help that I dated a woman who was in a similar "I don't need anyone / people suck" phase that further cemented my own, as we both validated each other in unhealthy ways. Emptiness coexisted alongside the perceived sense of safety I'd cultivated.

I still savor my alone time, and will always be an introvert at heart. When the world re-opened, rather than rush to refill my social calendar, I planned my social outings thoughtfully and sparingly. After a year of hovering on the banks inside my cocoon though, I did look forward to swimming in that river of human connection once more. To seeing and hearing and hugging others. To dancing to music in public.

I willfully took part in it, even as I ended the day curled up at home with a book. COVID taught me I don't have to barricade myself from the world completely—just minimize my exposure to its at times overwhelming stimuli. I can still protect my flame, but I



also choose not to guard it so vigilantly that I block out the Earth's light.

As HSPs we can choose friends and environments wisely. We can spend time with people who aren't on survival mode like the pigeon in the opening example, or biting at our wings for our bread piece after they've devoured their own. We can seek out the pockets of the planet wherein abundance mentality thrives and there's plenty to share. They may not be on every corner, but enough exist to serve as refuge.

# LaGranche; Crawford y Mammoth

by Alex Roselio De La Cruz

GO LEFT, NOW right, shoot the light out, it's casting your shadow, he saw you, exclamation, fuck no, nope, he sees you, go, gogogo, hit the top button, pull the fucking thing out, get to the next door, he saw you, he's following your footsteps, chasing the cold breath, suspended geometry, the pounding of your heart, the tightened lungs, the way you see your reflection, disgusted with the gape, smack your lips, suck that spit in, you got a long night here, he kicks up some boxes, you're not there, you know he's getting close, you know it, Brian knows it, he can see the sweat peeling through the cowlick your curls refuse to cover, you have the notice, you saw the notice but Ma doesn't want to tell you, you know she was crying, you saw her in the bathroom looking through some papers, some bills maybe, some letters inviting her to a place beyond your understanding, you think about crying because you're scared, it's not all bad, you know you can make it, you know this won't really mean anything, where's Pa anyway, Brian never met him, not that you think, was weird that your cousins knew your mom better than your dad, how it can go, a flashlight on now, the shadow might keep you safe, feels warmer than the James Bond lights, the shit you two watched, Pierce Brosnan watched his partner get shot, he zipped off on some jet ski, jumped off a cliff to catch a plane, dove with no parachute, pulled up on the stick, fucking cool, you

pursed them, stuck the tongue out and everything too, found a reason to hate a rhyme, to figure out where the next spot was supposed to be, you got a friend there, you got Yoly, you got her sense of cool, the shit you want to emulate, you can't be that cool though, it'd be too much, so go off and find a moment to spend, wait for him to throw the beam your way, you shit yourself when you were three, but you weren't making that mistake again, you take a pause, you let yourself go, you look at the crack on the linoleum and wait a moment, remembering, gripping your fist, the tree was lit with the angel, you wanted to put it up there this year but they told you no, so you snuck out of the room, the one with the cold brick wall remember, the one where you got smacked for talking back, where didn't that happen, you weren't even safe in Market Basket, you wish for a fender, shiny and dented, regardless you snuck out and took the fucking angel off, but Abuela was down there watching, like she would be when you forgot your key at home and snuck in through her bedroom window, brittle twigs wrapped around her cane smacking you twice, you didn't think she was home, she was with your aunt that morning, in New York, cancer called her twice, she's still here though, *Gracias a Dios*, and you pulled the angel down and she told you you to put it back, and in your broken Spanish you told her, *Si Abuela si*, you started to speak better Spanish later, mostly to impress the Cambodian kids in school, mostly to let them know you weren't white, you got used to the pale, Pa was darker then too, you tried to learn how to sew, he told you it was a waste of time, go do something that makes money, you decided you were gonna write, you got

bored, you see the reflection again but your mouth does this weird side hang thing, you let it sit there while you gaze off into it, Ma noticed and smacks your head, says something, you can't hear her, remember when Pierce Brosnan and Halle Berry almost kissed, he was kind of old, tried to hide his grey maybe but he was another one of those old dudes in movies having some young trophy that he effortlessly wins over, everyone in these movies have daddy issues, sneak outside, there's no room to run to, you slept next to the tree hoping you'd be warmer, tried to catch a breath and you thought about the guy, you figured him out, you smacked the screen on one night, almost too excited, Yary watched you and got along with you too, just go up the steps and wait for the next part, the talking is the hardest part to sit through, trust me, wait, you like it right now, it's your first time, that makes it easier, Snake being screamed out in some raucous melody, you got punched in the lip for the first time, you cried, it's okay that you did, it was the same reaction, but you waited until after he left, no satisfaction, you kissed someone the day after too, she kissed you, she saw the swell of the lip and pulled it to her, she tongued you and you thought that tongues tasted gross, you liked it though, it was a different touch, a week of longing, she expected you to have a cellphone, wanted you to call her, you asked Yary for hers, told her the deal, she made you do the dishes for her, told you you could have the phone after you got it done, it was 7 30pm, she said you can't use it after 7pm, you told her to fuck off, you made it worse, fuck, you made a lot of things worse, you didn't think it at the time, you had to bike to Pa's shop, stole his key, remembered the keypad,

