

THE BEST REVIEWS



NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

Issue 14

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Dear Brucians,

We hope this email finds you well. Just kidding! Fuck email forever. It's not mail (electronic or otherwise) that we gift thee but the brand-spanking-clock-cranking-rabble-rousing-yelling-FIRE-in-a crowded-theater-darewesay-literary-atomic-bomb-wowee-zowee that you expect from the one and only *Nude Bruce Review*! We know, dear readers, that you've been losing sleep the year past for lack of our dear ol' Bruce's eccentric (but ecumenical) literary acumen. Well, now you can fill those dreamy, sleepless hours with the undreamt-of poems, fictions, and non-fictions here enclosed.

O friends, O lovers—it's ISSUE 14! This issue features an out-of-this-world cover illustration by our (newly christened) cover artist in residence, Britney Logan. Our fiction section was edited by the tireless and tenacious Desiree Remick. Every tasty—even the tiniest—morsel of this moveable feast has received the (invisible, because spiritual) Mustachio Stamp™ (awarded for literary excellence) from Bruce himself. We're very proud, and very eager, to share with you each and every one of the works that follow. Some of them will shake you, some will crash upon and around you, some will burnish the soft glass of your mind. And, to be perfectly honest, some will break your fucking heart.

Speaking of the heart, we would be remiss if we neglected to draw your attention to the four elegies penned by the incredible Lea Graham, which open the issue as one pries open a dehiscent wound; and to the pair of poems (by Garin Cycholl and Michael Anania, respectively) that follow thereupon. These half-dozen poems are all dedicated to the memory of our dear friend and teacher: the inimitable, incorrigible, immortal Mark Spitzer. They are published in heaven, too.

Nudely,

Andrew & Tim
Editors

Poetry

Four Elegies

By Lea Graham

~

Aubade

When you tell me one
afternoon you *might not be*
able to beat this thing

we are sitting in the TV
room that doubles
as your office, scraps

of paper, notes for poems,
a student's translations from
Mandarin on the coffee table

I say *please, please, please*
don't leave me, don't leave me,
it took so long to find you....

A few nights ago, thunder
seemed to rise from the Hudson,
the storm whipping our old lilacs.

I was watching a Korean film
where the young adoptee's
biological father begs her to stay

in Seoul even as her Parisian
adoptive mother calls to say
I thought we would go there together....

It's a nexus of desperation.
and bravado; she tries to dance
it away in one scene, solo.

I write you this because
sometimes I'm happy
in the safety of those nights

in our kitchen, small rituals,
conversations in a certain light,
how I wanted it all to go on and on

~

Reading Larry Levis *I Think of Our Beautiful Life*

Though the poem is about Stalin
and burying people alive and angels who
can't be dumped into ossuaries, it also has mist
in the corner of a field and horses drinking
from troughs, watching the traffic
from their bit of fence, innumerable stars.

Late last night after two days
of rain and still raining, I open
the back door for our little dog
and stand, breathing in
earth and water

But this morning, I remember the box turtle
you named Speckles who lived under the deck
you built me and how the dog would
lay her chin on the ground, splay her paws
as if to hug him, commune somehow

Now, it is night, and again, I pound
the walls and wail long and wild—
an ecstasy, in rapture

~

Barracudas

Near Punta Cana that March,
after your proposal, you caught
a dozen or more in that electric,

see-through sea, clutched them,
laughing each time they flipped
out, nearly taking a finger.

The next day, we went in search
of larger things, life jackets stored
neatly out of reach in that tiny boat.

The waves so high, you said
it's like surfing from a rooftop
as we smacked down each time;

you, standing up to save your balls; me,

wrapped around a pole; the captain, circumspect
at the stern, his child dying back in town.

When we finally returned to shore
you said *well, at least we would have died together.*
Exactly what I was thinking

~

Elegy Upon Which I Find Myself in One of Your Dreams

I know it's yours because there's a rust-colored
El Camino in the driveway

The woman who is your sort-of girlfriend
scolds me for not covering the leftovers correctly

I am part your girlfriend, part your step-child
My brothers are around here somewhere

In this carport, this stairless basement, this living room
turned hockey rink turned marching band practice room

You've been given a trunk of cash like a one-hit wonder
Tim arrives on his bike; you scour each bill

We are on the run or know we should run
but what's stalling us in this place where you're here

and not here with me?

Poem for Mark Spitzer

By Garin Cycholl

when you look a gar in the eye
do you find yourself looking back?
fish out of water

word trimmed to the clock's
tick and fileting
knife hung from
the peg out the
kitchen wall

drive from Conway east,
crossing the river at Memphis;
drive west along time, the fish
in your hand, out of water and
out of time

no drum, no voice, no
fiddle holds this story as
the palm of your hand; fish
slipping there as sure
as in time

our mouths
unwrap these lines a-
long the map

O ditch out yonder!
O Platte waters!
O Susquehanna!

O Michigan Sea!
O Stillwater!
O pond at dusk!

Riverrun

By Michael Anania

for Mark Spitzer

1.

you lean into the river
and all its motions,
the long swell, pebbles
smoothed against pebbles,
the grasp at tree roots and marl,
the white undersides of fish
mimicking sunlight on wavelets,
leaf-shaped leeches adrift,
leaves, as well, twigs, and
the soils it carries with it

2.

in Ravenna, in the Baptistry
of San Vitale, the slotted
windows, in place of glass,
have thin panes of marble,
the light they ease inside
thickens, umber, ecru
and yellow going to gold,
exactly what you see
swimming in a river on
a bright day, sun streaked
currents and eddies;
across a small garden
the sages stand in
their golden fire still

3.
older than time or sacrament
a spotted alligator gar eases
through river grasses, its long
snout lifted, occasionally, above
the river's dark surface, neither
saint nor sage, a creature,
like us, of water, silt and light;
any moment is worth its
blessing, all that is known
but unseen, the endless
tumult that shapes us

Ocean unfolding

By Essie Martin

Dear roach, Dear man,
Dear someone who I can reach out

and touch, alone on this island
again with a pair of hands

and a weight belt, Dear urchin
picker, Dear line cook,

look at my eyes over this frantic mess of parsley
and demand and see me

for a moment, Dear reader, Dear remicade,
Dear chemo drugs that saved my uncle,

Dear miracle, Dear remedy,
watch the page fold

under me, watch my hands numb
and purple to an ocean, Dear mother

bring me home

Steering the Womb

By Devon Neal

I've heard that the hum of car tires on pavement,
the gentle vibration through the car's frame
is like being in the womb, so tonight,
when his cries crack the night open,
I'm driving down this burnt ribbon of a country road,
the car seat buckled into the back. There are no
other cars, just the crisp night air, the naked trees
sticking new star-holes into the night sky,
the wave of brush at the corner of the headlight beam,
fields, swallowed by the dark, somehow so deep
and wide that though no single light shines,
their open expanse is felt in the twilight air.
We're similar tonight, though our missions are different:
he in the dusk of sleep, the black hum and warm
air of the car wrapping him in the womb of dreams
where only faint pink light and the gentle whorl
of laughter may disturb him, and myself,
sleep-drunk, passing quiet through the landscape,
determined to lull him to sleep, but also
small in the belly of the night.

My Friend, Dustin

By Shawn McCann

gun lubricant
the scent under dirty nails
dismantled gun on the desk

graduation from basic training
blue cord pinned on right shoulder
fanning Polaroids

Operation Iraqi Freedom
thank you for your service
a sandy objective

patrolling dusty streets
explosion hits the steeds
membranes bleed

sleeping in a car
purple medal crammed inside
an empty glove compartment

the smell of stale beer
a filthy bar at closing time
tobacco can on the floor

driving while drunk
police lockup
cold concrete slab

the wailing wind
a barren government cemetery
dead flowers

freshly cut grass
a white grave marker
tiny flag at the end

An Apology Letter to The Big Gulp Under My Shoe

By Caroline Jennings

I won't blame the trees for not showing themselves to me earlier. They've always been out there, waving their arms in the air, probably screaming, probably full of drama, flaunting their silky green dresses and reddish-brown lips and the bright strands of gold that laced their bodies, yet I kept on walking each day with my head stuck inside of the sidewalk cracks, buried deep enough to reach the layers that burn skin. But the thing is, even back then, I would've admitted that they were beautiful—I probably would've told you that on one of your drowningly-sad days that you should throw on your nearest slip-on shoes and crack open your door—just a little bit—to peek at the nearest leaf, even if it's the cracked-open and dead on your doorstep. I would've told you the even the smallest oak tree would fix everything. I would've said it with confidence, even as I coated my own skin in layers and layers of a tan and gold crocheted blanket that had just enough holes as to make me feel annoyed by the cold air, but not so many as to lure me out of the fabric trap I'd created in my disconsolate room. But today I got a taste of my own (good) medicine as I felt the heat on my face for one sweet, full moment and wanted to jump higher than I ever had (which isn't saying much), high enough to feel the red lipstick touch my cheeks and the threads of gold giftwrap my body. I'm not sure if it was the trees themselves or the sun or the sun in the trees. I even

stepped on someone's old empty Big Gulp cup. I know that because I felt it, not because my eyes could be bothered to leave what I was seeing to look down and observe it. I didn't know what I was missing. Last week I tripped on a rock and almost dove into the deepest layer I could find. Today I bent my head back, smiled, and took a seat.

Do Not Go to the House

By Alex Carrigan

After Kim Garcia's "Desert Litany"

If you are in the field, do not go to the house.
Just let the wind carry the sounds away from it.

It sounds like screaming and breaking, but
pretend it's just the branches under your feet.

Move your feet away and try to explore what's
under that rock or in the knot of the big oak tree.

If you look up the big oak tree, you may
see a more peaceful family meeting going on.

What's going on has been happening regularly for the
last few years now, and you were always ushered outside.

Outside, you could only imagine what was being
discussed and left to wonder when you can go inside.

You can go in when your bruised mother says you can, but
if you are in the field, do not go to the house.

A Poet's Body Is A Fragile Specimen

By Ayòdéjì Israel

i am the most fragile living thing i know.
wonder why these words are in the lowercase?
why should i place heavy letters on a tiny
stream of emotions? my head, big like a mount-
ain, is too small to describe itself. my
brain, though more magnificent than the wall
of Jericho, is only an atom of loamy
soil. i have learnt that not all letters carry alpha-
bets. look at how significant the letter
O is in my language. O is greater but everything
it touches returns to it again. i am like
the greater letter. i have never been drenched
by raindrops. a tiny girl entered our
village stream, and the stream filled her to the full-
est instead of filling itself with her body.
it is why i accepted the fact that everything that
makes me sad is not from my body. i
have learnt that the snake visited Eve and not
Eve to the snake. i have learnt that
every bad thing i feel within me is just a stranger
in my body. look at the small alpha-
bets in this poem. i made them. i gave them roles
to play. i am the potter in this poem.
because of the fragility of my flesh, my skin is a
swimming pool for dirt. the body
of my flesh is like the skin of a tree, and every
devilish arrow gets a spot. i strongly
believe that this warm feeling that wants me dead

is like a scar on my skin. since it wants
permanence, i will find a way to make it listen to me.

How Are We to Endure Life?

By John Tustin

He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

Let go with your mind if not your heart.

Drink a lot of water.

 Selective empathy is bad for you and everyone
 around you.

Sleep naked when possible.

Always be listening.

Promote peace in the face of impossibility.

It's always prudent to be at once hopeful and faithless.

Wear comfortable shoes.

Do three things Jesus said –

do unto others as you'd have them do unto you;

turn the other cheek;

love your neighbor as you love yourself.

It's better to be the good Samaritan.

Malcolm X was right when he said,

“If someone puts their hands on you,
put them in the cemetery.”

Know that it's ok to be confused.

It's also ok to be confusing.

Love your children more than they love you.

Listen to music every night before bed.

We are all alone,
so we are together in this aloneness.
Believe what nature tells you.
Turn your pillow to the cool side if you can't sleep.

Forgive the unforgivable; love the unlovable.
Kindness can do anything but raise the dead.
Know that when you die, you will feed the earth;
you will become the air; you will mingle with the stars.

The Horrors of Having a Body*

By Salem B Holden

hoarding hippocampus cells collide
at the mention of my mother
calling me codependent

she collects children
like she collects conches on the beach
and forgets she stored them in the closet
(I hid for many years)

The Cross confused bisexual transsexual
“Are you a boy or a girl?”

“My mom (a Catholic) says I’m a girl”

But I know she’s wrong; right
in her mind mindless might makeup
stories of my fake daughter—
Fake girls always pull off the best
drag queen looks

“She did her best”—doesn’t everyone?

But her best:

cracked

white
oak

wooden
doors,

window
pains of
the soul

As a child psychologist, I was a child
unlicensed for psychological warfare
(My mother called it Bonding.)

**Title inspired by the YouTube video: “The Horrors of Having a
Body” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOfucPpR1K0>)*

Untitled 1

By Blain Logan

Numb and dead as a blank page.

No rest to be found tonight.

I roll over in bed and poke at that synaptic crossroad,
the place you inhabited;

that intersection where all the lights blazed green

and the crash was so horrific the ambulance arrived
darkly silent.

That feeling when a car starts honking as you're walking down the street and at first you think it is at another car, but no. It's at you. Except is it really at *you* or more or less how you thought you could walk down the street without permission or how you thought you could wear your favorite dress and be in the corner of their eye at the same time or maybe how you thought you could be a fab and be unseen or at the very least uninterrupted or most daringly, how you thought you were allowed to be a person (how dare you!!). / The memory that I replay in my head every time a man tells me to *take a compliment*.

[TW: cat-calling]

By Sailor McCoy

we stand on the scuffed : rain dampened curbs
intertwining our pig
pink nails over each other's slouched
shoulders and ankles

hovering the gaps from tiny feet in Mama's heels
scratched up : rubbing together
tumbling over flash flood debris
mostly cigarette butts

Aunt Kim used to hold those puff clouds :

*Just to shoo shoo 'em birds
away. Don't go on tellin' Nana now, she
loves them birds.*

I love birds.

Kim thought I was pretty : tall and
blonde like a popstar : but

*I can't sing sing, like a popstar.
you gon' find out when you git bigger.*

so we'll be tall and grown : pretty

*Pretty like girls. Girls, girls
wear red lipstick like a
cherry and red heels like
rubies. Mama says models live
in france. Maybe they're french,
say ooh la la, One day,
I'll be them, be them, say ooh la la la.*

now we're struttin' in our tall heels
balancing on neighbors
mail boxes : waving at women
leading chihuahuas or
poodles that match their hair color

*Hi, Hi! Love love your dog.
She walks like you, looks like you too.*

they say *you dears stay safe*

we count passing cars : pick colors
like Pop Paw's : I choose white
white truck : rough beard man shouts

smile smile little ladies

and I smile big : but when Mama
calls

Come inside, storms soon

I can't catch a deep breath and I hide : hide
those heels as far under her bed as I can stretch my fingertips
and whisper into flattened pillows

I am done with being pretty

STUPID BABY DO SOMETHING GOOD

By Christine Perry

after Jenny Zhang's "My Baby First Birthday"

when i am baby
i open my eyes
and The People CHEER -
they say "YES BABY" (!)
"BAT UR LASHES BABY" (!!)
"WAVE YOUR STUPID
CLUMSY HAND"
when i am
i am baby
when i lift my stupidclumsy
hand
pick&pick
up my nose - the people
SCREEEAMM "NO BABY" (!)
"NO BABY
STUPID YOU
STUPID UGLY BABY" (!!)
"GERM OF THE WORLD BABY"
my mother
vomits in the sink
and tries to hide it from the house guests
her father holding back her hair
is caught in the splash
"AGHFHRMEMHMM BABY" (!!!!)
her vom bubbles to me

i pluck my ClumsyAndStupid™
hand out my ClumsyAndStupid™ face and THEY
CHEEERRRRR
“YES YOU STUPID BABY”
“YOU STUPID BRILLIANT BABY”
my father cries a bit
and hugs the ghost of his
mother to show off
his best work
he points to me
and the photo where my dead
grandfather is a blue heron cranes
his head and nods
and then *he* is flapping ‘round
my stupid fckn face
and my mother is lifting her
mother by the armpits like a child
one last time before her brain melts
to see what I have done

i never know what people want
from me or how to give
it to them

The Beauty of Data

By Joe Ryan

I type the following words into my smartphone's search engine:

How attractive am I?

I click on the first link that appears:

How attractive are you? Test it now!

I read the site's instructions:

Let Artificial Intelligence decide how hot you are.

Simply upload a picture of yourself.

I spend the next five minutes capturing an array of selfies:

Hair up vs. hair down.

Smile vs. pursed lips.

Raised eyebrows vs. relaxed.

Angled vs. straight on.

All for data's sake, of course.

I run the analysis multiple times

With multiple photos

And score a 7.8

Then a 7.2

Then a 7.6

Each rating yielding the same automated words of encouragement:

“You're pretty attractive!”

A bell-curve graph appears at the bottom of each result's
page,
Demonstrating my visual worth
As more valuable than 75.3 percent of random
strangers'.

Not too shabby there, big guy!

Surely a 9 or 10 would go to my head,
And a 2 or 3 would be deflating.
But a strong 7 on a good day?
I've got something to be proud of
And goals that I can work towards.

I leave my house to read at a cafe.
I confidently walk towards the barista at the counter
But not *too* confidently.

She politely takes my order,
Then comments on my hat.
She thinks it's cool.

And I realize I never ran the AI attraction analysis
On a photo of me wearing the hat.

Perhaps the barista was hoping for a generous tip,
Or perhaps complimenting patrons is in her job
description,
Or perhaps the hat itself is a 10
But my head wearing the hat is only a 6.

So I capture more selfies
Right in the cafe,
Donning my “cool” hat.

The cafe’s lighting is softer than my home’s,
And the walls are painted a different color,
And the AI analysis tells me I’m an 8.0.
A personal best.

I visit the cafe with more frequency,
Always wearing my cool hat,
Basking in my optimal state of attraction,
Feeling superior to nearly 80 percent of the patrons.

But outside the cafe,
Without my hat,
Raised eyebrows and smiling,
I am statistically
The ugliest version of myself

Breach

By Meredith MacLeod Davidson

Still, if you are not a child?
What remains is a cut in
the tongue. History undone
like lizard tails, this, syllabic
rotary of tooth.

Harbor water becomes poison
on a child's shoulder the devil
himself demanding free the
stuffed bear, thrown to oily basin
tides and temper its takeout Styrofoam.

When the black box charge port
blinks oyster scandal : pearl
country afloat on a Fanon calf
cadaver think of the horse faded
blank over time.

The Human Right to be Left Alone

By Misha Lynn Moon

I want the right to be left alone,
to drink a cup of coffee in a diner
without wondering if the waitress
is thinking what's under my dress,

walk home from the comic shop
passed the Plaid Pantry unharassed
by men drunk on beer and privilege
deciding I'm a beautiful abomination.

In the bathtub I carry the concern
of every woman watching me pass,
all the doubt of my body bobbing
in the soapy water as I breathe in

the sins of the world, breathe out
loving kindness, sense of permission,
change from the tangle of scripts
spliced at the genetic level. I want

to be here alone and naked blessed
by this curse of a body, find beauty
in my belly's curve, my cheekbones,
my voice singing in the echoes.

Fiction

Almost Everything Strange Washes up in Miami

By Rafael Jennings

As I breathed in, the tropical air tickled a lump that had always been growing inside of my throat. I coughed and then rubbed the lump in the left side of my throat as I leaned my neck back against the wall of a CVS. Looking into the Miami sky between heavy eyelids and through an array of wind-moved palm trees, I stared into the baby blue sky that hovered above Ocean Drive. The elastic flesh inside of the left side of my throat held firm as my fingers dug into my throat to feel the lump. I could feel nothing, the right side of my throat deceived my senses with its symmetry to the left. The Southern Florida sun had kissed my Java skin adding a roast in my color and a glistening sweat to my face and body. The elusive lump in my throat was nowhere to be found with my fingers, so I wiped the neck sweat off my fingers and onto my white tank top. Through tight ribs, I breathed in the air thick of ocean-salted cigarettes and blew it back through my nose. My phone had been buzzing intermittently in my pocket for the past 10 minutes, but I was too tense to check it while I was looking around the CVS. Interrupting my gaze into the heat-scintillated sky I pulled out my phone to bring attention to the interminable buzzing, ten hearts on my profile, and 5 new messages. Clicking the notifications brought my screen to a grid of tiny squares. Each grid looked back at me with blank profiles, people smiling, bulges, and jockstraps, every profile underscored by a title; some

were real names, a few flags of exotic countries, the common suggestive emojis, and some sexual names. The grid displayed the carnality that I had heard was cooked into Miami's rooftops and sidewalks. I hadn't been on this app since my stay in Atlanta, but I redownloaded it when I got off the train in downtown Miami. In every city I stopped in, I looked to find someone to keep me there. I was deep into the practice of staring as I walked down sidewalks, talking slowly when I ordered, and lingering everywhere until I knew it had been too long. It had been 7 months since I left my parents' house, guided by the ambiguous scent of love. Now, I had spent days alone traveling cities of the United States, waiting for the eyes I sought out in crowds to be an invitation to a permanent stay. Or maybe stay just until I get bored. Yet it didn't seem like anyone in Los Angeles, New York, Boston, or Atlanta wanted me for longer than they needed. Which was never too long. Ending up under the heat of a July on Ocean Drive I had come to re-downloading this app, to which my compulsive need to constantly check followed. Looking at my phone, I caught myself revisiting my own 4 uploaded photos, sliding through them, biting my lips, and inspecting my presence. My brows pushed themselves together trying to comprehend the outside perception of myself. Interpretation numbed my brain. The photos were not old or inaccurate, but staring at these former versions of myself made me feel as if I were born this morning. Since I was a child, I had been told that I was good-looking, and

I've always been excessive in hygiene and beauty. Sure, sexy was present in my photo, but any tincture of

attractive or sexy felt resistant to my brain. “Who cares”, I thought, knowing that someone would like them anyway. I coughed and pressed edit profile, changing the name from my name, Santiago, to just the flag of where I was born, Cuba. I tapped my messages tab and looked through what had been unread. Lined up on the left side of my phone were faces, each accompanied by short messages. I had seen hundreds of what felt like thousands of profiles and had countless meaningless conversations. Though I knew better, I still searched through the app imagining that somewhere in the sexual messages and blank profiles, was someone who could soothe the restlessness I carried with me. It was 7:00 p.m., and I felt the pressure of the west-racing sun, forcing me to establish where, and who with my night was going. My indecision had wasted so much time, and it didn’t actually matter who I messaged back anyway. I shuffled through profiles looking for the most attractive and the least creepy. With managed expectations, I sent a reply. Then I slipped my phone into my pocket and watched the view in front of me. My vision caught between the palms that tenderly shook, and the cars that flew by, I thought of how it would all be here tomorrow. I knew nothing about Miami, except for its beauty. “Southern Florida,” I thought, and the reality hit me. I had almost reached Cuba chasing my American love story. Yet, even if I didn’t find love tonight, the same sun would light up Miami in the morning; igniting the compulsions that breathed under the moon.