forgot that he checked the log every morning, you called her, her dad said she was asleep, you asked if he could wake her up, he said goodnight, you looked at the old register, the Singer model that the Michaels passed down, a sticker of some cartoon bear plastered with Band-Aids throws his thumb up at you saying he wasn't scared, the sticker's peeled, no, ripped back a bit, Baby picture of you too, you had blue eyes for a minute, the machines were cold but the clothes on the racks made it warm, you decided to sleep somewhere outside that night, no one looked for you, and you were sad, went back home before dawn, grabbed some leche at the Bodega, CheChe was opening up, asked if you was getting leche, you didn't say anything, *Este muchacho*, you saw the box and sat on it looking sad, you tried to look sad, you wanted someone to know, but you didn't even know, the games were ending soon, spring was smacking by and baseball was starting, Pa loved baseball but never showed up, Ma hated it but she watched, patted your head, cousins turned sisters somehow helped us get by, you still wish they were your blood sisters, yeah yeah, ya know, it was your friend you called, you let her know you liked her smile because Natasha told you to say that, she slept over once, Natasha said she was her friend, and you hung out with her in the basement, Pa saw you two, almost smacked you, told you to go upstairs, Natasha laughed, you'll smile at your friend at school and she'll smile back, you liked that, Ma found out the next day, smacked you up good, told you to respect yourself, Yary and Yoly watched, she always made us watch, Kev was okay though, he got it easier 'cause he was the baby Ya said, when did you stop being

the baby, when you stopped crying maybe, that made her go harder, you came home to Ya getting smacked with a broom, Ma yelling at her VEN AQUÍ, Ya was gonna call the cops which got you scared, Ma said go ahead, it'll take them 15 minutes to get here which is 15 minutes to whoop your ass, she got a C on her report card, you held Ma that next month, smelling like grass and dirt and outside, you held a trophy with a gold-sprayed-bat-wielding-psycho on it, she was crying in the bathroom the next morning, she told Kelman that she couldn't be with him anymore, you decided you didn't want to drink, you get drunk on a bottle of Jack Daniels Honey Whiskey, chugged the fucking thing down, black out, wake up to GET THE FUCK UP, Matt yelling in your ear, can't remember his last name though, he tells you to go left, now right, wait at the stairs, see Gio drunk passed out in the hall, fire alarms blasting those eardrums, the apartment alarm was pulled again for the 45<sup>th</sup> time that week, eh-hh, don't know, don't trust me on that, the first night you slept outside was the warmest you felt in a while, but Officer Quinones was there and told you to get up, Jordan was his son remember, he knew you, you were good, used to joke that my last name was a riddle, the Dominican secret, what's Pierce Brosnan doing now, the one and only night you slept through was graduation day, you don't sleep outside anymore, Brian doesn't talk to you anymore, not since Lucky bit him, his mom wanted Lucky dead, she was okay with Brian leaving instead, you turn on the TV again and remember what he told you, but the guy spots you, you see him and he sees you and your choice is to run or shoot, duck or dodge, punch or kick, you don't

really know the way the game is meant to be played yet, you don't really want to see it play out, but trust me you'll think better thoughts, you aren't there kid but you will be, the reset button, that little circle on the fucking edge, you can't click it, Pa walks in, you see him grab a beer, he already had trouble walking around you, he throws his cigarettes away though, looks at you and when you turn to see him, he turns away, that's just him, he's okay now, you understand now, but just don't hold your breath.

# Contributors

(in order of appearance)

**Britney Logan** is no stranger to Bruce or to Little Rock, AR. A photographer by profession who moonlights as a talented artist, she has done remarkable justice for our mustachioed boy with the cover art for this issue. Check her out at [britneylogan.com](http://britneylogan.com) and on Instagram: @britneylogan.