I was going to a club to meet a man I had been texting for less than two hours. I sat in an Uber driving towards downtown Miami, speeding across the General

Douglas MacArthur Causeway. Air soured by the ocean salt caressed my face as I peered out of the car window and into the water. A million tight tendrils of black curls danced in the wind as I stuck my head into the scene that raced across the moonlit bridge. My curls swirled into the sky as I craned my neck down to look at the neon purple lights that reflected off the bridge and into the water. It was 9:30 pm and a yellow luminescence coated the Miami streets. I turned my head back to look at the electric colors that blazed from South Beach and then looked forward into downtown Miami. I had hoped that Miami could water the Cuban inside of me that had grown wilted in the suburbs. To me, it was clear that I had run out of places to call home. But Miami and its infusion of the culture I claimed was mine didn't feel borrowed. It reminded me of the Celia Cruz my grandmother played and getting lost in the speed of my Father's Spanish. Those things I yearned for amongst white classmates, and at a dinner table where Spanish was no longer spoken. The more I looked for myself in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York, the more I was drawn to Miami. With a sidelong gaze into the lights of a now-distant South Beach, I made a promise to leave the person I was yesterday in the Ocean beyond. Feeling something valuable meant slipping away from who I was and who I've been. I was lost in the thought of a new reality until I felt a tinge of pain in the lump on my neck as its mass took a sharp breath in my throat. Pain jerked me back into the car, and I rubbed my throat as involuntary tears welled in my eyes. I took the back of my vacant hand and wiped the tears. Knuckles and skin

rubbed against my eye and throat for the rest of the ride to Downtown Miami.

A heat rose off my body and into the club lights as I rotated my hips on him. His sturdy chest was against my back and his strong fingers pressed into my swiveling hip bones. Breath blew onto my neck as he whispered into my ear. There was a depth to his words that scared me. The words "You're Perfect" baked into the depth of his voice and fell into my ears. Between the music and his touch, I almost believed him. In my experience, Java skin is never perfect, I've accepted that black can be too complicated. But I let him tell me that I was because I wanted to believe it too. For the new version of myself, not who I was yesterday. I could see myself loving him, Lorenzo. I pictured it as we danced, our kids: with his nose but my eyes, wrinkling my nose at the vision of kids with his face shape and my nose. Us in a high-rise apartment, us on a ranch, us in Europe, us with 7 grandkids, or just me touching his wrinkly hands as he dies in a hospital bed, a future, all with Lorenzo. I turned around to explore his eyes and rested my arms on his shoulders. A blue flame somewhere deep inside his black pupils stared into me. He had a languid look, his top eyelids a little heavy, and his full lips sat relaxed on top of his golden skin. A gold chain perched between his pecs and surfaced in between the popped buttons of his white shirt. I leaned in to kiss him. The warmth that lived between us was undoubtedly that feeling of teenage love; a passion I felt so petulantly it made me feel like I was in high school again, kneeling to a cross as my father watched over me. For years I prayed, for a moment like this as I cried tears of contrite. I could hear

my dad's voice in my head, “Santiago, let me pray for you.” I wonder what God thought of our family, my dad praying for me to obtain health, a wife and kids, an education, and me praying for distance from him. I wondered if Lorenzo could smell that on me, my youth If I wore it like a sweat stain on my soul. Dancing amid hot bodies and the sound of Miami bass, I felt sated, like answered prayers, like reversed karma.

I wrapped my hand around Lorenzo’s tattooed bicep, feeling his strength in my fingers. My body lay on the edge of his bed as he leaned over me. The space between had begun to feel too wide so I tugged on his bicep bringing his face closer to mine. His knee rested on the white comforter under me, as his body came closer covering mine. He kissed me and he rested his body on mine with his chin on my shoulder. As I felt his body relax onto mine, I turned my head to the view of Miami from his apartment. Into the lush yellow streets and the buildings that gleamed purple. That consolation I had been looking for filled my eyes and pressed against my chest. I pressed my hand into his back to feel his breath, to reify that he was there. I didn’t want to be just tantalized by Lorenzo. I wanted to love him. From under him, I asked, “So what do you do?” He lifted himself off of me and looked at me a little confused. He laughed and responded, “Uh, like for work?” “Well, yeah”.

“Well, I’m in the event planning business. I specialize in immersive art installations.”

“Oh nice.... Have you always been passionate about art.”

“Nah, it’s Miami I’m just doing what I enjoy enough to make my money.”

“Oh, how did you end up in event planning.”

“An old girlfriend was doing her art shit down here and it seemed like something we could both do that I’d be good at” he paused “She left me though, now she’s based in New York, I think she lives in Brooklyn” he paused again, “I miss her though, I even considered moving up to New York City just to you know, stage a run in” My face dropped, It was then when I realized that no, I wasn’t perfect, not tonight. “Oh, you’re another one of those types.” I watched the look in his eyes grow even more confused than before. “What?” he said sharply.

“I mean there’s a lot of guys-”

“Ah you thought I was gonna like fall in love with you or something.” He laughed a little, I sat silent, feeling guilty, cause that’s exactly what I thought. My eyes drew away from his face as he continued,” I mean I just met you like I didn’t really expect to actually know too much about you. Like where do you work? Where do you live? Where are you from? I guess I just thought skipping all that was intentional” I felt the low light of the room fill my eyes, but My chest jumped as my response got caught in my throat, and my body flailed as a violent cough shook my body. I grabbed my throat. The smell of the Saffron in his cologne stuck in my sinus as I leaned over myself on his bed choking. My vision was a haze as Lorenzo grabbed the hand on my throat and tugged me upright. My eyes watered from the coughing, but I could see Lorenzo lunge towards me looking into my coughing face. “Are you choking on

something?” he asked as his furrowed brows came closer to my vision. Between coughs, I leaned my head back and opened my mouth. Sticking my tongue out and pointing to where I had always felt the lump. He looked past my esophagus while poking the outside of my neck. He paused and stared down my throat in silence. Until he said, “Oh

I see it”. “See what?” I thought between coughs but within seconds I felt his hand stuffed in my throat, my teeth and tongue resentfully wrapped around the solid force. I screamed, as his fist reached past my esophagus. The ridges on his gold ring scraped up and down the inside of my throat. I grew lightheaded as fingers moved in my throat, my eyes rolled to the back of their sockets and my breathing stopped. After what felt like forever, my throat released and gave out a croak as he pulled his fist out of my throat. The air left my body, and I lurched up fighting for air. I sat teary-eyed and my bloody folded over itself wheezing blood into my thigh. My body slowly rolled up vertebrae by vertebrae as my nails dug into the comfort behind me for the support of my arms. A passive vigilance projected from my eyes as they met Lorenzo’s. He had stepped back onto two straight knees, with his right arm stuck out holding something in his hands. Covered in the stringy pink insides of my throat in a bloody ball Lorenzo held the tumor from my throat. Through all the pain, I felt no lump. I felt vacancy and looseness and tasted the blood that dripped down my throat. The bloody ball stood tough in his hand, unapologetic to the weakness that it had been causing me, and confident in its size. Lorenzo’s fists were drenched in my blood, holding the ball with his red

fingers. The tumor swelled, filling the room with a rotten smell. Underneath the red of my blood, the tumor was black and jagged. Even though the thick structure had left my throat, I felt choked just looking at it, disgusted by its presence. It was stuck in my throat, stabbing at me as I traveled, throbbing since I turned 18, now sitting covered in blood filling the room with the smell of burning flesh. For months I'd thought of my life before leaving home as expired, entombed by my will to outpace it. Yet this reminded me of home, of laying on my childhood bed rubbing my neck searching for the source of the discomfort. It reminded me of sitting on buses coughing violently, but not caring because at least I wasn't home. Lorenzo reminded me of my dad, causing me pain and then standing still in it.

Even though I was embarrassed for how disgusting I must've appeared ; I felt no obligation to the tumor. In his hands, he held a growth of 18 years, that I had no defense over. I felt exhaustion deep into my face, skin, and eyes. I was too tired to be angry, and in too much pain to be tired. I parted my lips and lifted myself to look at Lorenzo. His bitter chocolate eyes sat heavy yet frantic as his lips opened to justify what just happened. I interrupted him with a croak "Keep it" and I turned my head looking down at our bare feet to avoid his eyes. "It was all I had left, I continued" He looked so far away standing in front of me, as the tumor in his palm created excess space between us.

I passed him, through the door to the hallway of his apartment. As I stood under the cool light of the silver elevator, I saw my eyes reflected on its metal. Tired eyes

caught in a watery red glaze, realizing the sting of being left behind, even while leaving.

I watched as purple, orange, and yellow emerged from over the horizon and above the water. My feet sunk into the white sand that lined Ocean Drive. I stood and turned around to look at the famous street where I stood yesterday. I stared through palm trees at the buildings of Ocean Drive, their lights had died with the night. Miami was the best part of me, the sounds of salsa on Calle Ocho mixed with the language of my home country. The sex that breathed within the tropical air, air that I assumed of Cuba. Lorenzo, and the people I could meet here. The now stultifying thought of a world so big was once the only thing that stimulated me. I remembered the lost lump in my throat, and I tilted my head back to feel where it once sat. I squinted lazy eyes at the burning Miami sky feeling the exhaustion I'd been outrunning. With my mouth open and my jaw tight, I pressed my fingers against my throat searching for the lump that once held my past, maybe even missing it. "I want to go home", I thought, but not to the house I grew up in, a place before that home, a place I've never been but I find myself always searching for.

Contadino Is Italian for “Hoosier”
(From *No Depression Music: A
Novella in Verse*)

By James Bradley Wells

1. Pigeon Hill according to Sister Ignatia:

Vicki says to get herself off the Hill,
girl needs a boyfriend. She don't want to
end up teenage pregnant like her sister
got. Now she spends her afternoons at the college
Oztown, restaurants, shops, where there's them that
rattle

cups and them that sometimes hand out coins,
and sometimes won't. But to get herself off the Hill,
girl needs a man. Ramshackle shotgun
house, on the porch that man drinks Jack from the
bottle.

Next to him there's a boy be skinning raccoon.
Garbage burns in a fifty-gallon steel
barrel. Bootleg timeline of Pigeon Hill
is moonshine, crackpipe, methmouth, fentanyl epochs.
Some of them fights you win, and some you won't.
Fastfood job, drug court, Army recruiter ready
to take you down. You have to stand your ground.
Child prodigies prowl sidewalks, barefoot
and shirtless, a summer shellac of sweat and dust
coats their legs. They teach themselves to read
the cuneiform of situations. Supposing
you set your guitar on the stoop, supposing

you left a shovel leant against a tree,
sweets of pillage bank the coin of this realm,
Fear Thy Neighbor, currency and commandment.
Survivalist children, quick at coming to know
the ring-composition of the undertow:
make thy neighbors more afraid of thee
than thou be of them. No jewelry, heirlooms, paintings,
wine collections worth a fence's dollars
in the Westmont Public Housing Complex.
The only sweets of pillage are Fear Thy Neighbor.
Flaunt your take with style. Cast the stolen
fishing pole with a practice plug in the street
for all to see, and coin of the realm lights up
the slot machine when neighbors fear being
your future mark. According to the buzz
of summer sky's florescent lights, child prodigies
learn diagrams for fear's assembly lines,
Rottweiler chained to honey locust tree,
pseudoephedrine chemistry, ammonia tang.
Pitch of limbs buckshot into the wooded lot
when police cars nose through Pigeon Hill,
survivalist children quick at coming to know
the ring-composition of the undertow.
Children tell each other the news of sex
they forage. The summertime man that fixes bikes
for free explains what sex words mean. He teaches
metaphor, how baseball glove surrounds a bat,
one kind of bat, but many kinds of glove.
Some like bat-and-bat or glove-and-glove,
you understand. The more he teaches metaphor,
the less these out-of-school children wonder what—
what it means when overhearing hard-liquored

men brag on the time back when they pulled
a metaphorical train on so-and-so,
ring-composition of the undertow.
Another summer more in want of love,
friendly group of boys and plenty of Boone's Farm,
just boys who get you laughing at their mock-
innocent interest in what your pantszipper hides.
Supposing there is a fix for want of love,
their bleary persistence breaks that fix's limit.
Squirrel nailed to a walnut tree
and pliered, another summer more in want of love.
Fight against the undertow, you drown sure.
*So much perhaps depends / upon / a red
wheel / barrow*, but if a tin can's round ribs
contain the world, if sun and stars are sleeping
inside the tractor tire roped to a treelimb,
what opening is there for those whose circle
is too closed to the luxuries of a life
and language so uncomplicated and spare?

2. On page one of their client's file Sister Ignatia records:

The story of Contadino and the stork is
that Penny and Junior named their eldest child
William John and called him Billy Jack
after that movie Vietnam veteran, hapkido
master, justice fighter, vision quester.
Contadino brags he read the Bible
and all the poetry of William Blake, but his fight
against the Pigeon Hill undertow he got
from Mrs. Passon, who tended Contadino

and his siblings, Junior somewhere drunk,
Penny running around with Junior's brother
when she got off work. Mrs. Passon
in the rocking chair, Billy Jack inducted
into her lap like a sheaf of Cumaean scrolls,
like she was some goddess disguised as a wetnurse
taken to holding a boychild into the hearthfire
of her bosom to burn away his mortal
shell. She closed her eyes. She rocked and sang.

*Jesus loves you this I know
for the Bible tells me so*

Billy Jack started drinking whiskey age twelve.
Before that he wrote a poem about the Lord
on the back blank pages of his King James Bible.

3. Little boy Billy Jack's voice like this:

it's a nightmare the world so bad
everyone so angry pretending to be glad
but when God sat with me and said
"human tell me why this world is a lie"
I wondered myself to reply
"dear God I know the world is being destroyed
the trees the mountains the animals Lord
your creations being killed by the creation
created with the most skill"
the Lord left me with the world tattered and torn
awaiting a new generation to be born

4. On page two of their client's file Sister Ignatia records:

Dipped in the stream of Mrs. Passon's gospel singing, in time's fullness Billy Jack became Pastor William John Contadino at Beanblossom Creek Baptist Church and known to churchfolk as Brother William. Each unhappy child copes its own way with a blackeyed mother and her bailbonded husband. It's hard to picture a man like Contadino having the tenderness and wisdom to tend the dead and soothe their families' grief, but the dead do not need to punctuate a story for the story to be punctuated sad. What the living do and undo is enough cold and mournful, Pigeon Hill's unstoppable current and undertow, Contadino clinging to a treelimb with his every altarcall.

5. Contadino's altarcall is:

Jesus lives in my heart today, amen.
Does he live in your heart? Everything ought to be different when you get saved. Jesus may be many things—teacher, healer, miracle worker—but to a Christian, he is one thing: a savior. And such a savior saves us from but one fate: eternal damnation in the fires of hell. In this life, a teacher sure can lead you down the path of virtue. In this life, a healer might come in handy if you break your arm. In this life,

a miracle worker, if you need extra money to pay the bills, a miracle worker might be the ticket. But in the hereafter you need a savior. When you look to scripture the hereafter is nigh. Now I'd like us to open to the Gospel of Matthew chapter twenty-four, verse twenty-one. Chapter twenty-four, verse twenty-one. In this verse Jesus says there shall be a great tribulation, such as had never been since the world's beginning to this time, no, nor ever shall be. Let me ask you all a question. Have you lately followed the news? You may have heard about the coronavirus. You may have heard the experts saying Earth cannot sustain human life as we know it. You may have heard about the rich getting richer, poor getting poorer, bankers and insurgents organizing into gangs to take what they can before us humans are extinct. This sounds to me like a tribulation. This sounds to me like a Great Tribulation. Our troubled times are turbulent waters of the sea that John the Apostle foretells, the Book of Revelation chapter thirteen, verse one, where scripture says, I stood upon the sand of the sea and saw a beast rise up from the sea having seven heads and ten horns, upon his horns ten crowns, upon his heads the name of blasphemy. If you look to scripture, the hereafter is nigh. The Gospel of Matthew chapter twenty-four, verses forty-two to forty-four, Jesus tells his followers, watch therefore

for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come,
but know that if the goodman of the house
had known in what watch the thief would come, he
would
have watched, would not have suffered his house to be
broken up. Therefore be ye also ready,
for in such an hour as ye think not,
the Son of Man cometh. If you look to scripture,
the signs of tribulation, and now the hour is
late since Jesus ascended. At this watch
of the night, you can still be saved from eternal
damnation if Jesus does not yet live in your heart.
In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us
how easy it is to sign on the dotted line.
Verily I say unto you, he that heareth
my word and believeth on Him that sent me hath
an everlasting life and shall not come
into condemnation, but is passed from death
unto life. The Lord has purchased a house.
The Lord offers you a deed to eternal salvation.
The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans,
Paul is like your lawyer, you and Paul
sit at a table talking over this deed
you might sign, and Paul just whispers soft
in your ear, whosoever shall call upon
the name of the Lord shall be saved.
If you still have not been saved, or if you carry a burden
in your heart, come on up here to the altar and turn it
over
to Jesus. So many out there, Jee-sus, we know ya can see
em suffrin-a.

We're a-prayin to ya, Lord, put your healin hand on their hearts-a.

So when you come in glory, Lord, they don't burn in the pits of Hell-a.

We all got folks that need ya, Lord, we got wives and kids, dear Jee-sus, moms and dads in sin-a. They fit to feed the fires t' Hell-a!

6. On page three of their client's file Sister Ignatia records:

Contadino memorized Pigeon Hill's Fear Thy Neighbor diagrams. He stayed right with it after he snuck his first whiskey swill from Junior's bottle. Wanting to be better than Pigeon Hill had given him to be, still a dreamer of a station beyond his station, when police arrested him for smurfing, Judge Wylie sentenced Contadino to reform school at Camp Summit Boot Camp. As soon as he got out he got drunk. Temptation is the Devil's crowbar. Contadino overshot the whiskey drinking point where mind's recorder still hums. His drinking buddies pulled a prank and drove him out to the country. Like a dog unwanted they left him passed out in a farmhouse driveway on Mount Gilead Road. Thus Contadino came to know Farmer John Wyatt. Wyatt took stray Contadino in. Looked like the young man also needed a man to get him off the hill. Contadino started

to stop swilling whiskey, even attended service at Beanblossom Creek Baptist Church, repented him of the things he done. He planted a garden in the churchyard, gave the poor its produce. Contadino taught children Sunday School. Outer man made inner man seem justified of God. A redhot crowbar pried his guts. Contadino fought more the undertow. He said to Pastor Billy Robertson he had the feeling stronger the Lord was calling him to serve. If a man desire the office of preacher, quoth Contadino, he desireth a good work. Beanblossom Creek Baptist Church congregation granted Pastor Billy Robertson permission to convene an Ordination Council during Summer Revival Camp when preachers of note would be on hand to examine the elect: Pastor James Rainwater from Nashville, Indiana, Brother Mike Goodson traveled up from Georgia, the Reverends Virgil Graham and Bobby Brindle, "The World's Smallest Evangelist," from North Carolina.

Pastor Robertson assembled this council outside the churchhouse under the shadesome canopy of a stand of sycamores. Elbows in earnest atop folding tables, Contadino opposite sat in a chair, Beanblossom Creek Baptist Church congregation and preachers from nearby seated in rows behind the candidate. Pastor Robinson's daughter Leah could hardly breathe, so nervous for her Billy Jack, when Reverend Bobby Brindle asked right off

Contadino to tell how he got saved.

7. Contadino preaches the parable “Apprentice And Ghost.”

John Wyatt taught me it if I do better than fold my face
away when awe drives home its dreadful point. To tell
the truth,
I drank too much the day authorities released me from
Camp Summit
Boot Camp. These fellas I was with played a dirty trick,
drove me out
to the country, dumped me on the side of Mount Gilead
Road,
like the unwanted runt of the litter. I woke leant against
a tree,
head in my hands. What always weakens my resolve to
be
a better man? What weakness eats away my will to walk
into the flood when wonder whelms me over? Just
blanks, no answers,
head in my hands. Wyatt startled me something fierce
when he kicked
my shoe with the toe of his boot. Well, I just went ahead
and asked him
my questions. He told me come help him fill the water
troughs
in his pig paddock, then we would breakfast on
buttermilk biscuits and gravy.
I sat in his farmhouse kitchen, when Wyatt stood a
broom against

a bookshelf and incanted *Asa NIsi MAsa*. That broom
came to life!
It hollered “Set me a task!” Wyatt sent it sweeping
floorboards
and knocking down cobwebs. When Wyatt incanted *Asa
NIsi MUSa*
that broom toppled against a bookshelf, lifeless like a
broom normally is,
then smacked the floor. I never saw anything like that.
Wyatt kept me
around as long as I promised I’d not drink or do them
drugs.
He applied his pneumatic cures. I started not to feel
always low.
I recovered health and found I had some wits. Wyatt
appointed
me his amanuensis. *The Art of Grammar*, the ancient
Alexandrian
manuscript had come into Wyatt’s possession through
descendants
of Gabriel Adam Sciberras from Malta, said to map out
offshoots
and taproot, Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Gospel of John, the
poetry of Blake.
Wyatt brought this manuscript over into English. I
typed out
Wyatt’s handwritten translations, performed farmhand
tasks as needed.
In return I got food and better. One day before he went
off
to help the neighbors deliver their Jersey heifer of her
calf,

for no reason I could see Wyatt told me fill a washtub
with pails of water fetched from Stephens Creek just
down the hill.

Wyatt left Blake's *Jerusalem* open at plate ninety-six,
a temptation. I meant well to think I'd try my luck with
broom

magic to get that washtub filled with water, meantime
taking

a turn at reading that Blake. I stood the broom against a
bookshelf

and chanted *Asa NIsi MAsa*. The walls of Wyatt's
farmhouse

shuddered. The animated broom hollered "Set me a
task!" I told it, "Fetch

water from Stephens Creek with that pail and fill this
metal washtub."

I sat in a chair with *Jerusalem* in my lap and studied the
words.

Albion said. O Lord what can I do, which mean to me
faith does not exclude despair. Does fireless faith
weaken my sense

of loss for moments of beholding, make me fold away
my face when awe drives home its dreadful point? I

studied the words.

I see thee in the likeness & similitude of Los my Friend,
which means to me that God is a maker who labors as at
a forge.

Every kindness to another is a little Death

In the Divine Image, which means dispose of me wholly
according

to your will. I meditated on these words until I

noticed water on the floor creeping toward Wyatt's
bookshelves.

That demon broom overdid its task. The washtub was
overflowing.

When I said *Asa NIsi MUSa* the demon broom worked
faster.

Asa NIsi MUSa Asa NIsi MUSa, but it kept
hauling bucket after bucket of water, water rising
to the lowest shelf of leatherbound books—which did
not surprise

John Wyatt when he returned. The broom magic and
apparently
pointless task turned out to be equipment for him to
school me.

Wyatt told me walk straight into wonder's flood. "Turn
your face

firstwise into awe's driven point. Grieve for nothing
more than you grieve

for moments of beholding lost. You do not master
charm

and countercharm like a diagram. You preach your
words with heartfire.

Spirit understands nonsense *abracadabra* spoken with
heartfire."

"*Abracadabra!*" he said. The demon broom went lifeless,
toppled

against a bookshelf, and smacked the floor. That's how
Wyatt taught me preaching.

8. On page three of their client's file Sister Ignatia
further records:

Pastor Robertson feared Contadino's witness
had more magic than Jesus. His congregation
voted Contadino candidate
for ordination, now Contadino has gone
and too much mixed his preaching voice and book
voice,
like he told Billy be careful not to do.
Pastor Robertson needed to save face.

9. Contadino's Q&A with the ordination council.

PASTOR ROBERTSON

Brother William, what has haunted brooms
and poetry got to do with becoming Christian
and preaching the Holy Word of our Lord Jesus?

CONTADINO

As the apostle Paul writes, I am a debtor
to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise
and to the unwise. I cannot know the ways
of Grace that ran my path to Jesus through Wyatt's
farmhouse, but I'd be lying to deny it.

BROTHER MIKE GOODSON

A preacher's got to know his scripture inside
out. How have you prepared to spread the Gospel?

CONTADINO

Scripture says in Joshua, this Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth. I followed scripture by secluding myself for months in a cellar where was no one to bother my Bible studying or hear me practice preaching. I meditated therein day and night. I put a handful of stones in my mouth and spoke. I

strengthened

my voice's muscle. In this way I didst observe to do according to what is writ therein. I didst observe through a cellar window of Wyatt's farmhouse tulip scapes shove through mulch and brandish their neoprene tepals, the glory

of an experiment when I chanced to plant the dormant hope of twelve tulip bulbs. I took my declamations abroad. The forests learned of woe and bright austerity, but no word of the Book of the Law departed from my mouth to human ears until Grace manifested me ready to give my first message at Easter Sunday service.

BROTHER VIRGIL GRAHAM

Time's standard takes time to reach. When that time comes,

has one arrived or begun? How do you discern whether you are ready to continue preparation or ready to be ordained?

CONTADINO

I am no novice and will not be lifted up
with pride, will not fall into condemnation
of the Devil. I have defied the human
wheel that verges toward comfort's ruts by design.
I abide and grant that ministry will subdivide
me once again, grind me into infinitely
dust and blown between the lyre's close strings.
As scripture says, for then thou shalt make thy way
prosperous and then thou shalt have good success.

PASTOR JAMES H. RAINWATER

Brother William, you have a hard past, alcohol
and drugs. You served a sentence in reform school.
Are your sinful ways now truly behind you?

CONTADINO

As the apostle Paul says, I can do
all things through our savior Jesus which strengtheneth.
Jesus tells Thomas I am the way, the truth, the life.
No man cometh unto the Father but by me.
I have drunk no whiskey since I got saved.
I am not conformed to this world, but transformed.
Jesus renewed my mind that I may be
a demonstration of that good, acceptable,
and perfect will of God. I present my person
as a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable
unto God—which shall be my reasonable service.
I have witnessed to my sinful past.
As scripture says, in nothing shall I be ashamed,

but with all boldness, as always, so now also
Jesus shall be magnified in my body.

10. On page four of their client's file Sister Ignatia
further records:

The Ordination Council deemed Contadino's
calling from the Lord true, if strange, recommended
his ordination to the congregation.

Rumor ran Pastor Robertson's daughter Leah
was with child—which as generally assumed hastened
Contadino's route to respectability.

But Leah, Contadino's short-term wife,
The Jackson 5 and John Cougar Mellencamp
on her radio, learns how the Contadino
road goes nowhere else, just down and down.

Doing the Lindy Hop

By Rob Armstrong

“Is this your first time babysitting a ghastly ghostie?” said Alfie.

“Yes,” George said, “although I’d rather not be here at all. But apparently, I can’t keep coming to your meetings.”

George Pickett was an adjunct professor of folklore who was conducting background research on ghost hunters for his upcoming book on supernatural tales. The mantra of his department at the University was *you publish, or you don’t eat*. He was accordingly forced to write another volume in an established nonfiction series; this time, the topic was ghosts and legends. George preferred to focus on the under-recognized histories of actual people, not bump-in-the-night yarns. And yet here he was, in the uptight and affluent town of Bryn Mawr, hunting for hauntings with his much younger companion.

Alfie struck the lion-headed knocker against the oak door. “Who says? Malcolm, our bloviating president?”

Before George could answer, the door to the arts and crafts style mansion swung open. A woman greeted them with a pinched smile. “You must be the investigators from the Philadelphia Ghost Society?”

“I’m not.” George jerked his thumb at Alfie. “But he is.”

Alfie extended his hand. “Ignore the grumpy scholar. I’m Alfie Singler. We spoke about your banshee on the phone.”

The woman nodded. “Thanks for coming. To be honest, I’m not too happy to be doing any of this. But my brother and sister won’t allow the house to be put up for sale without understanding why there’s been bedlam every night since our father died, and until then, I’m stuck with this mess. It’s been weeks of chaos. My siblings live in California, where there’s more tolerance for talk of ghosts and empathy for would-be buyers. If it were up to me, it would be caveat emptor. I want this albatross of a house out of my life. I never liked it much when I lived here as a little girl. I always felt a nameless sense of doom here.”

“Not everybody believes in ghosts. In fact, half our membership doesn’t. But they do like to talk about ghost stories. We drink lots of beer at our meetings, which might explain why the two sides can mingle so sociably.” Alfie smiled.

“I don’t think Ms. Hoffman is very interested in the Philadelphia Ghost Society or its drinking rituals,” George interjected. “We should let her go on about her evening.”

“We’ll take it from here, Ms. Hoffman. My colleague and I will prepare a report and make recommendations,” Alfie said.

Ms. Hoffman collected her jacket as George and Alfie walked into the main hall. “And this won’t cost anything, right?” she said.

“No charge from us, ever. The beneficence of our founder, the railroad magnate Titus Bennington, has ensured that the Philadelphia Ghost Society has been fully funded since its inception in 1870.”

“Well, I’ll be at my house, which isn’t far away. Call

me if you need to.” Ms. Hoffman looked outside at the evening sky. “I’ve been slowly packing up my father’s things, but I don’t stay here after dark anymore. If you want my opinion, all this ghost stuff is a hoax—probably the work of that developer I told you about, John Crawford. He wants to buy this house on the cheap and tear it down to build lots of smaller homes.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve seen an unscrupulous real estate type pull something like that. We’ll get to the bottom of it,” Alfie said, closing the door behind her.

George looked around the house. The large expanse of rooms was a cluttered tableau of moving boxes, old-fashioned furniture from the seventies, stacks of books, fine art, and bric-a-brac from a lifetime spent vacationing around the world. He knew that Ms. Hoffman’s father, Albert, had been a prominent lawyer who had devoted much of his time—more still in his later years—to pro bono work that benefited those without access to competent legal services. Family photos revealed a life of upper-class suburban tranquility, complete with an extended family photo in Cape Cod. Albert had seemed to be a doting father of a loving family while he had his health. In his final years, he began to use a wheelchair. George briefly wondered why Ms. Hoffman had disliked growing up in the house, then chalked her feelings up to teenage angst.

A box in Albert’s office contained family Judaica—menorahs, a tallit, kippahs, silver art, and a chai pendant. A silver-framed photo of Albert’s wife, who had died of ovarian cancer five years earlier, was nestled at the bottom. George’s attention was drawn to the antique

mantel clock above the fireplace as it struck eight. Beneath the clock, on the oak floor, were piles of broken china. It seemed to George that several plates had been thrown against the wall.

George chuckled before calling out to Alfie. “It seems that Ms. Hoffman is smashing plates she doesn’t like against the wall. I guess she’s working out that doom and gloom feeling she had as a kid.”

Alfie entered the room, nibbling on a cereal bar. “Could be our ghost tipped them off the mantel as a sign of its unhappiness.”

“Or maybe the plates slid off accidentally during her rush to pack up the house and get it ready for sale,” George said. “Have you really witnessed any ghost activity on one of these haunted sleepovers? Be honest.”

“Not in a big way. I’ve heard some clanging of metal and a few moans. Nothing spectacular. But I’ve only been in the Society for a few years. The older members have better stories.”

“So you think ghosts exist because you’ve heard the rustle of wind through eaves and the ruminations of old steam pipes?”

“Don’t be such a killjoy, George. Regular people like me can believe in ghosts. Besides, being a paranormal investigator as a hobby is more fulfilling than playing online games and working at a pet store. Open yourself up to the mysteries of the universe. I don’t expect to see a firework display of spectral energy like in the movies. Ghosts are more subtle in reality.”

Without warning, a sound pierced the stillness. It was a wail, a mournful and eerie cry that seemed to emanate from the walls. The howl was full of pain and sorrow, as

though somebody had been doused with gasoline and set ablaze. The volume of the lingering scream intensified until it seemed to shake the entire house. Then it stopped.

“Holy WTF, George. That banshee ghost must be royally pissed. Let Malcolm come by himself and figure this out. Maybe Ms. Hoffman’s dad made a pact with the devil or something. Staying any longer ain’t worth it. The whole place is cursed to its foundations. Let’s get out of here,” Alfie pleaded.

George’s heart was racing, but he forced himself to think rationally. “Don’t let your imagination get the best of you, Alfie. Ms. Hoffman gave us a bit of a clue when she told us about that pushy developer, Crawford. I suspect that Crawford might have placed hidden wireless speakers around the house and let the holy hell sounds rip when Ms. Hoffman was packing at night. And when she’s not around, he tosses china and crockery about to make it seem like a poltergeist is wreaking havoc.”

“Poltergeist? Don’t you mean banshee?” Alfie said.

“A banshee is a female spirit from Irish folklore who screams to foretell the death of a family member. They don’t hurl objects like poltergeists do. Besides, the Hoffmans are Jewish, so no banshees.”

“Does this mean you believe in ghosts now?” Alfie said.

“No, I was making a scholarly comment about your definitions. Doesn’t the Philadelphia Ghost Society have a handbook or a manual about this stuff?” George said. “Come on—help me find the hidden speakers that made that loud scream.”

The pair searched the office walls, tapping the wood paneling for evidence of hidden spaces. After a few minutes, George's rapping knuckles produced a hollow sound. "Alfie, please grab a screwdriver from the toolbox by the steps. I saw it earlier."

George pried open a small section of paneling to reveal a recess about the size of a small locker at a bus station. Alfie pointed the light of his phone to illuminate aged papers and a metal box with a tarnished silver Nazi swastika on its lid.

"Not a good discovery, Alfie. Very sad. A prior owner of the house must have been a Nazi sympathizer during World War II. All sorts of crazy stuff's been found in the walls of old houses. Like witch bottles, in seventeenth-century homes in Greenwich—bottles filled with urine, hair, nail clippings, and red thread. They were used to counteract curses."

"A witch bottle's better than this junk, in my book," Alfie said.

George agreed. He quickly skimmed the papers. "It appears that the prior owner, Manfred Weber, was a member of the Philadelphia branch of a German American bund formed in the late 1930s. A bund consisted of American citizens of German descent who wanted to promote a favorable view of Nazi Germany. A subgroup of these people, like this Weber guy, joined militia-type groups called Kyffhäuserbund, who readied for armed resistance by practicing with rifles and pistols in the far suburbs of Philadelphia. I've read about these groups before. The House Un-American Activities Committee report has a section on pro-Nazi activities in Philadelphia before the war."

“Insane to think that hate was growing here in Philly,” Alfie said. “What’s in the box?”

George lifted the lid to expose a rusted Walther P38 pistol. Beneath was a stack of black-and-white photos of various events around Philadelphia, where the local bund had marched and promoted Nazi ideals. The last image startled George. It was a picture of Charles Lindbergh and another dark-haired man, both smiling broadly and standing on a stage with a large crowd gathered behind them. On the back of the photo, written in dark, faded ink, were the words *Me and Lucky Lindy—Philadelphia Speech—May 29, 1941.*

“Who are those dudes?” Alfie said.

“Charles Lindbergh and Manfred Weber. This was almost certainly the day Lindbergh delivered his infamous anti-Semitic speech opposing American involvement in the war.”

“Who’s Lindbergh?”

George glanced at the millennial and gasped incredulously. “He was a famous American aviator—the first to fly solo across the Atlantic.”

“Doesn’t seem like a big deal to me. The airplane did all the work.”

George laughed. “Looking at it through your eyes, I guess it’s more akin to a record-breaking NASCAR race.”

Suddenly, Alfie leaped forward and pulled George down toward the floor, sending the metal box and photos flying. Before George could utter a complaint, a barrage of china, glassware, and vases hurtled over their heads. An explosion of sharp-edged pieces fell on them, cutting the skin on their hands and faces.

“That was thrown from the main hall. We gotta move.” Alfie dragged George to his feet and guided the folklore historian to the rear staircase of the house.

“Who’s there? Throwing stuff?” George huffed as he scrambled up the stairs to the second floor.

“The Nazi ghost of Manfred Weber. I saw a skinny bald dude covered in dirt and mud,” Alfie said.

George stared at him. “Are you nuts?”

Both men were lying on the floor of a landing that overlooked the main hall. “After being attacked like that, you’ve got to believe in ghosts now. Look for yourself. He’s right stinking there!” Alfie rose and pointed his finger.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts! It’s an actor of some sort. I’m calling the police.”

George peered out from between the banister rails. Beneath the glow of the crystal chandelier in the hallway, he saw the luminous figure of a man emitting a grayish light. Just as Alfie had described him, the figure appeared to be the same person who stood next to Lindbergh in the photograph, except now Weber was bald, as though his head had been shaved for military duty. Grime covered what appeared to be dark slacks and a brown shirt. His red armband, emblazoned with a swastika, was torn and frayed. Weber spotted George, reached down into the nearby toolbox, picked up the hammer, and began to walk toward the stairs.

Alfie grabbed his phone to call emergency services, only to find it was dead. He showed George the black screen. “It’s toast. I saw a movie where the ghost sent out electromagnetic pulses that killed all the electronics.”

“You rube, that was just a plot device to ramp up the

tension by isolating the characters. You've been using it all day, and it hasn't been charged; that's probably why it's dead. You twenty-somethings incessantly click away on your phones. Let me check mine—I hate the thing and barely use it.”

George reached into his pocket for his phone as he said, “Enough of these theatrical scare tactics! I'm calling the police. This is your chance to run for it, buddy.”

But George's phone was dead as well. He cursed and threw his phone at their attacker, who stood at the top of the stairs. The phone passed through the spectral form, smashing against the stone of the entryway seconds later.

George's heart and head pounded from a rush of adrenaline. He stumbled to his feet and staggered into a nearby bedroom. Alfie followed, slamming the door shut behind him. The young man fumbled for a moment before sliding a deadbolt into place.

The terror of the moment caused the adjunct professor's mind to be plunged into a panic state of mindless flight. Across the bedroom, he saw an orange curtain crisscrossed with yellow tape. *Thank God*, he thought, *a way out*. He ran headlong, screaming for Alfie to follow.

“Don't, George! Stop—you'll die!” Alfie had spotted what George had failed to see above the orange construction curtain: a handmade sign reading *WARNING: ONGOING REPAIRS—OPEN ELEVATOR SHAFT*.

George pulled the curtain aside, only to be faced with blackness as dark as anything he had ever seen. Behind

him, the door to the bedroom exploded inward, sending splinters of wooden pieces across the room. George turned to see the ghost of Manfred Weber, who appeared to be a receptacle of pure hate. There was no doubt in George's mind that they were less than a minute away from death by bludgeoning hammer.

In a booming cadence, the ghost of Weber spat out its words. "How dare you defile my space and release my secrets. *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer!*"

Alfie cowered in the corner, his arms shielding his lowered head from having to see any more. George, lost for words, stumbled reflexively backward and away from the danger of Weber's approach, and then fell into the blackness of the elevator shaft.

George Pickett fell for a few seconds before he was caught. He felt gentle arms hold him in place for a few seconds before his body began to rise. Then, once again, George was in the bedroom. He could see the demonic force of Weber standing over Alfie—hammer raised, muttering in German.

A voice whispered in George's ear. "Burn the Lindbergh picture, and then we can do the Lindy Hop. I want my daughter to no longer feel the presence of evil in this house."

George saw the ghost of Albert Hoffman standing above him.

Manfred Weber hissed at Albert's ghost. "You can't drive me out of this house, son of Jacob. I will torment you forever."

Without speaking a word, Albert embraced Weber and dragged him out into the hallway. After a few moments of struggle, the pair of ghosts tumbled over

the railing into the foyer on the first floor. George could still hear the sounds of their desperate battle. He was dismayed at the idea that Albert might be fighting a Nazi for all eternity. *Poor Albert*, George thought, *he'll be doomed if we don't help him.*

George put out a hand to help Alfie up from the floor. “Quick, we’ve got to burn that picture from the Philadelphia speech. Weber couldn’t let go of the hate he felt in life. That picture captures the moment when his hate condemned him to hell—it’s binding him to the house. Weber’s evil spirit must have emerged from its slumber once Albert’s ghost appeared, and Albert’s intent on casting the Nazi out to protect his daughter and her peace of mind.”

Alfie and George used the back stairway to re-enter Albert’s office, careful to avoid being spotted by Weber, who continued to grapple with Alfred mere yards away in a spectral cage match. George scooped up the Lindbergh picture from the floor and dashed toward the kitchen at the rear of the house.

George tossed the picture on the largest stove burner and twisted the knob through the ignition spark toward full gas. Instantly, the center of the image melted. For a brief moment, George saw Lindbergh’s pearly white teeth swallow Manfred Weber’s features. Then the whole picture turned black, and then to smoke.

The house fell uncomfortably silent. The ghosts were gone—to where, George had no idea.

Alfie fumbled in the refrigerator and took out a couple of beers. He handed one to George. “There’s no way you don’t believe in ghosts anymore, so I’m not going to ask.”

George clinked Alfie's beer against his own and drank. "I think I'll join the Philadelphia Ghost Society as an official member after my book is finished. Nobody in the world but you wackadoodles would believe this ever happened. I'll be a secret member, of course."

Alfie nodded. "Our encounter beats all the other ghost stories in the Society by leaps and bounds. I can't wait to tell everybody at next month's meeting. Of course, with you being an academic, you can help write down all of our past and future stories and create that handbook you mentioned earlier."

"Why not?" George laughed.

During the silence that followed between them, each tried to calm their racing thoughts. Alfie considered buying a parrot. George, for his part, liked the notion that Albert Hoffman was doing the Lindy Hop with his wife in heaven. It sure was a swell swing dance.

Burnt Popcorn and Marijuana

By Matthew Wherttam

Tommy James and the Shondells are an American rock band that formed in Michigan in 1964 and had one certified gold record single. Tommy James collapsed from drugs coming off stage after a concert in Alabama and was pronounced dead. But as Wikipedia puts it, “he was not dead ... and decided to move to the country to rest and recuperate...”