**Desiree Remick** (she/her) is a poet and author currently pursuing a BFA in creative writing. Growing up in Southern Oregon, she learned to love nature, literature, and fencing – three passions that remain with her to this day. Her debut short story was the runner-up for Kallisto Gaia Press' 2020 Chester B. Himes Memorial Short Fiction Prize. Her work has also appeared in the *Nude Bruce Review* and *Unlost*.

**HR. Harper**, a poet living in the redwoods above Santa Cruz CA, was a creative writing major at UCLA and studied in the English Ph.D. program there. He worked as an educator in central city schools for years. Writing poetry and fiction over decades, he only began to publish in 2021 and has published in several print and online journals since.

<https://brusheswiththedarklaw.blogspot.com/>

**Tyler Jones:** Hello! I'm Tyler, an American writer living in Los Angeles by way of rural North Carolina. I write romantic comedies for fun and am currently working on my first collection of poetry. Most recently, my poem "Hands" was published in the sixth issue of Fourteen Poems, a global queer poetry anthology. You can read more at [tylerbjones.com](http://tylerbjones.com) and on Instagram @tylerb\_poetry



**Mark Blaeuer's** poems and translations have appeared in ninety-plus journals, including Blue Unicorn, Boston Literary Magazine, The Dark Horse, Deep South, El Portal, Ezra, The Flea, The Hiram Poetry Review, IthacaLit, Nimrod, RE:AL, Slant, SurVision, Westview, and The Windsor Review. Kelsay Books published a collection, *Fragments of a Nocturne*, in 2014. He lives a few miles outside Hot Springs, Arkansas.

**Layla Lenhardt** (she/they) is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection, *Mother Tongue* (Mainstreet Rag, 2023). Her work appears in *Rust + Moth*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. She is a current writer in residence at Sundress Academy for the Arts' Firefly Farms and was a judge in the 2022 Poetry Super Highway Contest. She currently lives in Indianapolis with her two cats, Beau and Giovanni.  
[www.laylalenhardt.com](http://www.laylalenhardt.com)

**Faith Earl:** My name is Faith Earl and I am a poet and copywriter (advertising--super exciting stuff) from New Jersey. I see poetry as my place to be brutally honest, unapologetic and, at times, unlikable. I learn more on the page than anywhere else, and I hope my writing allows others to learn about themselves in the same way.

**Henry Crawford** is the author of two collections of poetry, *American Software* (CW Books, 2017), and the *Binary Planet* (Word Works, 2020) and a chapbook, *The Little Box Theater* (printF Press 2022). He won first prize in the 2019 World Food Poetry Competition. His work has been published in *Boulevard*, *Copper Nickel*, *Rattle*, the *Southern Humanities Review*, and others. He was nominated for the 2022 Rhysling Award by the

Science Fiction Poetry Association. He also serves at a co-host of the Café Muse Literary Salon Online. His website is <http://henrycrawfordpoetry.com/>

**Shawn McCann,**

one of the most popular and widely honored poets in the U.S.—

Actually,  
that title belongs to the late Mary Oliver,  
and Mary Oliver says  
poets are born, not made.

**Charles D. Tarlton** is a poet living in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. He has a Ph.D. from the University of California, at Los Angeles. His poems have appeared, among other places, in Ekphrastic Review, Rattle, Blackbox Manifold (UK), Ilanot Review (Israel), London Grip (UK), The Journal (UK), Innisfree Poetry Journal, (Eire), and elsewhere. In addition, he has published four print collections of his poetry and ekphrasis. The hardest thing in writing poetry is to get the form (lines, rhythms, words) aligned with the thought or feeling. Sometimes the latter is obscure and strange, but you still have to wrap it in ordinary language.

**Esther Martin** is from Maine. She finds herself most at home near (or in) the ocean, where she works as an aquaculture researcher and scuba diver. Esther is a scientist by training, but a poet by nature. She is humbled by new publications, and looks forward to continued exploration of the world through poetry.

**Ellis Elliott** has been published in Belle Ombre, The Broken Plate, Brushfire Literature & Arts Journal, Cerasus Magazine, Cider Press Review, Copperfield Review Quarterly, Courtship of Winds, The Ear, The Ignatian Literary Magazine, Isele Magazine, Literary

Mama, The MacGuffin, Meadow, Pennsylvania English, OPEN: Journal of Arts and Letters, Riggwelter, Perceptions Magazine, Plainsongs, The Rail, Signal Mountain Review, Sheila-Na-Gig, and Wrath-Bearing Tree. Three of her poems have been nominated for the Best of the Net awards.