We all need to rest and recuperate.

Tommy James and what was left of his Shondells were giving a free concert Friday afternoon and evening at the PNC Bank Arts Center and because the highways in that part of northern New Jersey are always clotted at that time, Ruben and his wife arrived long after the gates had opened. The best seats in the bowels of the Arts Center’s amphitheater were gone. What Ruben and his wife got instead were outer seats just where the partial roof of the amphitheater ended and open sky began. Off-white cement surrounded those seats which were not hard, but also not plush. They did not have to be plush. Tommy James and his Shondells were not going to be putting on an opera.

Folks were still arriving, but not in droves and all the remaining seats and the grassy field beyond them were never going to be filled. Tommy James and his Shondells are a draw, but not an outstandingly sensational draw, even when they are appearing for free.

All that off-white cement may have been

preventing everything from caving in, but it had not been arranged in an attractive way. Still, the weather was perfect and while the people who had arrived were old, wrinkled and gray, they wore beads and bell bottoms and torn T-shirts printed with rainbows and peace symbols. Burnt popcorn, perfume, deodorant and marijuana filled the air, but they did not put a dent in that splendid afternoon. Fresh breezes were blowing in and even if there had been no such breezes and the other odors had gained in strength and become noxious, the marijuana, at least, was meant to be there. It went with the beads, bell bottoms and torn T-shirts.

That well worn but carefree disc jockey, Cousin Brucie, emerged. He was to be the master of ceremonies. He was only a dot on the distant stage below and not much more than that on the huge, silver projection screen overhead. He talked in a voice that was husky to start with and was not being helped much by the Arts Center's doubtful sound system. Decades earlier his voice had also not been helped much by Ruben's uncertain transistor radio. But what Brucie had said back then and what he was saying now was friendly sounding, an indistinct but pleasant puddle of noise; and whenever that puddle would congeal into words, Ruben would hear him saying that rock n' roll music *was* the greatest, *is* the greatest, and *would forever be* the greatest. And Cousin Brucie used that word "cousins" a lot. Apparently everyone in the audience was his cousin.

The oversized amplifiers on that stage were distant, makeshift tombstones – tombstones that were infested with other dots that had to be sound technicians. After a time, those dots retreated, and the dot that remained,

the dot that was Cousin Brucie, grew more urgent. And finally, some new dots that were Tommy James and his Shondells wobbled into view and the audience burst into a roar.

Tommy James then began saying things which were also blurry but which excited that crowd into more raucous cheering. They were cheering their hero. And they were also cheering themselves for being smart enough to have him as their hero and for being lucky enough to be getting him for free. That cheering washed back and forth across the amphitheater. And, to be fair, Tommy James had done nothing really wrong so far. Then he brought his microphone too near to the microphone that was in front of his Shondells and there was an explosion of feedback that ripped that crowd into silence. And when Tommy James then told everyone that they had no reason to be upset about this, that they were getting what they had paid for, that crowd responded with still more ferocious cheering.

Finally, he and what was left of his Shondells began playing and, quite remarkably, the noise they made coagulated into one of their hit songs. And when the breeze was right, Ruben heard a lot of that song. And when it was wrong, he heard only the beating of the drummer.

Ruben's seat felt uneven and bumpy. And the hot dog he bought was leathery and salty and not all that hot. But the gratitude of that crowd was intense. They were singing and clapping and stomping their feet.

"You like this, don't you?" asked Ruben's wife.

He must have been frowning.

"It really *is* Tommy James," she continued.

“I guess,” he answered.

“Well, you’re not going to ruin things for me.”

And by now, even more marijuana and burnt popcorn were in the air.

Marijuana!

Back in the sixties it had been right. The music had been right. The beads, bell bottoms, and torn T-shirts had been right. And the war in Vietnam had been wrong. But time softens most things and that war was now gone, replaced by smaller wars in other far away places – wars which will someday serve as kindling for a nuclear war.

Marijuana was still fun. But these days it was also medicinal and even legal in places; and also illegal, for example, when it was unlicensed and being sold on street corners. It was more potent than it had ever been; but most importantly, right now, it was all over that amphitheater.

Tommy James and his Shondells kept churning away, but how would they be making their concert last for very long when they only ever had come out with three or four good songs? The answer was that they would play each of their good songs for a long time, and then be doing the same for each of their bad songs, and then they would be returning to their good songs; and all along the way, they would be having guests – special, surprise, musical guests. Gary U.S. Bonds. Blood, Sweat & Tears. Earth, Wind & Fire.

But the real answer was that Tommy James and his Shondells could do whatever they wanted to do for as long as they wanted. They were where the folks in that crowd wanted them to be. And the burnt popcorn

was now in fiercer battle with the marijuana.

When the best surprise guest of all, Joan Jett, took the stage, she dazzled the people even though to many of them she was also no more than a dot. And she dazzled them even though she was without any of her Blackhearts and even though she would not sing “I Love Rock n’ Roll”, a song she must have reserved for when she had her Blackhearts with her and when she was getting paid, or at least getting paid more than she was getting paid for this brief, surprise, but special guest appearance. Her voice and music were garbled but it was all good. She was a surly and unrepentant dot.

“You like Joan Jett,” Ruben’s wife said.

He must have been frowning again.

“You *do* like her,” she insisted. “And you *were* a hippie back then.”

“I was *never* a hippie. I had a crew cut and lots of acne and I was *for* the war.”

* * *

The sky was now a deeper blue; turning into a perfect summer night. A really good rest of the summer might be on the way. The evening star appeared. And the sun and the evening star were heading toward the horizon. The moon was pale, mysterious and genial. It was drifting, but since there were no clouds up there along with it, it was drifting nowhere. It was watery in that cloudless sky. Earlier that day Ruben had not seen it rise. A lot of people had not seen it rise. It was a thing which was suddenly just up there. A surprise without a bang, but a surprise, nevertheless. Mostly white. Splattered with light gray here and there. Cratered. But only through binoculars. Almost close enough to touch.

And, they said, we had touched it back in 1969, the year of Woodstock.

Then Tommy James and his Shondells stopped playing and departed. It was intermission. But Cousin Bruce was still talking. He was saying all over again how great rock n' roll *had been, is, and would always be*. And he was also telling his "cousins" that now would be a good time for them to go to the bathroom.

"I'm going," Ruben's wife said. "Watch my handbag."

"You're a hippie," he said. "And hippies don't usually have handbags."

"I'm not a hippie now and I was not much of one back then. And a lot of the women in this crowd were never hippies. They're just pretending to be ones for this concert.

"And many of them were neither for the war nor against it. They weren't being drafted. They weren't thinking about the war. And even if they had been, they are done with all that now.

"These days they have handbags. They all have handbags. And lots of them have lots of money in those handbags. And some of them had lots of money back then, even if they lacked handbags. And those of them who did not have lots of money had parents who had lots of money. And by now their parents are dead or are gonna' be dead soon. And in any case those of their parents who are still around don't remember whether their children were hippies back then and they surely don't care now.

"And, Ruben, if we had gotten into the car when I said we should have, we would have gotten better seats."

“Didn’t you say you were going to the bathroom?” asked Ruben.

“Yes. And after I get back I’ll watch my own handbag.”

And then she was gone.

Cousin Brucie disappeared and now there was only one dot wandering around on that distant stage, apparently looking at all the amplifiers, and then wandering off, and then wandering back on and looking at them some more. If that dot had been a doctor and those amplifiers had been his patients, he would have seen that his patients were quite ill and were never going to be getting better.

Cousin Brucie then reappeared and began making more husky and pleasant-sounding noises, and lots of people were now returning from those bathrooms. Streams of them. There had been many more people at Woodstock, but not enough bathrooms.

Brucie was really going strong and Ruben could actually hear what he was saying now and then. He was saying that the *memories* were the greatest, the *memories* would always be the greatest, and the *memories* would last forever. And in the middle of those superlatives and eternities, Tommy James and his Shondells reemerged. They had not made any great music so far and it was unlikely that they were going to be making any the rest of that day.

Ruben’s wife returned, the band started playing again, and he got up and began heading toward those bathrooms. The sounds coming from Tommy James and his Shondells and that crowd were now coming from behind him, and were bothering him less the

further he got away from them. The sun and the evening star had set. The more-than-pleasant moon was still higher in the sky, surrounded by twinkling stars and a steady, pink dot that had to be Mars. Unfortunately, the seats in that amphitheater were arranged in impossibly serpentine paths downward and it was only after he was done with those bathrooms and was heading back toward his wife, that he realized he couldn't remember his section and seat numbers and hadn't written them down and that without those, all the ushers in the world wouldn't be able to lead him back to where he had been. A cell phone call to his wife would have been pointless with all the noise everyone was making. So Ruben slowed down.

Now and then, the crowd would outroar the music.

Do crowds usually outroar whatever they have gathered for? Or is it the other way around? Crowds often don't know how loud they can roar until they really try. And when they get loud, crowds can sometimes scare themselves. Once, long ago, at the old Yankee Stadium, right after an easy fly ball popped into and then out of a Yankee outfielder's glove, 60,000 fans groaned all at once and that had scared the hell out of Ruben. And when crowds are outraged, they will get louder still and sometimes they'll do more than make noise. During World War II, in the Pacific, and, more specifically, in a stadium in Australia, an unartfully fixed horse race caused the crowd there to burn the whole place down. That had scared more than hell out of Ruben's father.

And crowds can even blast people who have left an arena but have not gotten quite far enough away from it.

Long ago, on a hot summer afternoon, a packed crowd which had included Ruben and his little brothers and their father was watching track and field in the stadium at Randall's Island. And when the huge heat of that day finally defeated Ruben and his brothers and father, and after they had left that stadium and were somewhere in a huge parking lot looking for their car, that crowd let out its most humongous roar of that day. John Pennel had just broken the world's record in the pole vault on his third and final attempt. That's what everyone in that stadium had been waiting for all day. And that was what Ruben and his brothers and his father had almost gotten to see.

* * *

Meanwhile, back in northern New Jersey, Ruben had slowed down still more and then made it to the grass just outside of the amphitheater, and then stopped and sat down. It was cool, soft and enjoyable grass, and he was now under a spectacular night sky, and it was then that the rest of his body began thinking in place of his brain and it was then that the rest of his body determined that he was going to be staying on this particular patch of grass until this particular concert was over and done with.

He kept his eyes upwards on the bright, beautiful and floating moon and on all the stars around it, and on the pink dot that was Mars. Tommy James and his Shondells and Cousin Brucie were no longer bothering him very much. After a time, Tommy James and his Shondells stopped making noise and shortly after that, Cousin Brucie stopped making noise, too. Then all that was left was the steady, annoying sound of canned

music. And all those really old people in that amphitheater began getting up and struggling their way out of that huge bowl of seats. Some of them were still singing. Some were drinking beer out of cups and cans and bottles. And some were still smoking marijuana. But there was no more burnt popcorn.

Folks were talking to each other or were on their cell phones talking to their sons and daughters, telling them when they expected to be home. Back many years ago at Woodstock they had not told their parents when they would be getting home or even exactly where they were. They didn't know or didn't care. And because there were no cell phones back then even if they had wanted to talk to their parents, phone booths had been so few and so far, far away.

Ruben looked more closely at these people. A number of them had canes. A few of them even had walkers. Walkers! Where had those walkers been all this time? Ruben hadn't seen them until now. Were they foldable? Were they so foldable that they could be fit into a handbag or a purse or a wallet? And was it only just now that they had been unfolded and deployed?

Ruben squinted at the exits leading to the many parking lots. His wife had to be heading toward one of them. Maybe he would be able to see her. Or maybe now because there was less noise he could reach her on his cell phone.

A lot of these folks were having trouble walking. In addition to being old, they were carrying too many things – picnic bags, water bottles, big foam hands with big foam pointing fingers. Things that were not foldable at all. And they were scraping some of those things

along the paths leading out, paths that were covered with gravel.

These days he had trouble walking, too. There was something wrong with his eyes. They would no longer cooperate with each other. It was an incurable medical condition. Diplopia. Partial paralysis of something in his skull. Paresis of a nerve attached to a muscle that was attached, in turn, to his right eyeball. Even through his glasses which held tons of prism, he would see double and lose his perspective and have trouble finding the next step up or down. He was absolutely one of these many struggling old people that he was watching now. But since he was not walking with them he did not have to focus on not falling down. Instead, he could think about this concert and also about what Cousin Brucie had said.

He had said the *memories* would last forever. But the memories – at least the memories of this concert – would be gone when these people were gone. Dead and gone. What would be left of rock n’ roll then? What would be left of this concert? Anything at all?

Well, light from this concert had begun bouncing out into the sky three or so hours ago. Bouncing out toward the stars above. Waves of it. A lot of it was being scattered, absorbed, drowned out by the sun, reflected or blocked. But some of it was getting through. And some of it was even carrying images of Tommy James, his Shondells, Cousin Brucie and this crowd. But those images, too, were spreading out and blurring and after enough time had passed – billions and billions of years – they would flatten out altogether and not be images after that. Yet billions and billions of years are *almost* the same

as forever. So, those images would be living for a long time. Living and dying for a long time.

Front Porch Apocalypse

By D.W. Davis

Dillon sipped a Bud Lite. Crawford nursed a near-beer. They shared the cooler between them, each other's drinks separated by a wall of ice. The wooden chairs creaked beneath them even when they made no movement. Neither could remember how long Dillon had owned the chairs, though both agreed his second wife had bought them.

"It all started going to shit," Dillon said, "when they started putting feathers on dinosaurs. You can tell me they changed into birds all you want, but don't put feathers on 'em. Ain't right."

Crawford belched. "What about Pluto?"

"Shit. I forgot about Pluto."

"Exactly."

"You can't just rewrite history. You can't just change what kids learned in school. Teach 'em something different, sure. But you're gonna tell me what I learned, what my *teachers* learned, wasn't true? That's...what's the word? Rockwellian?"

"Sure."

"Ain't right."

"It ain't."

A stiff warm autumn breeze drifted across the porch, rattling the hummingbird windchimes set up by Dillon's fourth and most recent spouse, passed now these eight months. The house had fallen apart in her absence, but Dillon didn't care, and Crawford couldn't complain. His own and only wife had been gone five

years, and neither of them had been much for housekeeping. Crawford could replace the dining room window after the tornado of '21, but he couldn't mop a floor for the life of him.

He swished some more of the fake beverage in his mouth. He'd been tempted for the real thing, but resistance had become habit, and he'd settled for silver even now that it didn't seem to matter. A man became used to things, he'd learned. All sorts of things.

"Michael called today," Dillon said.

Crawford huffed, then realized that may not be enough of a response. "What'd he want?"

"Nothing. Didn't have anything important to say, either."

"Least he's not asking for money."

"Yeah. Least that."

A bird called from the trees nearby. Bluebird, maybe. Or a cardinal. Or sparrow. The evening was made for birdsong and fireflies, the faint smell of ragweed, wisps of bullet-gray clouds in a grapefruit sky. An evening for reflection and contemplation as much as dissolution, of losing yourself in the moment and simply being. Drift off against the whir of the window a/c unit, feeling the sun on your skin and the breeze across your brow. Crawford had relished evenings such as this his entire life, and not even the weight of the incumbent reality could deprive him of this last pleasure.

"I just don't know how they can go on," Dillon said. He spoke softly, reverently. His voice barely carried through the space between them.

"I don't think they can," Crawford said. He sought to add something else, but found the words too heavy.

He'd had years to reckon with this, the end of it all, but could think of no way to describe it, quantify or catalogue it. Trying to do so left him helpless.

"At least the sun's still settin' right," Dillon said. "They can't change that."

Crawford nodded. "They can't."

Dillon popped another beer and said, "I think Michael's lonely. His wife leaving him like that."

"I always liked her."

"Me, too. I think he just wanted to talk to someone."

Crawford eyed the sunset, setting fire to the sky above the trees. "Can't blame him much."

"Didn't mention her, though."

If Linda were here, what would Crawford say to her? He couldn't think of a thing. They'd shared a comfortable silence, an empathetic understanding that what needed to be said couldn't always be said. He had only proposed out of formality; they had known they would spend their lives together. Except he, of course, still had some life left. In that scenario, who had cheated whom?

There was not one thing he missed about her above any other. She had been the total sum of her parts; all facets of her being had appealed to him at one time or another. He could not pin her down to one trait, to one quality. To do so would be judging a painting one dot at a time. Some would try, because they felt compelled to, but Crawford saw no point in attempting the impossible. You accept limitations and move on. You have to.

The bird called again, lilting and pleasant, oblivious. Crawford could not bring himself to be envious of a bird. He would not sink to that level, even now.

“Do you think this makes it all worthless?” Dillon asked. “Our lives.”

Crawford took another drink. Swirled it around in his mouth. He could almost pretend it was real. Could almost pretend it gave him some measure of comfort. He swallowed, and he thought maybe he should’ve tried to tidy up the house, then figured if it hadn’t mattered to him before, then it shouldn’t matter to him now.

“Nah,” he said, and gave a slow shake of his head. “Not worthless. Just...I don’t know. Inevitable, maybe.”

“That what that word means?”

Crawford grabbed another can from the cooler and popped the top.

“I suppose,” he said. Dillon grunted, and the two men drank and watched their world unfold.

Everybody's Somebody

By David Larsen

Drake Withers couldn't help but watch Rosalia, the dark-haired, long-legged waitress as she walked away from his booth; her narrow hips swayed like an old Hank William's song. How was it, he wondered, that he'd gotten so damned old while most folks in Dos Pesos stayed young, at least those who hadn't up and died on him? Like Evelyn had. Like he himself would, all too soon. Life, he grumbled, it ain't nothing but a pain in the ass. When you come right down to it, it ain't worth spit. And, today, he wasn't all that thrilled to be wasting his afternoon in a hot and dusty café as he waited for some shyster to show up and bullshit him, then try to finagle hard-earned money out of him.

The booth he'd chosen to sit in was too damned cramped, but he didn't like sitting at a table in the middle of the room, on display like some relic in a museum, an old-timer for know-it-all young folks to stare at. Look, but don't touch. His knees throbbed something awful; they had a way of rusting up when he sat too long. Hell, his brittle, withering body ached when he walked, when he sat, when he slept. At eighty-eight, he got by so-so, better than most, as long as no one minded his hobbling around on the confounded cane the doctor demanded that he use. Just so's he wouldn't lose his balance. At least his staff wasn't one of those metal pieces of crap old folks tottered around on, purchased at Walgreens in San Angelo or Ft. Stockton. Thanks to Ruben

Ochoa, the day worker who'd done some work for him at the ranch, Drake had a skillfully crafted cane, a beauty, an oak walking stick with a curved handle that offered more than a smidgen of dignity.

His hip ached something awful. It had been ten years since he'd been on a horse, but he had the twisted, arthritic body to prove he'd spent more than his share of time in a saddle. Unlike ranchers today, who blew off all of their hours gallivanting around in four-wheel-drive vehicles, sixty-thousand-dollar pickups, or SUVs, or whatever the heck they called those glorified station wagons that seemed to be the rage, all shiny and chromed up, Drake was of the old school, as young folks liked to say: he drove a rattly old pickup, lived on meat and potatoes, tipped his Stetson to the ladies and eyed the young ones.

Nowadays, even a sturdy Jeep was passe to those young hotshots. Hell, they didn't even have the decency to ramble around in something halfway manly. Drake's '48 Studebaker pickup, parked right out in front of the café, a V8 his father had passed down to him, suited him just fine. True, parts were hard to come by, but Pete Ramirez, right there in Dos Pesos, Texas, was a whiz when it came to old engines. Thank God, thought Drake, for competent old timers who know what the hell a carburetor is. Punks today don't know piss from lemonade when it comes to an engine. Electronic this, computerized that, and nothing works worth a damn.

Drake had made up his mind to sit by the window. That way he could watch what went on in town—not much—and get a good look at the young woman from San Antonio who'd called and said she needed to talk

with him. A lawyer. Damn it. Just what he didn't need, some hot-stuff attorney out to try to take something away from him and give it to someone else. She wouldn't be the first to try, and she probably wouldn't be the last. His father would've shown up with his Winchester. But not Drake. He no longer owned a weapon of any sort. It just didn't seem neighborly, nor efficient. His days of shooting at coyotes or javelinas were behind him. He no longer had the gumption to try to kill anything, definitely not anybody.

It was three-thirty, the lunch crowd had cleared out of the La Sombra Café. There were just three customers, Drake and two young women he'd never laid eyes on, in their whoop-de-do western shirts and tight Wranglers, fancy-dandy boots any horse with half a mind would snicker at. It was as plain as day that neither had ever stepped foot on a ranch. That was for sure. He looked out the window and gulped his Dr. Pepper. The waitress had left a glass with ice for him, but he preferred to swig his sodas straight from the bottle, like he used to drink his beer, back in his piss-and-vinegar days.

The jukebox garbled out a racket that sounded more like some varmint caught in a trap than a country song. Either the waitress or one of the two patrons in the fancy duds had selected some new-fangled hit, too complicated for Drake, with umpteen guitars, keyboards, synthesizers and a bass line far too complex for a respectable country song. The singer sang too high, as if his boxers were bunching up on him. The twang was there, but it sounded manufactured. In his day, it was Hank, or George Jones, or Bob Wills. Marty Robbins, for God's sake. Then there was Willie with his

syncopated rhythmic chords and solos, or Waylon, good God, Waylon Jennings, with that pounding beat and non-sense bass. Lyrics about cheatin', drinkin' and fallin' in love. That kind of music Drake could relate to. This new noise he just didn't get. On good days, Drake pulled out his old Stella guitar, action as high as overhead telephone lines, Black Diamond strings, thick as your finger. He still liked to strum and warble old songs as best he could. But only on those days when his hands weren't riddled with pain.

Old songs, he thought. They said something. About life and struggle. Hell, his own life had been plagued with enough agony and more than his share of irony: he courted and married the prettiest girl in the county, then Evelyn became disabled in a rollover between Dos Pesos and Ft. Stockton. Drake himself was born the son of a West Texas good old boy who had nothing but disdain for anyone, brown or black. Only white folks were somewhat tolerated. Yet Drake pretty much liked everyone in town. There weren't many songs about that sort of thing.

A gray sedan, most likely foreign, Texas plates, spit and polished, had driven past the La Sombra twice since he'd sat down. Sedans were an oddity in Dos Pesos, about as rare as zebras in Austin. Everyone craned their neck to see who was behind the wheel. Pickup trucks and those damned SUVs were the vehicles of choice. Every so often a tourist got the notion that it would be quaint to take Highway 1129 to Del Rio, just for a change of scenery. Drake suspected that the drivers of those stray cars were more often than not extremely disappointed by what they saw, or didn't see. The driver

of this sedan, a young woman with reddish hair, rubbernecked both times she passed the La Sombra; his Studebaker pickup seemed to be of particular interest. That damned lawyer, he thought. They all think they're so clever. She might just as well come on in and get it over with, whatever the hell it was that she needed to talk with him about.

Drake waited impatiently. His entire body was racked with life-earned pains, a spasm here, a jab there.

"Mr. Withers," said the bright-eyed thirty-something. Tastefully made up, dressed to the nines in a beige pantsuit and flat-heeled shoes—expensive, no doubt—she reached out her hand. Drake took it reluctantly. There was a time when women didn't shake hands with men. Back before there were female lawyers. "I'm Angie Melendez." She smiled, friendly as all get out.

Melendez. She didn't look Mexican. Not like the Mexicans in Dos Pesos, down-on-their-luck folks Drake got along with just fine. This woman looked prosperous. Hell, he preferred any Mexican lawyer to those yuppie landgrabbers from Austin, with their German cars and their trendy duds—a bunch of bastards out to grab up land they'll never put to good use. Give me a Mexican anytime, he used to tell Evelyn. A fella can trust 'em.

"And what is it I can do for you, Miz Melendez. You said on the phone that you're a lawyer." Drake paused and squinted at the attractive woman. "I should warn you that I don't hold lawyers in my prayers at night." He didn't hold *anyone* in his prayers; he was a skeptic by nature. No sanctimonious gobbledygook for

Drake Withers. He didn't put much faith in anything he couldn't get his grip on.

She smiled. "First, I must tell you, Mr. Withers, that you are one difficult man to get ahold of. I've called your phone several times and you never answer. And I couldn't find a cellphone listing for you."

"I've got no use for one of those damned cellphones...and I'm half deaf. I don't always hear the phone at my place." Drake chuckled. "When I watch a ballgame on TV, I've got to turn the volume up so damned loud that I can't hear much of anything else. Someone could come in and rob me blind, and I'd never even hear 'em." Like you're out to do, he thought.

The woman paused. She fidgeted in her seat. Finally, she said, "I've come to talk with you about Ida Ramos." She stared at Drake. "You do remember Ida Ramos, don't you?"

The old rancher ran the back of his weathered hand across the stubble on his chin. He hadn't shaved. He should have. He looked like some rube, instead of a man who could hold his own in any negotiation. So that's this lawyer's game, he thought. She thinks she can shake me down over *that* matter.

"I remember Ida," said Drake. "She used to work for us. She helped take care of my wife after her accident."

The lawyer blinked, gazed out the window, then turned back to Drake. After a heavy sigh, she said, "I see you're still driving that old truck. My mother told me about that truck. She said that you were too stubborn to buy a new one."

“Your mother?” Drake cleared his throat. “Ida’s your mother?”

“She is,” said the woman. Her eyes narrowed. “And from what she’s told me, you’re my father.”

Drake glared at her, then looked around the room. No one had better be listening to any of this. He grimaced. “I don’t think I’ve got any idea what it is you’re talking about.”

She smiled. “I suspect you do, Mr. Withers.”

“Why don’t you tell me.”

Angie Melendez, attorney at law—or so she claimed—laughed softly. “When I was twelve my mother told me that my father was a rancher in a little town called Dos Pesos.” She stopped.

“Could I have a swallow of that Dr. Pepper?” Without waiting for consent, she grasped the bottle and gulped. Then another gulp. She drank more assertively than any ranch hand or good for nothing Drake had ever come across. She grinned, charmingly. “Right now, you must be thinking ‘Is it possible that this woman is who she says she is? Could she possibly be my daughter?’”

Drake shook his head. “Everybody’s somebody, Miz Melendez.” He bit at his lip. “I remember your mother, but I’m not so damned sure you know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t think I need to remind you of how you and my mother became more than boss and employee. Do I?”

“Like I said. I remember Ida. Whatever happened between her and me ain’t none of some lawyer’s business. Daughter or no daughter.” That should settle

the matter, he thought. Then, for good measure, he added, “Now, why don’t you just tell me what you think you’re going to get out of me. Ida and me, we were close forty years ago.”

“Thirty-eight,” said Ms. Melendez. “I’m thirty-seven.”

“That don’t prove nothin’.”

“I didn’t drive all the way out here ‘to get something out of you’, as you so poetically put it.” She tilted her head, then gently tapped the Dr. Pepper bottle. “I was raised by a man name Raul Melendez. My mother married my father when I was six. He knows all about you...and my mother’s past. It was his idea that I come out here. Not mine.”

So, thought Drake, it’s some damned jealous asshole who wants to take me for all I’ve got. Well, that son of a bitch better realize that I ain’t no easy mark. Drake took a deep breath. “And just what did this fella think would come about from this blackmail?”

“Blackmail?” She laughed. Across the room, the waitress and the cook stared at them. “Mr. Withers, my father, Raul, could buy and sell you, me, and probably everyone in this county. No, he didn’t send me here to get anything from you. He, and my mother, thought I’d better meet you before it’s too late. Raul Melendez owns a large construction company. He doesn’t need anything from you. Or anyone.”

Too late for what? Drake studied the woman. He couldn’t see much resemblance to him or anyone in his family. But, it was possible. Perhaps. If he and Evelyn had ever had a child she might’ve looked something like this woman. With lighter skin, although this Angie

Melendez wasn't all that dark. But, hell, who can say?
“You call this man your father. Did you suddenly decide that you need two fathers?”

“My mother warned me that you could be a bastard once you've made up your mind to be one.” She folded her thin arms across her chest.

Drake grinned. Bastard? A poor choice of words...considering. He drained the bottle of Dr. Pepper. He wanted another, but Rosalia wasn't about to come to the table. She wanted no part in any of this—whatever *this* was. “And did your mother warn you that I can be an orn'ry SOB?”

The lawyer shrugged. “She told me you're a rancher. A cantankerous but generous man. Rich enough to hire a thirty-year-old divorced woman to help his wife bathe and get dressed.

Handsome enough to seduce a shy woman.” She stared at Drake. “She also said you were kind and that she thought, at the time, that she was in love with you.”

Drake coughed. His knees ached downright terrible. “Ida never told me anything about being pregnant. She just left. She quit. I didn't fire her.”

Again, the young woman shrugged. “You were a married man. A wealthy married man. She was pregnant and afraid. Your wife was nearly helpless. What would you do in her situation?”

“My wife was paralyzed from the waist down. Did your mother tell you that?”

“Uh-huh. She told me that your wife was a nice woman.” She laughed. “And that you were nice. I hope you're not about to prove her wrong.”

“I didn’t take advantage of Ida,” said Drake. “I was twenty years older than she was, but it wasn’t like I was some kind predator.” He exhaled, then breathed deeply. “Things happen. I’d even say I was in love with your mother. Or at least I thought I was in love with her. If you can believe that.” An admission of guilt, he thought. This lawyer’s gonna jump on that like a fly on a fresh cow paddy. Could she be taping this whole conversation? She is a lawyer, after all.

Angie Melendez drilled into his forehead with narrowed eyes. She drummed her fingertips on the table. “Mr. Withers,” she finally said, “I just thought it was time for me to meet my biological father.”

“And get what out of him?”

She sighed. “Mr. Withers, if you think I came out here to hustle you, you’re sorely mistaken. I work for a successful law firm. My father paid for me to go to St. Edward’s University, then to law school at the University of Texas. I just wanted to meet you. That’s it. Nothing sinister. Nothing conniving. I just thought I should meet my father before it’s too late.”

“Damn it. You keep saying that. What do you mean, ‘before it’s too late?’”

The lawyer laughed. “Mr. Withers, you are eighty-eight years old.” She placed her hands in her lap. “Do you think I’m out to swindle you out of your pickup truck or something?”

“Hmm.” Drake rustled in his seat. Every bone in his body felt dried out and ready to snap. “Miz Melendez, what I think is that you expect too much in life. You can’t possibly think you could come waltzing in here and tell me some cock-and-bull story about me

being your father. Then everything would be all hunky-dory. Life ain't that simple...or that tidy."

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," she said. "I don't know what I expected. I thought we could get to know each other. That was all I had hoped for."

"Before it's too late?"

Angie Melendez smiled. "No. While we still can." She scooted out of her side of the booth. "Could I hold your hand? Please." She reached both of her hands out to him.

Drake gave her his right hand. She held his leathered, bony fingers in both of her soft hands, then squeezed. She let go, then turned and began to walk toward the door.

Drake watched and sniffled—out of nowhere, tears. "Miz Melendez," he called. "If you'd like to eat something before you leave, I'll buy you dinner. They've got pretty good Mexican food here. Do you like enchiladas?"

She stopped, turned around, then stared at Drake. "Do they have a chicken fried steak?"

"One of the best," said Drake. He grinned. "It's what I always order whenever I come in here." He nodded, wiped the moisture from his eyes. He ran his fingers through what little white hair he had left. A chicken fried steak? She just might be related to me. Who knows?

The Dream of Rain

by Chris McDermott

There was this girl I knew before I left Chapel Hill, who found out that her mother had died on the morning of her big organic chem exam. I had met her mother earlier in the term; she was small and energetic and cheerfully determined that her daughter would become a doctor. Organic was the one exam that this girl absolutely, positively had to pass. And it was the one exam that she absolutely, positively knew that she was going to fail. Not just do poorly; she was going to fail catastrophically. I saw her when she came out of the administration building the next day, her face streaming tears. She had withdrawn from school without taking the exam; she could reapply after a while when the trauma passed. “Don’t worry about it,” I had said to her. “You were going to flunk anyway. Now your mom will never know.”

Needless to say she didn’t take this well, but I didn’t care. I was at the administration building for the same reason—to drop out of college. But I knew I was never coming back. I was dropping out permanently. I never saw that girl again; I never found out if she ever came back to school, ever finished her exam, ever became a doctor. The episode didn’t teach me anything new, it just reinforced something—besides the kind of stupid people I was leaving school to get away from—something that I think I already knew. That death, above all, is inconvenient. I remember thinking just

that: that whatever else death may be, it was most of all an imposition, an interference, a gross interruption.

But that was long ago. And now there I was, examining my guitar before starting the drive to tonight's gig and wondering if I could coax one more session out of the frayed D string, when the text came through on my phone: Death. And I thought: interrupting as usual. It was Comber Hadley texting me to say that my Aunt Ama had died. Comber was still at the house we were crashing at, and said that a letter from my mother had just caught up to me.

Why r you reading my mail I texted back, but he didn't answer.

And why was my mother sending me a letter, for Christ's sake? I have a *phone*. She has my *number*. She knows that I'm on the road this month and that to the extent I'll have any relationship with the US postal service at all, my mailing addresses will be a series of borrowed couches in a series of sketchy living rooms. But that's my mother. She always has a very definite idea of how things are done. Propriety. A code of etiquette. Somewhere in some rule book it must surely be written that one does never inform kin of a death in the family by any means except a formal letter. I couldn't wait to read it; she probably wrote it to sound like the letter from that Civil War documentary that made her bawl when they read it with music in the voiceover. The letter from Sullivan Ballou. You know, in that Ken Burns thing. I had to stop watching it after that. Not that I was going to sit there and finish watching all those hours of the documentary with her,

anyway. It would have taken longer to watch than the Civil War took to fight.

Russell came up and nudged me. “Hey, we gotta go,” he said. He saw my face. “Is everything OK, Lorri? Something wrong?”

I shook him off. “No, just a text from Comber.”

“Let me guess, he’s still not coming,” Russell said. Russell pushed a hank of his long black hair behind his ear and grinned in this way he had that made him look very sly. He had a long face and a strong chin, and gemlike dark blue eyes. He knew he was handsome. Of all of us only Russell was good-looking enough to be a real rock star, or so we thought, so he sang lead for the band right up front in the lights and me and the two others—or three others, when Comber deigned to show up—strummed and banged away behind him, occluded in shadow to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the venue.

And oh, the venues! Oh, we were just rocketing to fame. We had our pick of every crappy state campus all across the Carolinas and Georgia. At least, those within a seventy-mile radius of the same goddamn place that we had started from, five years ago. I could think of a lot of reasons Comber had stayed back.

“He’s just pissed about that cover you added, the Sting one. *Desert Rose*.” Russell grinned again. “He doesn’t think it fits our set.”

“He’s just pissed,” I said, “because he’s a fucking moron.”

He ruffled my hair, still grinning, knowing I liked it even while I pushed his hand away. Russell’s good

looks could actually get irritating. “In the car, Lorri,” he said. “Five minutes. We got a long drive.”

I took my time packing the instrument bag and gathering the cords and the amp, because it gave me time to think. Comber Hadley was a pseudo-intellectual pain in the ass. We had had a fight about doing the *Desert Rose* cover weeks ago. He said the band didn’t have time to rehearse a whole new number, with all those different instruments. I told him we didn’t have to mimic the Sting track; we could do it with our own sound, as a guitar band—no new instruments needed. That was the whole point of making a cover, I said, to do it our own way. “What are we, an *oldies* act?” Comber had growled, angry. “A Best-of-the-Eighties tribute band?” I told him that Sting released *Desert Rose* in 2000, not in the Eighties, and not to be such a dumbass. Then Comber got even angrier, shouting that I was just trying to show off how I had memorized the Arabic words to the female vocal part. “We *get* it, Lorri—you’re *smart!*” he shouted. “OK?”

Comber was always bringing up smarts. He was a pudgy little guy with a thatch of tangled, gravity-defying brown hair. He favored cargo pants that made his short legs look like the stumps of ill-sawn logs. He wore wire-rimmed glasses that somehow made his face seem, not intelligent, not introspective, but just pudgier. Half his sentences started with the phrase, *Did you know that...?* He was never happier than when he knew something—anything—that someone else didn’t. The other guys let him be, recognizing Comber’s obvious insecurity for what it was, and reasoning that it was a small enough price to pay for Comber’s ethereal, inexplicable

virtuosity on bass guitar. But I couldn't let it alone. He'd push; I'd push back. He'd say something about black holes, say, and I'd respond with some technical aspect of quantum theory. He'd mention Shakespeare; I'd quote back a sonnet at him. Comber would always save up things I had said, hopefully things I was wrong about, to repeat to other people, mostly at parties at the colleges we played. I never actually heard him talking about me but I could imagine his whispered comments: *Lorri thinks she's a genius but she actually dropped out of college, you know. In fact, yesterday she told me....* I finally, irredeemably, became his enemy the time I suggested to Russell that he should read a book I just finished. It was *Never Let Me Go*, by Katsuo Ishiguro. I told him he'd like it, because it was science fiction, but with a kind of an Englishy setting. Comber couldn't wait to interject himself, scoffing at my suggestion because, he said, you should never read fiction in translation. Russell didn't care; he was never going to read anything anyway. But my great offense that time was that I remained silent. I said nothing. I just let Comber strap that unexploded torpedo onto his back and waited for him to carry it with him to the next party. And blow himself up. I saw his face afterward; he refused to meet my eyes.

I wasn't silent this time though. I had shouted back at Comber like a banshee, daring everyone to hear. I had shouted that there weren't *any* female vocals on the track; that the other voice with Sting on the track was a famous Algerian *rai* singer, who was unequivocally, unquestionably male. And I shouted that yes, *of course*, I had memorized the Arabic lyrics, because

that's the way the song goes! Or maybe you think we should do it *in translation*?

Comber had been silent for a moment, and then quietly asked why I was such an angry person, and suggested that I might benefit from professional counseling.

But that was weeks ago and the band had since agreed to do the cover; we were performing it for the first time tonight. That was surely the reason that Comber found himself unable to come with us to the gig, though he must have given Russell some other bullshit excuse. But Comber surely didn't appreciate the real joke that death was playing with me here. Because this wasn't the first time this song and my Aunt Ama had interfered with my life.

It was the summer I was eleven years old, the summer I've always remembered as the summer of my brother's ghost. By which I mean that I had dreams where my brother's ghost visited me. And even at the time I knew that was strange and couldn't be true, because my brother wasn't dead yet.

It was 2003 and I was still in junior high. The war was on television; it had been the background noise in the kitchen all through the spring, while my mother fussed at the stove and Aunt Ama sat in her chair smoking, and I sullenly tried to do my homework at the kitchen table. After Baghdad fell in April they showed the same video loop of Saddam's statue being pulled down, over and over. We didn't know where my brother Tommy was. We knew he was with the Third Infantry Division but that didn't tell us anything we

could relate to the television reports. We got occasional letters from him and satellite phone calls, but they were studiously cheerful and insubstantial. So we mostly avoided the topic, talking around it while we sat in the kitchen but leaving the television on in the background, unwilling to turn it off for fear of missing the one critical fact, the key, the piece to the puzzle that would explain things to us. My mother and I wouldn't admit that we were listening.

But Aunt Ama wasn't afraid to say something about it. She liked to shock my mother by being intentionally coarse. "I bet Tommy and his friends are blowing the heads off a bunch of hadjis right now," she would say, staring at my mother. My mother would give a little noise of alarm, and leave the kitchen.

So Aunt Ama would redirect her attention at me. "So what do you think, missy? Do you think your brother is giving hell to them A-rab ragheads?"

I wouldn't answer. I silently stared at my workbook, twirling my pencil thoughtfully by my temple and pretending my aunt wasn't there. She didn't know, my mother didn't know, that I was following the war intently. Obsessively. Every study hall I claimed a table in the school library and spread out whatever copy of the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* was hanging from the newspaper racks. It was generally a few days old but I didn't care. The librarian was sympathetic; she knew I had a brother in the service. She was smart enough to be merely businesslike, and to help me trace the progress of the Third Infantry as it fought through Najaf and Baghdad. Then after a while she would let me use the computer in the library office to read more up-

to-date reports. I was the only kid given that privilege—I'm not sure why, because plenty of my classmates had brothers or fathers in the war. Maybe because I had a particularly intense look on my face. I quickly became an expert on the war, although I don't think my face ever softened. I was a secret expert on the war.

But I would never admit that to my mother, and certainly not to Aunt Ama. Not with her *ragheads* and *hadjis* and *kaffirs*. I suspected that Aunt Ama's ethnic slurs weren't even accurate, that she was mixing up one insult with another in her attempt to maintain a sufficient supply of new names to keep my mother and me shocked. I became accustomed to looking up each new name on the computer at study hall, and seeing the familiar formula of the online definition: *noun; slang, pejorative*. But I resented Aunt Ama for it. It didn't matter that the kids in school talked much the same way; Aunt Ama was an adult, and for adults it indicated something bad, something rotten, to talk so prejudiced. *I'm not like you*, I would say to myself, as Aunt Ama tried to get a rise out of me. *I'm not like you at all*. As soon as Aunt Ama's fierce gaze faltered for a moment and she glanced away from me I would bolt from the kitchen table and fly out the door, running down the slope toward the water. Our little house was near the river, in a little cluster of deteriorating, identical mill houses. My father had once worked in the factory that still stood, hulking and abandoned, the other direction up the slope behind a screen of trees. He had left when I was little; I didn't really remember him. The textile jobs had gone, I had learned; it was an economic fact. *Serves you right for marrying a Jew*, I had once heard Aunt Ama say to my

mother. *Why would you ever think a Jew who works in a factory is worth a dime?* That was history, part of the lore of my childhood, although I knew I wasn't supposed to have overheard the remark. I didn't know what it meant; I had no appreciation of what it meant to be a Jew much less what that had to do with working in a factory. But it cumulated with other information I gleaned. When her mood was bright my mother and I might walk the neighborhood streets to the store and she would still call the empty houses by the names of the families who used to live there, or point out the schoolhouse nearby that had always been closed during my lifetime and I had never known to be a school. (I took the school bus miles to the county comprehensive.) But that, too, was information, still more information for the map of my past that I was slowly assembling in my mind. By that summer I knew the basic terrain. I knew that we were poor, I knew that my father had abandoned us, I knew that my mother had ceased looking toward anything better, and I knew that my Aunt Ama would always stay there to torment us both.

It was when I escaped down the slope to the river that I calmed. The river moved slowly at that spot, bulky and gelatinous, an obdurate mass that moved its chosen direction downstream and brooked no obstruction. There was a fringe of woods along the banks, and the houses and factory were obscured from the path I walked. My brother had shown me the path, years ago when I was no more than a toddler. He had helped me scramble past the thickets of prickles and the slick wet logs pushed onto the bank by the water. He was much older than I, and told me the stories from

Greek mythology that he had learned in school. I remember lying back on the logs and watching the breeze tossing the treetops like lions' manes, and thinking that there was a Greek god in every tree, and in the wind, and in the river sounds, and wondering whether I, too, could move the wind and the trees with the power of my willing it, like the Greek gods. I don't remember the stories my brother told, just the telling of them. I had once loved to listen to stories. My very first memory was of a storytelling session when I could not have been too much younger than that time with my brother, although I remember thinking of myself as a baby then—my Aunt Ama held me on her lap and read from a baby's board book, and asked me to fill in the line, "quiet as a mouse!" from the story. Each time I added a new animal—"quiet as a...*horse!*" I shouted; "quiet as a...*elephant!*"—and each time I flew into fits of giggling hilarity. But after that, I don't remember having stories anymore, except for the Greek myths my brother told me by the river.