**Alison Hicks** was awarded the 2021 Birdy Prize from Meadowlark Press for *Knowing Is a Branching Trail*. Previous collections are *You Who Took the Boat Out and Kiss*, a chapbook *Falling Dreams*, and a novella *Love: A Story of Images*. Her work has appeared in *Eclipse*, *Gargoyle*, *Permafrost*, and *Poet Lore*. She was named a finalist for the 2021 Beullah Rose prize from Smartish Pace, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize by Green Hills Literary Lantern and Quartet. She is founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community-based writing workshops.

**Mark Keane** has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in *Down in the Dirt*, *Granfalloon*, *Samjoko*, *upstreet*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Superpresent*, *Into the Void* (Pushcart Prize nomination), *Night Picnic*, *Firewords*, *Dog and Vile Short Fiction*, *the Dark Lane* and *What Monsters Do for Love* anthologies, and *Best Indie Speculative Fiction 2021*. He lives in Edinburgh (Scotland).

**T. M. Bemis** is a writer and producer from the Hudson Valley. His fiction has appeared in *The Oddville Press*, *For Page & Screen Magazine*, *Poydras Review*, *Projected Letters*, *Bryant Literary Review* and other publications. Hobbies include pacing, balloon animals, and a spirited wringing of the hands.

**Lily Swanson** is a fiction writer from Kansas City who aspires to have more credits to put at the beginning of author bios. Lily specializes in humor and SF. Her work has been previously published in Yale's *The Foundationalist*.

**Steven Mayoff** (he/him) was born and raised in Montreal and moved to Prince Edward Island on Canada's east coast in 2001. His fiction and poetry have appeared in literary journals across Canada, the U.S. and abroad. His books include the story collection *Fatted Calf Blues* (Turnstone Press, 2009), the novel *Our Lady of Steerage* (Bunim & Bannigan, 2015), the poetry chapbook *Leonard's Flat* (Grey Borders Books, 2018) and the poetry collection *Swinging Between Water and Stone* (Guernica Editions, 2019). Upcoming is the novel *The Island Gospel According to Samson Grief* to be published by Radiant Press in 2023.

**Alan Gartenhaus:** After a thirty-year career in the museum profession, I now live on the Island of Hawaii, where I farm and write fiction. My work has been published in *Avalon Literary Review*, *Broad River Review*, *DASH*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Entropy Magazine*, *Euphony Journal*, *The Evening Street Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Ignatian Literary Magazine* (recipient of the Editor's Choice Award), *moonShine Review*, *New English Review*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Paragon Journal*, *The Penmen Review*, *riverSedge*, *Running Press*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Smithsonian Press*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, and *Writer's Workshop Review* among others. My short story "The Outing" was a winner of Living Springs Publishers' national competition for baby boomer authors. My novel, *Balsamic Moon*, released by Atmosphere Press on October 25, 2022, is now available

**Emily Bonner** received her B.A. in Literature from the University of North Carolina Asheville and an M.A. in Literary Criticism from the University of Tennessee Knoxville. She works for a non-profit summer camp and lives in Brunswick, Maine with her partner and their two cats. When she's not working (or writing), she's doing her best to emulate the cat lifestyle - lots of naps, lots of snacks, and a few zoomies.

**Max Sheridan:** I'm the author of *DILLO* (2018, Shotgun Honey Press) and *GOD'S SPEEDBOAT* (coming soon from Outcast Press). My short fiction has appeared in Hobart, Diagram Magazine, Gargoyle Magazine, and a bunch of other less savory venues.

**Emma David:** In a Wisconsin town called Appleton resides Emma David: a 24-year-old chaotic fairy person. Emma flies around town collecting word nuggets that she dribbles onto paper to see what sticks. Her dribbles have been featured in various literary zines along with her first short poetry book, *Handful of Feathers*. She likes grilled cheese, laying on the ground, and collecting cool sticks.

**Eleni Stephanides**, an LGBTQ bilingual writer and Spanish medical interpreter, was born, raised, and currently resides in the California Bay Area. Her work has been published in *Them*, *Curve Magazine*, *Tiny Buddha*, *The Mighty*, *Elephant Journal*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, and *Introvert*, *Dear* among others. She currently writes the monthly column "Queer Girl Q&A" for *Out Front Magazine*. You can follow her on IG [eleni\\_steph\\_writer](#) and read stories from her time as a rideshare driver at [lyfttales.com](#)

Note: Eleni's piece, "The Delicate Line..." was published previously in *Variety Pack*.

**Alex Roselio De La Cruz** is an MFA student at Portland State University, working fiction with experimentation, pushing on the lines between genres and form, ambiguity and sharp imagery. He enjoys reading (of course) as much as you do, sitting around the apartment, counting the meows of the two cats he and his wife took in, wondering and wandering through thought and process.

fin<sub>(and farewell, Mark)</sub>•