So that was where the dreams took me, when my brother's ghost began to visit me that summer. School was just out; I was bored and it was hot. The summer nights never seemed to get fully dark. But soon enough I would find myself walking along the same river path, my brother's dress uniform several paces ahead of me in the starlight and I was hustling along the wet track to keep up. We would find a place to stop on dry stones or logs, and he would sit and face me. The river moved even more stolidly in the nighttime, the blackness making its mass that much heavier. Ripples of starlight played on the wavelets and my brother's face was only

just visible. He didn't speak, but in the way of dreams I knew he was talking to me nonetheless. I listened intently, and at the time I felt I had understood everything. The wind tossed the treetops above our heads and then I would be awake, convinced that I had spoken with my brother, but unable to recapture what he had said.

The computer was my birthday present that summer. My mother gave it to me with a solemnity that was out of proportion to the second-hand machine. I knew that computer; I recognized it as soon as we slid it out of the newspaper-stuffed box that it had come in. The county upgraded the schools' hardware from time to time and gave staff the opportunity to purchase old components at the fully-depreciated prices. I never thanked the librarian for acquiring the old library computer for me; the next fall we were both as businesslike as ever, and I was grateful for it.

But it was a thrill, I can admit that, even without any online connection. I set about to learn everything about the computer. It was how I discovered music, playing my mother's old CDs in the disk drive and listening on a pair of old headphones. Suddenly, I became interested in having girlfriends from school come to our house for the afternoon, girls who happened to come from homes with better technology and who had greater computer skills than my own. But I acquired the skills quickly, along with a growing suite of computer music props: software, microphones, speakers, an upgraded set of headphones. The extra cartons of cigarettes Aunt Ama kept on the top shelf of the closet were my currency that summer. When the

pilferage would be inevitably discovered I planned to be placid, obtuse, and to deny everything. I rehearsed mentally: *You know, you've been smoking a lot more recently than you used to, Aunt Ama.*

And with the slowly accumulating set of recording gadgets, there also slowly accumulated a series of tracks on the hard drive: me, in my new guise as a pop singer. I moved the computer into my bedroom, for privacy and soundproofing, such as it was. (Aunt Ama, who was happy to get the machine out of the kitchen, still took a swipe. “Probably looking at pornography on it,” she muttered archly to my turned back, though just how that would work with no Internet she didn’t explain.) My girlfriends helped me with the basics of computer sound recording; soon I was a master. Or so I believed. I sang everything. I worked through all of my mother’s CDs, which really were a collection that could be styled “Best of the Eighties”. That was how I discovered Sting, in among the Go-Go’s and the B-52’s and the Duran Duran. And that was why I traded one of my girlfriends five packs of Marlboros for a new CD—or almost new CD—because it was by Sting, and I recognized him.

I guess it’s not hard to figure why *Desert Rose*, which was a track on that record, became so important to me. Sting, after all, must have been an adult—if not Aunt Ama’s age then certainly my mother’s age. And so far from Aunt Ama’s litany of *hadji* and *raghead*, here he was singing with an Arab artist! Singing with Arabic lyrics! He was a person of an altogether superior nature, I felt. I set about adding my version of the song to the hard drive, mimicking every flourish, every tremolo,

every syllable of the words which, of course, I couldn't understand.

I copied the tracks I made that summer onto recordable CDs, which I also traded for with one of my girlfriends. That seemed to make them permanent, tangible. It also seemed to be safer—I worried that, despite the network of passwords I used to encrypt my computer, Aunt Ama would become curious and hack her way in. Strangely, it never worried me that my mother or one of my girlfriends would listen to my music—just my Aunt Ama. I figured that if I suspected that Aunt Ama had gotten access to my music I could just delete the tracks from the computer, and I would still have the songs on my back-up CDs. Why I thought that Aunt Ama might spontaneously acquire the technical skills to hack my computer, I don't know. Why it did not occur to me that a shoebox full of CDs was actually less secure than a password-protected computer, I don't know. But that was my reasoning that summer.

But the shoebox filled, faster and faster, as I tried to record all the songs I had ever heard. I was in a fever to sing; it didn't matter to me if I never listened to the tracks I recorded. And the dreams of my brother kept coming. Always the same—the walk to the river, the quiet of the river sounds, the conversation made of silence, the starlight on the wavelets.

Until one night it wasn't the same. The dream came but Tommy didn't lead me to the river down the slope. Tommy wasn't in his dress uniform; he was in desert camouflage, and we stood on the verge of a huge and sun-poisoned desert, flat and hot as a steel plate.

Tommy's face was sunburned and the sunglasses he wore were mirrors. His boots were dusty with the yellow dust of the desert; his helmet was low on his brow and his rifle was slung on a shoulder. But he grinned with surpassing happiness, and gestured again and again to the open desert and glaring sky with his arm, as if to say *See, all this is yours!* I thought he was trying to speak to me but the desert wind kept carrying away his words.

And when I awoke from that dream it wasn't light, it wasn't anywhere close to morning. The blackness of the night was all around, it pressed at the screens and swallowed up the windows, it seemed to flatten away the sounds of the insects in the woods beyond. I found myself up, out—I was running away. I could not stay any longer. I was sure that that was what Tommy had been trying to say to me in the dream, that I did not have to stay where I was, where people called Arabs ragheads. I could leave, I could go away and become a famous pop singer. I could sing *Desert Rose* out loud at the top of my lungs; no one could stop me. I was out of the house, down the slope, my bare feet scuffing the dry earth of the path as it led to the river. I ran along the path until I stopped at a place that seemed familiar, feeling that this was the place where I had been in the other dreams with my brother, the ones before that night. The river glided by, the wavelets topped with silver light, just like the dreams. But the wind was still, the air was silent. There was no one there.

I never told anyone about the dreams of my brother. I certainly never told anyone about the last dream, or my running away that night, although it

presaged my actual flight some seven or eight years later, after my Aunt Ama had prepaid a full year for me at Chapel Hill and I knew she couldn't get a refund for the semester that I was chucking away. I didn't care. By that time, everyone knew I was a strange, angry girl. I was the girl who showed no feeling at the end of that summer when I was eleven and the Army sent the two officers in mirror polished shoes to tell my mother that Tommy was dead now. They didn't need to know that I had already understood that from the dream, that seeing Tommy show me the desert gave me a more accurate news report than any details about his final patrol, any details about how the IED blew his legs off at the thigh, about how he watered the desert from his shredded veins and died within minutes.

I knew enough, now.

We got back from the gig in the middle of the afternoon the next day. Comber was still at the house. He was supposed to pack up for the move to the next venue, but he hadn't done anything. I was angry; I had let my mind wander too much on the drive back.

"Where's my letter?" I demanded, as soon as I saw him.

He was sitting in the living room, headphones clamped around his pudgy face, his crazy hair going in every direction. He motioned to a large box on the floor.

I pulled an earpiece away from his ear. "The letter," I repeated. "Where's my goddamn letter that you opened without my permission?"

Comber grabbed the headphones back, covering both ears again. “It came with the box,” he said, overloud, his eyes partly closing as he sought to shake off the interruption and reimmerge himself in the music he was listening to. “Your mother sent that whole box. I thought it might be perishable, that’s why I opened it.”

I pulled the box over and sat cross-legged on the floor. Russell and the other guys frowned at Comber and me from the doorway as they toted the instruments from the car, but I didn’t care. I shuffled through the box my mother had sent, thinking, *This isn’t what I was expecting.*

The letter from my mother was brief, even terse, just a note laid on top of the contents of the box and not even folded. “My sister Ama died last week,” it read. “We buried her Friday. I would have called but I know you’ve been busy, and I know you didn’t get on with your aunt. Here are a few things that she wanted you to have.”

And that was all for the letter. The box contained an obituary clipping from the *Charlotte Observer*, noting the passing of Amalasantha Tyrell, aged 66. Photographs of me with Aunt Ama, birthday cards, yearbooks, graduation programs, you name it—the detritus of an entire childhood, all calculated, I thought, to pull my heartstrings. Even some ragged baby board books although none that contained the line, “It was as quiet as a mouse.”

It was then that I noticed the shoebox that was already out of the larger box, sitting in the middle of the living room floor.

I reached for it, burning. The lid was off. I took out a handful of the CD cases and examined them, opening them one by one. The silvery CDs were still there, untouched, but the liner paper of each one carried a handful of penciled comments. “*Very good modulation,*” one read. “*A touch heavy on the bass, but excellent vocal color.*” All in Aunt Ama’s spidery handwriting. I could hear her scratchy voice as I read each one.

I spotted a stray CD case next to the laptop beside Comber on the floor, his headphone cord trailing out of the laptop like a curly tail. I recognized the case as soon as I saw it and I grabbed it and, panic rising, opened it. The case was empty, but there was writing on the liner paper of this case as well. Not commentary, though; it was a few lines of lyric to *Desert Rose*, translated (God only knows how Aunt Ama managed that) and laboriously pencil-scratched onto the liner paper in the same wavering handwriting:

Oh night oh night

It has been a long time

And I am looking for myself and my loved one

And I am looking for myself and my loved one

And I am looking for myself and my loved one

I made a lunge for the laptop, my finger jabbing at the release button for the disk drive. Comber swatted away my hand and bent his pudgy body to shield the computer.

“Hey, come on, be careful!” he said. “You’ll break it!”

“You’re lucky I don’t break *you*,” I muttered, grabbing at the headphone cord, trying to pull out the jack.

“Jesus, Lorri, quit it!” he said. He slid the headphones off his head. “I wouldn’t have opened the box if I knew you’d be so angry about it.” I clutched the empty CD case, the rage boiling in me, the spurt of hot tears from my eyes adding their inevitable, inconvenient interruption.

“I can’t believe you were only eleven when you laid these tracks,” Comber said. He reached out in his oblivious way to slide the cushioned headphones over my ears. “You weren’t half bad,” I heard him say, just before the headphones settled onto my head and the painfully loud music filled my brain, overwhelming it with my childish voice singing, singing, blasting away at the song.

Brainrot Whirligig

By Dashiell Byrne

“Two dead birds, ten tabs of acid, a girlfriend trying to digitize her consciousness, Trotsky’s last manuscript and a time machine. Welcome back to your life, sweetheart.”

You hate that voice. Not synthetically primitive, no mispronunciations or odd timings or misunderstood vowel combinations, but the modulation through your ship’s plastic-megaphone speaker system breaks down the frequency *just* enough to let Alicistasia’s tone turn chilly as she reorients you in the timeline. Not to mention the buzzing in your ears and the potential case of hyper-malaria wrecking havoc internally. Great weekend to be a time cop. You should’ve just gone to time law school instead like Mom wanted.

“Please deposit the manuscript in Outgoing and bring me some pizza rolls.”

You tell her you’ll be there right away, hands gripping the rim of your metallic, coffin-shaped chronobobsled, and jerk yourself up to get free of that weird smell that never seems to leave the time machine. The room is hazy with machine smog, rolling the light from the ever-beeping interfaces around the walls into a nest of iridescent snakes, and for a moment they coil you in the warmth of being where you need to be. They slither in your trail as you break the doorway’s threshold, a gray-black mantle that dissipates three steps down the hall. Two more steps— each one feels like thirty seconds with the adrenaline still coursing through you after the

job— and you’ve cleared the annex into your ship proper. You set the manuscript down in a box for retrieved artifacts, *praying* that nobody sends it back in time again, and grab the two pigeon corpses out of the Incoming container. Move those across the room to the TimePack™, grab her pizza rolls out of the ove— wait, wash your hands, *then* grab the pizza rolls, and it’s on again unto the flight deck.

It used to be *nice* in here. You kept a tidy cockpit, with new-car upholstery and nothing littering the consoles except some retro *Jupiter’s Moons* tourism stickers from a recent-past job in your training days. And then one day Alicistasia offered to start running the ship, so you could focus on “all that cool stuff you do for work,” and of course you accepted because you haven’t been able to tell a girl *no* since high school. First came the empty cans, then the dirty dishes, and then the nightmarish cobwebs of wiring from the ceiling down into her brain. Supposedly it was just “easier” to run the ship full-time and improve her capacity for mental multitasking to make up for it. Now she never leaves the room. You hesitate to still call her your partner in front of others these days— more like your pet pilot who browses the internet all day and occasionally saves your life. Whatever. Not having to deal with those shitty ACME controls was worth being lonely-but-not-single.

You crawl out of these mental caverns, coaxing Alicistasia out of her own with a snap, and she turns. The cords twist around themselves like some absurdly vertical crown.

“Brought your pizza rolls.”

“Thaaank youuu,” she responds. Between her asteroider’s drawl, the perpetual flow of information through her neural circuits, and the equally-unyielding flow of morphine down her arm— *who’d’ve guessed linking one’s self to infinite knowledge was stressful?*— it became impossible to tell what, exactly, was drawing out the vowels.

“Careful, they’re... hot...” by the time you get the words out she’s scarfed three down and you remember that she’d ditched thermal sensation as an “unneeded distraction.” Maybe it was worth considering. You hated having to wait for food to cool down.

“Mmph. Hmmpth zzyum mn brmthn hrth.”

“Babe, your mouth is full of pizza-roll-mush. Well, most of it is on your shirt now.” At least there weren’t vermin in the cold vacuum. You wish she was a little more careful, though.

“Th— one sec,” she paused, blinking through windows and chat screens. “Here. The next assignment came in.”

“When’s it at?”

“Twentieth century. You know Pink Floyd?”

“Vaguely. I knew this crackpot in college who was *convinced* that they were from our time and had just gone back on the down-low, said it was the only way they could’ve made music like that.” You wondered how Joe was doing these days. Probably not great. He had **MANUFACTURING DEATH CAUGHT ON CAMERA!** written all over him.

“Well, unless they take old-earth LSD, their music won’t sound the same, and then the people who get inspired by *them* won’t sound the—”

“Are you seriously explaining the butterfly effect to me?”

“Quit being mean. Anyway, if Pink Floyd doesn’t take acid for the first time, music will get all screwed up. And you know what happens when music gets screwed up.”

You do know what happens when music gets screwed up. “So, basically, I have to go back in time and sell acid to Pink Floyd.”

“Pretty much. And you have to make sure they take it.”

“Where’s the acid?”

“Huh?”

“There were two dead pigeons in the incoming box, but no acid.”

“Where the hell would anybody get old-Earth acid without Earth?”

“Fuck.”

Okay. Only slightly more complicated. Go back, somehow procure LSD, sell it to Pink Floyd, make sure they take it. A walk in the park. Hell, based on the job, it might end up literally *being* a walk in the park. Maybe you’ll get to see one of those domesticated canines people use to keep. You scratch the back of her neck—the closest you can get to a hair-ruffle with the cords going into her brain— and leave the cockpit. On your way back to the dock you grab the TimePack™, and on it is an old 21st-century keychain you’d received back when you played a bit fast and loose with the Time Officer Rules of Contact, and *that’s it*. You know how you’re gonna get acid.

“Alicistasia!”

“Huh?” When she opens the cockpit door to yell back you hear what she’s watching. *Em*. Ever since she linked herself into the internet, her proclivities had grown increasingly abnormal. At least she wasn’t asking you to try it. Yet.

“Set up a Double-Jump. New landing point, and then the 1960s after.”

“Alrighty, when to?”

You run over to the kitchen and open the drawer, snatching up a pocketbook. “Uh... 21st century... July 9th, 2023.” The friends that you made during the preemptive assassination of Steve Carell had invited you to some party. You’d made sure to write the date down so you could show up, but upon returning to your Natural Time the Chief had found out about your Rules-of-Contact laxness and totally got on your ass about it. *This’ll show him.*

“You’re all set, jumps are queued. Have fun!”

“Yeah, you too. And don’t get any more viruses in the ship computer for fuck’s sake.”

Back into the annex’s omnipresent noise and snakes of smoke, you flip the flippable switches and click the clickable buttons and lower yourself into that weird smell that never leaves your time machine. The lid slams closed once it feels your weight in the box, and off you go.

—

A forest. *How atmospheric.* As the lid flips open to reveal treetop branches brushing one another gently at the endpoints, Alicistasia begins to ask you something and you’re reminded of how much you hate the way the chip buzzes in your earlobe when she transmits.

“So what’s the plan then, you’re gonna get the acid from here?”

“Mhmm, I know some people. Spent a while back here in a college town. This is the only party they mentioned that I haven’t come to yet.”

“Do you think you enjoy parties more or less, being able to go to them on your own time?”

“I dunno. Less, probably. I’ve told you what it’s like.”

“I mean, in general I guess, but parties specifically—”

“Hey, I love you, but please just only transmit when you need to.”

“Oh, what, the buzzing again?”

“Yeah, actually. The buzzing.”

You suppose you should be grateful for the lack of response but it just feels shitty. Whatever. Once you’re standing under street lights in the road, you check your pocketbook for the address. Then you realize you don’t have a map. About forty-five minutes later you stumble across the proper street and find your way to the house with bass shaking its windows, deliberating whether or not to knock. Better not to. Was more your style regardless of the party’s type.

Something like thirty people crowded the home’s immediate interior room with more packed in every passage out, as dense as sardines and as far as you could see. *Great.* You spot a few faces you recognize (but can’t name) and are suddenly struck by the always-lurking reality that nothing you do back here will have real consequences. But it’s also the 21st century, and you know that all these people have the internet in their

pockets and are probably as vile as Alicistasia. Fighting through the urge you instinctually autopilot to your friends' most likely location, the balcony, though not without struggle. Ascending the stairs is an Olympian trial and by the time you reach the glass French doors leading out you've had the air crushed out of your lungs a dozen times over. You were right, though, and your friends greet you with cheers and sardonic smatterings of applause as you step out into another wispy web of snake-shaped smoke, this time spilling from cigarettes.

"You showed yourself in public! Congratulations!"

These sorts of relationships usually forced one to maintain such an image. Not that it was an unnatural image for you. "Yeah, I wasn't doing anything and my apartment was getting lonely. Plus I need to buy some acid." Smooth. Nice. You forcibly recalled their names as you lowered yourself. Left, half-shaved head, that one was Chris. Right, with the weird belt-looking thing around her neck, *uh...* Blar. *Blair*. Blair. Across, the one who'd spoken, that one had a noun-name... wait, no, a color. Grey? Yeah, Grey, you were pretty sure. Maybe just don't call her by it. And now they were all staring.

"Huh?"

Your inquiry prompts laughter. Not *at* you though, you can tell, it's a good kind. Phew.

"I asked whether you brought it up because you need some help." Grey clarified.

"Oh, well yes ma'am, you know I'd be helpless drug-wise without your... infinite benevolence."

The other three all give you a faux-suspicious look.

"Hey now," said Chris. "You're startin' to sound a whole lot like one of those Carell Cult weirdos."

Your friends and you laugh for different reasons and Grey gets up to go inside, saying something about how you should start a stopwatch. The rate she could find drugs *was* absurd.

“You know, I’m pretty sure the last time you tripped with me you said never again.” Shit. You’d really hoped you wouldn’t have to talk to Blair.

“Well, y’know, you say things you don’t really mean with that much in your system.” She and Chris laugh at your response and her hand is on your knee now. *Fuck.*

“Why don’t we go back to mine after this?” She makes a lecherous face and Chris mimes disgust and your blood boils, not at her or him or anyone else but at your own head for racing so fast with potentials. The soft smoke has cleared and all that remains is cold concrete under your ass and an uncomfortable railing behind your back. You don’t like what Blair likes and you don’t like to give Alicistasia what *she* likes but it’s not like you’re gonna say no right to her face.

Grey rescues you by exiting the house looking shockingly distraught. “It’s never happened before. Not like this... there’s not a single person in there with acid. Not-a-one.”

“Fuck, really?” you say, turning enough to shift the hand off of your knee.

Blair chirps up. “You know, I think I still have some shrooms at home.”

It always astounds you when a situation somehow gets even worse. Every possible thing that could happen in her room plays through your head and you cringe internally with disgust towards her, Alicistasia, and more than anything yourself for being weak enough to

entertain them. Opting to make up your mind in the bathroom, you mumble something about how you'll be right back and then the two of you will head out. As you're washing your hands you remember that nothing back here has real consequences. *Oh yeah.* You tell your brain not to run too far with that idea as you slip out through the sardine-crowd and make your way back to the time machine.

—

“Welcome to London, 1966. Tonight, Syd Barrett must consume one hundred and fifty micrograms of LSD. You have roughly three hours to ensure that this happens.”

“Wait, wait, wait. I thought you said I had to sell *Pink Floyd* acid.”

“In 1966, Syd Barrett *was* Pink Floyd. Gilmour had yet to join the band, and Roger Waters hadn't come into his own as a songwriter yet.”

“So basically, instead of playing the generous flower-child hippie, I have to destroy a musician's life.”

“Hippies have destroyed countless lives.”

Witty as Alicistasia's comment may be, it didn't help the staggering moral and ethical quandary of selling acid to Syd Barrett. It was the start of the guy's whole lifelong spiral, you already knew about *those* consequences. It wasn't wrong to sell drugs but it seemed deeply wrong to sell these drugs to this guy— oh, shit, you still have to figure out where to get acid. If you're gonna sell it to him. Probably best to get your hands on it first and then decide. Okay, no big deal. Mid-20th century is your specialty. Let's buy some acid. The machine decided to show up tucked away in a

storm drain, nice and hidden. Unfortunately, it also meant wading out through the filthy runoff of London's perpetual drizzle.

Exiting the cavernous mouth of the drain, your eyes take no time at all to adjust to the grey and dismal day outside. Some stairs to the right lead up to the sidewalk, and upon ascending, you survey. The streets are dead save for those waiting for buses under awnings or shivering in storefront nooks. A completely ordinary day.

"There's a park two miles down that should be suitable." Alicistasia said.

"Copy." With that, you head down the road.

"Also, I think we should see other people."

"What?"

"I want to see other people."

"Why?" You ask the same question as always, hoping this doesn't have to do with Blair.

"I feel like I'm holding you back." Goddamnit.

"Because I don't cheat on you? When you asked to be wired into the ship— illegally, mind you— what did I do?"

"You wired me in."

"Yeah, I did. Even though IT could probably tell the moment we did it. Even though the shit you do on my ship computer all day reflects on *me*."

No response. Great. Got that to look forward to now. It's never worth dwelling on, though, and as you reach the park you realize just how "suitable" it is. There's some sort of event or party or something, or maybe it's just one of those places that *always* had at least one group of hippies at it, cause the place is packed to

the brim with floral prints and homemade drums. Everyone is smiling. Smoke snakes so heavily through the air that not even the gentle downpour displaces it. From the fence's archway, a beckoning finger of hedonism coaxes. For nobody here knows, and nobody home *would* know, and you could do just about anything with this opportunity. And then you actually focus on someone's face for a second, and remember that these are living people too, and you feel like the Devil. And you should. What's wrong with you?

Passing through the gate into a warm embrace of liberation, you beat the intruding carnivore back into your head's darkest crevice. Time to work. Usually, at these sorts of things, someone will initiate a conversation as long as you look properly lost.

“Oi, you new in town?”

Ta-da. Now the feigned startle; “Oh! Yeah, actually, I am, I'm from New York.” Supposedly, Neptunian accents were closest to old-Earth American. It made certain operations hard: at one point you'd gone back to ensure that Britain's practice of impressing sailors into service ended, and wound up sailing the South China Sea for nearly a decade. Picked up some cool rationing tricks, though.

“That's sound, mate, hear it's wild over there. All the music's here, though.”

“Yeah, damn near. We've got Zappa, though. And Beefheart.”

“Beefheart? Who's that?”

Oh shit. Had *Safe as Milk* not come out yet? Alicistasia hadn't mentioned the month, and... *think, think, think on your feet, quick thinking, come on you got thi—*

“Oh, wait, that the bloke makin’ all the songs about the ocean?”

No. “Yeah, that’s the one, man. Sorry, forgot he ain’t super huge.” Well, better to let this guy be wrong about Captain Beefheart than to out yourself.

“Ah, love what I’ve heard, love it. Anyhow, what brings ya out to Blundstor?”

Blundstor park. It didn’t ring a bell. *Must not be important, then, you could—* stop it. Stop it. Stop. Thinking. It. After a moment you’re overwhelmed again by the stifling smoky air and the disquiet is gone. You have a job to do.

“I’m, uh... well, I’m seeing this show tonight, that’s why I’m here in town. But I heard it’s one of those bands that’s better if you’re, uh...” *SHIT!* What had Blair called it again?

“Tripping?” finished the guy, who clearly enjoyed a few bands of the type himself.

“Yeah.”

“Sound, I got you mate. Lemme grab it out my bag,” he says as he turns, walking off towards a group in a circle. Wow. It was *really* easy to buy acid in the 60s.

The rain and wind have finally cleared the air of smoke. Someone passing catches your eye, a girl, and as you turn to look it’s like an icicle going through your brain. She’s got something tight around her neck too and it’s a reminder of the pilot before Alicistasia, and of Alicistasia, and of Blair and everyone else before that and everyone that will come after and of the reality that they’re all selling something your brain can’t afford. And a question of whether you wanted it in the first place.

“Ere you go mate, don’t sweat it, just come and buy more if you like it. Aye?”

His generosity is an unwanted juxtaposition against your own thoughts and a jarring reminder that you don’t belong in this park or back with Alicistasia in orbit.

“Thanks, man. See you around.”

He nods and leaves you standing there, holding the sheet, fingers feeling funny as you decide to update Alicistasia. “Secured ten ‘tabs’ of old-Earth acid.”

“Congratulations. You have two and a half hours to get it to 101 Cromwell Road.”

“I don’t think I want to.”

Silence. Then, “Why is that?”

“It’s going to ruin his life. And for what?”

“It’s your job to ruin his life.”

“Exactly. And it’s pointless” Or, would *Is it?* have been more appropriate? Regardless.

“We’ve done worse. Don’t get fired over this.” She wasn’t catching on.

“But I don’t have to do it.”

“Where is this independence coming from?”

“Maybe I think you should take some notes on it.”

“Oh, so *that’s* how it is.”

You’ve been walking for a second, looking for a place to stay. You’ve already made your decision, or it was never yours to make, but you aren’t leaving. Why should you? For her? It’s nice here, calm, even if pre-internet peoples’ proclivities remain abnormal.

She’s yelling bullshit straight down your ear canal now. “I swear, is this because of someone back then? Have you been manwhoring your way through time, huh?”

No. Kind of. Accidentally? “Cut it out.”

“*What?*”

“Just fuckin’ cut it out. We both know how happy you’d be to hear all about it. You should’ve found a more charismatic time cop.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“With *me*? Why don’t you ask yourself that when you’re sleeping under the bed on your next ship?”

“Yeah? What’s that supposed to imply?”

“I’m not *implying* shit! Why would I analogize directly to you? You know exactly how I feel about you and your... your *wants*, and all I’m doing now is finally telling you to fuck off!”

You can see your own purple face in the mirror. You found a bathroom, a quiet, dingy one, where you can be alone. The moldy walls get into your head, painful free-association, but you’re able to chase away the unsavory thought. *Ew*. It’s not a huge deal. You’re already focused on a plan. You punch the mirror cracked and pull out a shard.

The buzzing starts again. “You know what? You’re right, I don’t need you. Nobody needs you. You don’t even really exist back then. And like hell I’m bringing you back to me now.” She wasn’t wrong.

“I heard that Lisa and Scott need a data core for their new ship. Give ‘em a call. You’re already used to wires.” And with that, you dig the shard into your ear where it meets your head, sawing and tugging until the whole damn ear comes off. You see the tiny little beeping chip fall to the ground and decide to crush it just in case someone comes looking.

Stepping out of the bathroom (with a clump of paper towels bound to the gaping wound) it seems like the cloud cover is finally splitting up. As the day's first sunbeam shines down upon you, you snatch a tab off the sheet and set it under your tongue. For all the future chemicals, you'd always speculated what the originals were like. And with that, setting off down the road, you finally begin to wonder what those dead pigeons were for.

Non-Fiction

An Ocotillo Field near Mexico

By Eytan Pol

My wife and I pack Tapatío, our red 2011 Ford Escape named after the People's Hot Sauce. We were gifted a cooler after our recent marriage, and this will be the first time we are able to bring cooled food and drinks during a trip. The luxuries are still limited to some tomatoes, bell peppers and apples, shredded cheese (for her), and Coors Lights (for me). I've also poured some milk into a washed-out pasta sauce jar to add to my morning coffee. The remainder of the inventory is the same as always; tent, sleeping bags, backpacks, a light stove, and water bottles are all forced into a couple of those plastic storage containers that people sell on Facebook Marketplace for five bucks each.

The destination is Big Bend National Park, but in truth, we are mostly just happy to be able to leave campus for about a week. Lately, the tediousness of feigning participation in the academic community, pretending to care about the constant and tireless subverting, complicating, shuffling, and reorganizing, has started to become overwhelming. Fortunately, these academic activities remain confined to dusty offices, whispering hallways, and cold classrooms, and quickly die off when coming in contact with the open air.

The drive to Big Bend takes us only around five hours, mostly towards the south and slightly to the west. The plains dry out quickly and the Chihuahuan desert soon greets us with its greasewood, mesquite, and yellowish dust. This is the Trans-Pecos, where West

Texas turns into Far West Texas, cut off by the Pecos River. The towns become smaller and the distance between them greater as we continue heading south. What remains the same, however, is the constant nodding of the hypnotizing pumpjacks that litter this state from the Panhandle to the Mexican border.

It is afternoon when we reach the park boundary south of the town of Marathon, but another forty-five minutes to get to the visitor center for a backcountry permit. Fields of ocotillos and mesquite embrace the road, and we pass a border patrol station, which only stops and checks all the northbound vehicles. In the distance, the Chisos Mountains appear. Dog Canyon, Dagger Flats, we pass it all by in a race to get to the visitor center before closing time. The parking lot is almost full, busier than I have ever seen the park, but we arrive on time. "I can't give you a permit more than a day in advance," the backcountry ranger tells me, as my wife is picking out postcards. We leave and make our plans for the rest of the day, which boils down to a quick trip to Boquillas Canyon to dip into the Rio Grande, as Santa Elena Canyon is too far of a drive to make before dark.

She shows me the postcards and we talk about the potential recipients. When I arrived in the United States, someone advised me to make friends with my mechanic as soon as I could. I sent him a postcard from a trip to Utah, which is still visible on the wall of the shop. A postcard shows effort, and effort means care. A coyote crosses the road in the distance, and we get out to watch it run over the desert flats.

It is a welcoming change to be once again

surrounded by nature, rather than nature writing, which is the focus of my research. As much as I enjoy my little academic niche, I have yet to read the page that beats the actual experience of being outdoors yourself. The only logical conclusion is then that there is an inherent paradox in writing this essay, which I am happy to brush aside for now, telling myself I shall not write down a single word while outside of any city limits. Nature writing often serves a twofold purpose. It recounts and describes the author's time spent away from the city and in nature. But often, nature writing serves as a narratological vehicle to allow the author to contemplate larger issues and subjects, be they societal or philosophical or otherwise. That is alright, nature writing simply functions effectively for such literary activities. However, the nature itself, the wilderness one finds themselves in, should never be a diversion, secondary, or a tool.

Boquillas Canyon proves to be less busy than the visitor center, and the water of the Rio Grande is cool, welcoming on our skin. It is March, but here at the southern tip of Texas, the temperature is already well into the 90s. I look at the other side of the river, which seems easy enough to cross. Mexico is so close, and the boundary seems arbitrary, but at the same time monstrously real, an imposing fact without having any actual physical presence inside the park, beyond the occasional border patrol vehicle. The bathroom has 'ACAB' graffitied on the wall. At a nearby overlook, Mexican pottery and blankets and other goods are laid out with price tags. The products are brought in every morning, left out, and removed in the evening. No one

stays to guard them, the operation relies on an honor system instead. Visitors put cash inside a nearby cylinder for whichever product they want to purchase. Later, the cylinder, together with the remaining goods are brought back into Mexico. “You can just put in a dollar and get whatever you want,” I overhear a visitor say. “No one would know. It is all illegal contraband technically anyway.”

An our and a half later, we are back near Marathon, where we’ll be camping for a few days. Naturally, all the campgrounds inside Big Bend were fully reserved, which left us with little options. Geographically and culturally, West Texas is undoubtedly a part of the West, especially the Trans-Pecos. However, what sets Texas apart from the rest of the states in the West is the accessibility to land. Over 95% of this state is private land, which stands in stark contrast with states like Utah, where 75% of the land is public. Colorado, California, Arizona, and New Mexico all are split roughly fifty-fifty between private and public land, and Nevada is almost 90% public. In these states, it is easy to find a backroad and camp on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management or in National Forests. Not so in Texas, where Big Bend is immediately surrounded by enormous ranches. Cattle land. Country roads and highways are hugged by fences on either side, and every acre is portioned off. A state so large in size, yet small in other ways.

The next day, the Chisos Mountain Basin is packed. We foolishly expect to be able to park at the Lost Mine trailhead, but end up parking a mile away at the side of the road like many dozens of other cars.

Forced to hike alongside the road to get to the trailhead, we make fun of what seems to be the dominant demographics at the park currently: young families and elderly people. A friend and ranger at Capitol Reef National Park in Utah once characterized these groups of visitors as the newlyweds and nearly-deads. We smirk until we realize our recent marriage has now caused us to be part of the former of these groups. No matter, we make good time up the mountain towards the overlook at the end, partially hurried up by a man blasting classical music from a speaker attached to his backpack. We despise him, forcing everyone in a hundred-foot radius to listen to his music, most likely scaring away wildlife, and chipping away at the serenity of a place like this. Phonetic littering. I have not been employed by the park service for almost three years, and I have learned that arguing with such a person is an exercise in futility when not wearing a uniform.

I promised my wife amazing views at the top, and even told her that you could see the Guadalupe Mountains on a clear day, without knowing the truth behind such a statement. Empty promises, the day is dusty and we cannot clearly see more than twenty or so miles in any direction. Towards the south is Mexico, and if it wasn't for the sliver of green surrounding the Rio Grande that stands in stark contrast with the yellow desert all around, there would be no way to tell where Texas ends and Mexico begins. The man and his music arrive, and we are forced back down again.

Edward Abbey wrote that it is not enough to defend wilderness, that you should enjoy it too. Recently, I was criticized for my views on wilderness

recreation – a loathsome term that connotes utilization rather than immersion. The sentiment I rejected, one that seems to circulate increasingly commonly, is that wilderness enjoyment is mostly for the rich, and to deny this is to pretend otherwise. Distrust anyone who says you need anything more than a bottle of water and a couple of Nature Valley Crunchy Honey Bars to enjoy the outside. No RVs, ATVs, speedboats, GPS trackers, or any other expensive piece of equipment or technology is necessary. It is in fact the increase in accessibility (for machines and the wealthy, not for wildlife and the poor) that causes this sentiment. To go outside in nature, to get lost and find your way back using just your own two feet, is not an upper class activity, nor should it be viewed as such. It is important to resist such nefarious notions, and to maintain the idea and ideal of wilderness enjoyment as one of the most open and democratic activities available. To frame wilderness enjoyment as elitist and privileged will inevitably lead to the introduction of the type of overdevelopment that in reality does put a price tag on the access to wilderness, creating an intellectual cul-de-sac.

A few hours later, we face the same parking problem at Santa Elena Canyon at the far western edge of the park. The day has become hot, which makes the thought of dipping into the Rio Grande that flows out of the canyon even more alluring, and again we end up parking at the side of the road. The trail into the canyon seems crowded, and we have a backpacking trip to start tomorrow, so we decide to linger at the river instead. A short walk downstream, a bank formed in the middle of

the river, and it seems shallow enough to cross. The notion seems hard to resist. We roll up our pants as high as we can and start wading. In less than two minutes, we reach the other side of the river, Mexico, and are looking around. Of course, nothing is different, and everything feels the same.

We drive back to our campsite near Marathon, this time through the west entrance of the park and the towns of Terlingua and Alpine instead, mostly to avoid the 45 mph speed limit inside the park boundaries and the excess of expensively modified Sprinter Vans and 30-foot RVs, the shelters of those too afraid or rich to sleep in a tent. The speed limit practically doubles in an instance outside of the park boundaries, where the ranches start. Soon, however, we notice another border patrol station, and I rapidly decrease Tapatio's speed. I ask my wife to grab my wallet from my back as I slowly roll over the three speedbumps right before the roofed station. Three agents, armed, casually walk out their office.

"How are we doing today?" the one on the driver's side asks me. The two others remain in front and near the vehicle, watching us.

"We're fine, and you?" I answer.

"Do you have your license?" the agent asks, ignoring my own question. I reach for my wallet to take it out, but he seems uninterested in looking at it.

"Are you American citizens?" he asks, while looking inside the car, noticing our storage bins, backpacks and firewood.

"No we are not." I say

"What is your status in this country?"

“We are on F1 visas. We’ve got our I-20s with us if you’d like to see them.”

“You guys are fine, have a nice a day,” he says without having looked at either of our licenses. Their uninterest seemed to quickly turn into boredom, and I imagine that this is their equivalent of an assembly line and the road their conveyor belt, inspecting the quality of the products that pass by monotonously, occasionally picking one out to disapprove and remove.

In turn, the whole process has become routine for us too in a border state like Texas. More often than not, the experience is over quickly and the agents pleasant, though we did get scolded once for not carrying our I-20 documents in Southern New Mexico about half a year ago. I decided not to argue the inherent silliness of carrying a large folder of immigration documents with you at all times. Never argue with an armed uniform in a bad mood.

Soon we reach Alpine, and get gas on the road near the campus of Sul Ross State University. The buildings of the campus are situated on a hillside, facing southwest, and are all built in the same orange and white stone. It is, all in all, a beautiful campus, as are many of the small and forgettable ones that dot this country. As much as the inside of academic institutions can often be disappointing, the outside remains aesthetically beautiful. In any case, I imagine the work done at a teaching-heavy college such as Sul Ross is a lot more important than at our own large R1 research university.

That evening near Marathon, we pack our backpacks for the planned overnight. I’m carrying the tent, and my wife our small stove to boil water for our

prepackaged camping meals. Those are objectively disgusting, but after a long day of hiking, huddled hungrily outside, they taste delicious. We each have six liters of water, as the temperature will be high and we can expect little shade on the trail. The Marufo Vega trail is our destination for tomorrow, an initial trail leading over backcountry ridges and desert flats in the east side of the park, before a loop through two washes leads you to and alongside the Rio Grande. The day will be too hot tomorrow for the full loop, and we already decided to simply take the south fork of the loop to the Rio Grande, enjoy a view of the river and Mexico one last time, before heading back the same way and camping somewhere alongside the trail, to hike back out the following day.

The day is hotter than expected, but windier too, which makes the heat a lot more bearable. The Marufo Vega trailhead has two other cars parked at it, though within the first thirty minutes of the hike we run into both groups, returning to their cars after visiting the old ore trail that forks off two miles in. The packs feel heavy on our backs as we quickly lose sight of the trailhead, the road, and eventually the overlook of Boquillas Canyon as we continue upward a steep ridge. After fifteen minutes of carefully ascending and balancing, however, we are rejoined with views of the Rio Grande and its thin bordering riparian zone of green vegetation, contrasted by the yellow and white and brown of the Chihuahuan desert all around.

According to the park service, the Marufo Vega trail is named after a rancher, Gregorio Marufo, who used to herd goats in the area. I share this information

with my wife as we take a break to drink some water, but she does not believe me initially. I don't blame her, it is difficult to imagine any herbivore larger than a jackrabbit surviving out here. The only thing in this area that is more lacking than vegetation without thorns is shade. Even getting to the Rio Grande for water is a fairly treacherous climb or a straight fall at most spots.

The trail takes a sharp turn leftward and we continue along the rocky path up and over ridges, one after the other. The view of the Rio Grande is quickly blocked off as we hike more towards the east. The afternoon sun burns us, but the semiregular wind gusts make the hike more bearable. After passing over the fourth – or is it the fifth? – ridge, we enter a small and shallow bowl-like valley. A relatively flat area at the bottom of this bowl, a field, is covered in countless ocotillos. Ocotillos, or desert coral, candlewood, vine cactus, are upward bundles of thin needle-covered plants. They look like cacti and especially the bright flowers on top remind me of the prickly pear, but ocotillos are succulents.

This whole area feels hidden, even though the occasional hiker like us passes through. Still, it feels as though we have stumbled upon the most lonesome corner of Big Bend. The sheer quantity of the ocotillos is overwhelming, and it is almost as though the entire bottom of the bowl is one large grove. All of them are taller than us, and if it wasn't for their lack of girth, surely they would block our view. They are beautiful, and the moment feels significant. I feel embraced by the world around me, by the sun and the rock, by the Rio Grande miles away, by these ocotillos. I look at my wife

and she seems to experience the same feeling. Neither of us speak.

The openness in nature is paradoxically contrasted by a general restrictiveness in nature writing. The joy of the danger of wilderness exploration is opposite to the tendency to not take many risks in narratives retelling such explorations. And the freedom of the open spaces is far removed from the manner in which writing on these spaces is judged. In writing, the difference between mythologizing nature and romanticizing nature seems to be totally forgotten. Both are clumped together and are responded to with a wagging index finger – often one that is a well-kept, thoroughly moisturized, and showing advanced signs of carpal tunnel syndrome. A similar thing occurs after accusations of anthropomorphism, which according to David Gessner is a label often given to any author who strays from the strictly scientific.

To mythologize something is to make a thing into a myth, a symbolic narrative. To mythologize nature is then by definition to force upon it an exterior narrative, a myth. On the other hand, to romanticize something means to describe a thing in an idealized manner, making it more appealing than it really is. This is then inherently subjective. More appealing according to whom? Are we not all witness to our subjective perception and experiences? And what if the sensation of this ideal is reality? A concept of Romanticism in literature is an emphasis on the experience of the beauty and sublime in nature and wilderness. The sublime, of course, has been thoroughly and mercilessly demonized.

When something is sublime, its beauty inspires awe. To witness a lightning storm on red Kayenta cliffs

of Lower Muley Twist, hitting the dry rock in front of you, as you are many hours removed from the nearest human being is sublime. Those who deny it often fall back on reducing such experiences to dry and drab explanations of electrostatic discharge caused by the electrons attracted to protons in the silt and sandstone (thus we circle back to Gessner's comments on the antagonistic label of anthropomorphism). Therefore, such an experience is the exact same as sitting in a comfortable townhouse and looking at a storm through a window. Or worse, it is the same as a digitally rendered version of lightning, a shade on a TV or computer screen. The sublime of the wilderness becomes unworthy of such exuberant celebration.

But what if I feel these joys? Truly feel them? What cynicism must be felt to want to deny the truth of individual sensation and experience? I have no patience for those who feel the need to argue this from neatly decorated offices. The only trouble that wilderness has is from those who want to reimagine it, either as abstract subverted little packages, or as consumable aesthetics to make a quick buck from. Unfortunately, the logic of academia and industry sometimes tend to go hand in hand. Wilderness does not need to be subverted, deconstructed, reimaged, recategorized, or reorganized. It needs to be enjoyed and appreciated.

Before too long, we reach the south fork towards the Rio Grande. We continue eastward through the canyon, scrambling over the loose rocks and boulders that litter its floor. After a mile, the canyon reopens, and after a few ridges we reach the edge of the cliffs at the river. The Rio Grande bends like an inverted C-shape

around us. Mexico is simultaneously to our south, our east, and our north. The river looks peaceful, clean, stunning, but my mind remains with the ocotillos four miles back on the trail.

The wind picks up as we set up our tent for the night. We weigh down the tarp with some rocks and watch the sun set over Marufo Vega in the west. The night is windy, and the tent noisy, but we don't care. Exhaustion ensures deep sleep. We wake up to a silent desert engulfing us, but are quick to get up and pack. A few hours later, we load Tapatío with our packs thrown in the back, and start the drive back northwards, out of the back, towards Marathon.

At another station, a border patrol agent signals us to stop.

Arrival

By Alina Zollfrank

It's not exactly welcoming, this 1920s home.

We unravel weary bones from the long drive to drag bits and bobs up the slovenly poured cement layers of the driveway. Congealed wrinkles on an incline. I struggle with the Yale door lock when my teenager goes, "Ugh." Wet tennis shoe sole slides on the slanted porch, a mild plop. A landing sound of sorts, of something that used to matter. "Ugh," repeats my kid. A ragged red cat has dropped a mouse and dashes, all attitude, for the bushes when my husband deftly sends the rodent's body flying. It's a city full of life, it seems, and I wonder how much life this vacation home has seen.

Plink. I win the battle with the lock. The door squeaks open, and my eyes take a moment to adjust. Cascading notes of brown, inefficiently interrupted by wilted roses that maybe used to be pink and maybe used to smell sweet. A monstrous holiday ribbon perched on top of a decrepit mirror; the frame, of course, some flavor of oak. "Dude, this is like from a horror film," my kid exclaims, and I can't disagree. Two steps in on creaky floor boards, and my shock about the palette is replaced by an olfactory attack. Tired feet rooted on wooden planks, we try to find our bearings and identify the smell. Well, smells – plural. There's the stained brown-on-brown carpet that accordions its way up steep stairs. Definitely critter droppings. And possibly the corporeal outline of the original woman and her many cats, all

who lived and died here and now shimmer in the landing's dust cloud.

“Two hundred bucks a night for this?” my husband, who is not easy to rattle, mutters while spinning in search of a safe surface to place the luggage. “Well, it did say historic home,” I reply. A few steps further and seconds later, I break into panic sweats and tears. A long-awaited family get-away after months of his cancer treatments, a chance to escape our town, our routine without doom on the horizon. We needed this; we deserved this; we thought we'd planned it well. The storm had followed us south on I-5, visibility often less than ten feet, and the Canadian big rigs sported stickers stating “I'm not afraid of death” and drove accordingly. Now, here, we're reminded of mortality again while the sky turns ochre and the house's muted and not-so-muted browns wobble like jello. I fumble along the walls for light switches, find sticky trails, metal plates, then tiny round buttons. When pressed, they sigh and click on ceiling bulbs that remind me of war-era basements. It's a good thing we brought flashlights because even with all the lamps on, this place is wrapped in shadow. I'm ashamed to admit: I may not be willing to give it a chance.

Ironically, there are slippers to protect our socks from errant nails. My husband scoffs at this, marches over to the fire place, and promptly exclaims, “Dammit!” A nail has torn a sizable hole in his compression sock. We stumble around gasping, try to find something to love while we travel from wall to wall to open up the windows. Many are painted shut and won't budge. Others come with metal contraptions from another

century and require a key we don't have. The well-lit kitchen, however, has a modern tile splash and sink, and a newer window that we push open. The Portland breeze carries a surprising shot of eucalyptus and hibiscus blossoms this wet September evening; it rushes in and uplifts. We unpack.

I don gloves and get to cleaning what appear to be ketchup speckles on counters, unidentifiable smears on fridge shelves, and toilet seats that have obviously hosted other humans recently. I try not to gag and hum to myself that there are some things I can fix and some things I can't. My therapist said so. When I discover dubious brown spots on the bed's sheets and comforters, rather than melting down and running out the door screaming, I decide to wash the bedding for better, cleaner sleep. I don't even fall apart, at least not all the way, when the modern front-loader washer is covered in black goo at which I scrub, scrub away.

I'm preparing our dinner next to the kitchen sink when I begin to feel odd. Not the hair-standing-on-back-of-neck odd I expected when we first entered, but a soft slipping into otherness. I feel my anxiety sliding off my skin and hone in on the artworks that litter the place. The square kitchen table showcases rough hand-hewn pineapples and vines beneath a glass cover, and I wonder how old it is. Behind the double folding doors of the wood-paneled dining room, a joyous painting, vaguely French, depicts a black-clad bicyclist transporting on his back a metallic tree lit with numerous bulbs. It's delightful. Even the mishmash of rickety dining chairs, found objects from antique stores and flea markets, I'm guessing, entertains me with its

various surfaces that speak of meals spilled by those left behind. Or of spilled behinds?

I giggle and wow to write this down when my spouse asks, “What is *that* smell now?” I’m not sure, really, but our tall teen flares his nostrils and trails the source: tenants who apparently live in the basement. Perched at street level below our open kitchen window, they are dressed in all black and blacker, with eye make-up I haven’t seen since my last Cure concert and hair that hasn’t seen a comb since they left their parents’ nests. The looks of a ratty generation who thinks it knows death and suffering but only in concept. Eyes glued to the back of the garbage can, they’re smoking from large glass apparatuses and sucking on small glimmer sticks.

It hits me that this constitutes my first-ever contact high. I’ve arrived in this old home, in this moment. And I feel free not to care.

Stairs, Scars, and Bicycles

By Eric Gabriel Lehman

One fall evening after teaching my last class I inched my banged-up red Raleigh toward an intersection with a four-way stop sign, the Baby Steps Preschool to my right, the office of science-fiction-sounding Dr. Gudeon to my left. One or two pedal strokes after continuing, blinding headlights struck the Raleigh and something shoved its front wheel. I teetered weightlessly in air for an eternal Wile E. Coyote moment before everything speeded up and I fell, scraping my face against the chilly asphalt. Moments later the flashing lights of an EMT wagon, fire truck, and police car lit up the intersection like an old-fashioned Hollywood premiere, complete with onlookers. I untangled myself from the Raleigh's frame and ignored the burn on one side of my face, ready to tell off the motorist who'd hit me, when a woman offered an open makeup compact. The glare of many headlights turned it into a tiny backstage makeup mirror. One half of my face had been spared, but the other was darkly bruised. I was a walking New York-style black-and-white cookie. "Call your husband," a cop advised after learning someone waited for me at home.

My bifurcated face shocked me in the mirror the next morning, not only on account of the jungle of bruise but its uncanny resemblance to several dimly recalled, crinkle-edged black-and-white images taken by my father's Argus 35-mm reflex camera a long, long time ago. They recorded another fall from another bike.

This time the damage ran horizontally, a gauzy, Rothko-like band of scab starting at the hairline and dropping deep enough to crust my eyelids shut. My downward-tilting head displayed the gore to its best advantage, since these pictures were to be submitted as evidence in a lawsuit.

Scars are the body's archive. Memories might float in some neurological Cloud, but scars are stubbornly analog, written in old school longhand on the skin for all to see. A tiny line branding the skin near my left thumb by a hot baking sheet used to make chapati in a Scottish youth hostel still grins like a finger puppet whenever I make a fist. The shiny stripe stitched into my upper forearm records a bike's skid on gravel in East Hampton. Faulkner, the cat who shared my first New York apartment, sank his teeth into my nose, leaving a raspberry gash that healed into a dry riverbed across my right nostril that has faded only in the last ten years.

Scars are a signature of the *luftmensch*, a Yiddish term referring to someone who might forget to screw his head on every morning if not attached, as my mother put it. The ceramic elephant an aunt gave me? I broke it. I was not yet five when I charged across busy Ogden Avenue in the Bronx, nearly getting hit by a bus bound for Yankee Stadium, just to greet the upstairs neighbor who baked my favorite cookies. Another *luftmensch* incident occurred while my mother hung laundry on a line that shuttled between the living room and bedroom windows. I leaned over the bedroom window's ledge, high above a skull-cracking concrete alleyway, enjoying the clothing's jittery approach that made me think of the

elevated subway line nearby, until a neighbor's terrified shout alerted my mother. That cat-bite scar was without question the mark of a *luftmensch*. The gravel wipeout occurred a year or two after coming out, when I took an unceremonious slide down a boyfriend's wooden staircase in my socks, qualifying me as a gay *luftmensch*.

But my stellar *luftmensch* performance, archived in those black and white snapshots, dates from one of several summers my family spent in a bungalow colony just north of the city. Such colonies once dotted upstate New York, postwar, suburban versions of Catskill Mountains rooming houses where Jewish immigrants once sought relief from airless Lower East Side summers between the wars. My parents, the children of such immigrants, joined the ranks of city people eager to escape hot, non-air conditioned apartments. They rented a small cottage with a peaked roof and siding resembling red brick in a miniature village of trees and curving walkways. We swam in an aqua-colored pool and relaxed on our tiny patch of lawn while my father barbequed on the grill. My sister and I had our own bedroom, which our cramped Bronx apartment lacked. We went horseback riding. We enjoyed the kind of comfortably middle class life of 1960s TV sitcoms, albeit temporarily. For two months every year, my mother liked to say, we lived as princes.

What about the remaining ten? My father's job building pipe racks and partitions and cutting tables for his stingy father-in-law's garment center business couldn't provide such comfort year-round. Our declining neighborhood was locked into the Bronx's dreary, concrete crossword puzzle of streets. Our

apartment in the back of the building crowded four people into three rooms. My father drove one rattletrap after the other. Treats were never abundant, the cake slices measured, the ice cream parceled out. The bit of back yard sprouting a brave *Tree Grows in Brooklyn* ailanthus was the exclusive domain of the super's family, so my sister and I got no closer to the tree than our fire escape. Like many New York neighborhoods of the era, ours would be ruptured by seismic demographic shifts of white flight.

Other families arrived at the bungalow colony in nice cars, driving up from New York's better neighborhoods or its suburbs. Most of the men worked in offices and not with their hands. The kids didn't share their bedroom in the city with a refrigerator, as I did, since mine was shoehorned into a corner of the kitchen. They might fly down to Florida in the winter. They certainly didn't have to wait for a relative "in the business" to furnish them with school supplies each fall. They showed off their tape recorders, stereo systems, and cameras, bought with generous allowances or received as gifts. They were secure about who they were and what they expected of the world. They knew what they wanted to study in college and where they intended to enroll, movers and shakers-to-be, *machers* in the making, even if none of the boys had reached bar mitzvah age. They behaved as many white, middle class people of the time were supposed to, confident of a future they knew would be theirs. Our cover was blown the moment my father drove our latest clunker onto the property, when I repeated something in Spanish learned from my friend Carmen Sanchez, or when I contributed

Aretha Franklin 45s to parties. We were strangers in this strange land of prosperous American Jews, impostors, perhaps even traitors.

The day of the shopping-cart incident my mother and I have carpooled with other mothers from the colony into town. “Don’t shame me,” she often exhorts anytime we leave the apartment, overestimating my ability to compromise her integrity while betraying her anxiety at her place in the world, as well as my potential for a *luftmensch*’s antics. She might have said as much that morning as we pulled off the property, sitting beside the other mothers speaking of new dresses or jewelry or winter travel plans, a farm wife warning her son to remember his city manners when trucking into town. We are barely inside the supermarket when we wrangle over Cheez Doodles, my latest craving. She insists on plain—and less expensive—store-brand potato chips. Mothers of my bungalow colony friends buy Cheez Doodles, I remind her. I am due a prince’s worth of Cheez Doodles during those two magical months of summer, after all. If I had been paying attention—and had been a tad kinder—I might have noted the strain on her face as she grabbed the Cheez Doodles from my greedy hands. But I am in the thrall of kids with tape recorders and Impala-driving fathers who don’t patch corrosion spots on their car’s hood with masking tape or affix metal hangers to replace stolen antennas. “Stay put,” she says when I fidget on the checkout line, smarting with shame.

Unused carts yoked together near the checkout line bring to mind a row of stainless steel locomotives, and at that age there’s nothing I love more than trains. While

my mother rummages in her purse for coupons I break free of the line and, *luftmensch* that I am, dislodge a cart and push it toward the exit before my mother realizes what has happened. The complicit automatic door whisks open in a gesture of encouragement to frame the vista of a sunny parking lot that's almost empty, its smooth asphalt beckoning.

I grab the front handle, push one foot against the ground, scooter-style, and the cart glides forward as I light out for the territories. I pick up speed, free of my mother and far from the Bronx. Warm, welcoming air caresses my face as I course into the sunlight. Midway through my joyride the cart ceases being a train and becomes what I have wanted for the longest time: a bicycle. I don't know how to ride, and the high saddles and skinny tires of ten-speeds zipping through the neighborhood look daunting, but, oh, to dart around the block, getting to school in no time or sailing down the Anderson Avenue hill, nearly as steep as the first drop of the Coney Island Cyclone by my reckoning. My mother has deemed our neighborhood's streets unsafe for biking—even if it's where I regularly roller skate—which is code for bikes being beyond our family's means.

My shiny, new bike crosses line after line of each parking spot painted onto the asphalt. The bit of slope toward the exit ramp kicks up my pace, speeding me toward the town's main street, as well as toward a flight of concrete steps leading to the store's basement, but my eyes barely reach to the level of the shopping cart handle, so I see neither ramp nor steps. Would the *luftmensch* in me have slowed down if I had? Or would

the relief at escaping my mother's tight purse and ceaseless critique that have me second guessing my very being—*Don't walk like a girl, Go outside and play with the other boys, Don't talk with your hands*—been too hard to resist?

I can't say for sure what happens next. I remember nothing. I imagine the front wheels of the speeding cart jamming against a raised concrete lip that frames the top of those stairs. The back of the cart arches up as if I'd braked my imaginary bike's back wheel—something an experienced cyclist wouldn't do—causing the speeding cart to rear up. In the final seconds before its fall back to earth, however—a taut, shimmering moment not unlike the Raleigh's wheels losing contact with the ground in that Queens intersection—my bike catapults me skyward. I am Daedalus ascending into a flawless summer sky, a *luftmensch* too exhilarated by his ascent into the *luft* to give his trajectory's inevitable descent a second thought. I soar like a ski jumper, intoxicated by height and speed and the sheer power of will. I am beyond judgement, my mother's or anyone else's. *I can have all the Cheez Doodles I want.* Then cart and boy crash to the ground and tumble over each of the stairway's sharp concrete teeth, their roughness sandpapering my forehead over and over, until I slam against a locked door whose heartless silence denies any responsibility for what has just happened.

My head is bandaged in the ER, mummifying me to just below my eyes and sealing them shut. For days I see no more than pinpoints of blood-tinged light through a filigree of bruise that will scab, hard as the tooth-breaking mantle of a candy apple. My usually no-

nonsense parents speak to me in anxious whispers, as if talking any louder might tear something. My accident renders them gentle as TV parents who help their children fly kites and tuck them in at night. Unable to swim or do much else, I am installed in a webbed folding chair on our little lawn for the good part of several days, which spares me the ordeal of softball but subjects me to the happy sounds coming from the pool. The itchy bandage keeps me up at night, and I toss in my bed to the electric chirp of crickets, my hearing heightened by a diminished sense of sight. Volleys of nocturnal ping pong players at a table set up on our neighbor's lawn are incessant, ticking clocks. I sleepwalk during the day, woozy in perpetual nighttime. Once the bandage is peeled away, I finger my forehead, whose stippled surface replicates my mother's crispy salmon croquettes. She hesitates when I ask for a mirror and then cry at what I finally see.

Family lore surrounding my fall concerns less the accident than the lawsuit it was to have won, netting a generous settlement to bankroll my college education. The owner of the bungalow colony, a family friend, recommended a lawyer, his brother, as it turned out, who promised to soak the store—one of a large chain—for all it was worth, since the threat of bad publicity would have the owners caving. Our case would be a slam-dunk, a clear instance of gross negligence, since a barrier should have blocked access to those stairs. A child was seriously injured, and no jury would fail to be moved by the sight of a bruised boy marched into the courtroom. Soon, however, the lawyer began telling my parents of the supermarket's claim that a chain had been

strung across the stairway, since no deliveries were made that day. If the chain hadn't been in place at the time of the accident, it could only mean someone had removed it. An unsupervised boy who might hijack a shopping cart and be so foolhardy as to race it across an active parking lot just off a busy street might easily undo a chain, it was argued. A store employee recalled running after my cart and shouting for me to stop, although I remember neither person nor chain. I never had the chance to tell my side of the story in court. Those crinkle-edge pictures were the only pieces of evidence my parents were instructed to submit. The case was dropped.

Lawyer friends shake their heads when I tell them that my parents didn't seek other representation. Yet even if born in America, my parents continued living in the Polish shtetls of their parents. They were the children of working-class immigrants unfamiliar with opaque legal machinery and intimidated by it. They rarely went outside their circle of relatives and friends for what they needed, honoring connections and tribal loyalties. Why would they even think of seeking out a complete stranger to represent their family in court instead of the brother of someone they knew?

Years later my mother admitted not wanting to withdraw the case, horrified by what happened to me and suspecting foul play. I wondered whether she accepted defeat as punishment for letting her *luftmensch* son out of her sight. I can easily picture my father, less confrontational than she, unwilling to question the lawyer's authority. He was far less understanding of *luftmensch* sons and likely blamed me for the incident.

Not only was it a stunt I might pull—I'd nearly walked straight into that Ogden Avenue bus, hadn't I?—but snubbing the owner's brother— and perhaps exposing a payoff—risked putting everyone in an awkward position; the owner not only gave us a break on our summer rental but a year to pay it off. Keeping silent was the least my father could do.

Not long after the incident the owner of the bungalow colony was indicted on tax evasion and wound up in prison. He was in the pool one weekend after not being seen on the grounds all summer, no doubt on a weekend's leave. He was thickly bearded. A Willie Nelson-style bandana knotted around his long hair and his skin was the pasty white of someone forced to spend time indoors. My father's explanation of his situation, when I pried it from him, was tinged with sympathy and even admiration for such a Jewish badass. Years later the owner faced charges of illegal seizure of state land, a petty Jewish gangster of the late twentieth century.

One Sunday afternoon weeks after my parking lot misadventure, we were visiting the bungalow colony owner and his wife. The many rooms of their suburban house included one with a picture window overlooking a private little valley. The den contained the largest TV I ever saw. A Black woman did the family's cooking and cleaning. The kitchen sink's garbage disposal unit was a marvel. I borrowed one of the family's several bicycles and took it to the gently sloping road out front, determined to do what I'd never been able to on account of having no bike: learn to ride.

Cycling is perfect for a *luftmensch*. A bicycle's architecture is minimal. Its tires barely touch the ground. A mere dance of physics keeps it upright. How different from a car, whose four heavy wheels hug the earth in a way that seems obvious and unimaginative. I kick myself off into motion, wary, but determined, feet held free of pedals I fear touching. Gravity pulls me along at first. The smooth asphalt is cooperative; a gentle breeze at my back encourages. I pick up speed as the hill steepens and trees start hurrying past. I relax, far from a cramped apartment in a neighborhood where a chubby, White boy is at the mercy of tough kids irritated by his vocabulary and seeking the distraction of a good schoolyard fight. I will be mugged coming home from school later that year and will develop habits of the urban fearful: looking behind me, watching what I say, and saying little. Such habits will stay with me, warping, shadowing, and scarring for years to come. In a few hours we will have to return to all of it. But for the moment I glide down a friendly hill showing country kindness to a city stranger. By the time the road evens out my feet have connected to the pedals, and I am riding at last.

I cranked back uphill, sweating and happy as I returned to the house to announce my achievement. My father reacted with indifference. My mother looked alarmed, perhaps fearing that since I could now ride a bike, I would soon demand one. "Did you ask before you borrowed it?" she said, dimming my joy. She was as conscious as my father of my family's delicate web of debt to the bungalow colony's owner, who faced them on the other side of the coffee table. My shamed eyes

avoided those of our hosts when I admitted I hadn't. The woman of the house sensed my discomfort as well as my parents' and with equal parts diplomacy and noblesse oblige she welcomed me to use the bike in the future if I asked beforehand. I slunk away from the living room, from the harsh world of my parents, where little could be said truthfully or admitted to openly, lest it cause shame, where scars pulsed for years beneath the skin. During the drive home the twin pylons of the George Washington Bridge soared in silvery floodlight, giant trophies celebrating my triumph. But the backs of my parents' heads, lit by cars from behind, were faceless deities demanding tribute.

Those pictures of my bruised face were probably among hundreds of Kodak Instamatic snapshots I threw out one hot August afternoon when I emptied my parents' apartment. The sun through their unwashed bedroom windows filled the room in a lifeless twilight I recalled from each of their *shivas*. I took down shoeboxes of curled pictures taken in New England and Florida and Israel, the sole destinations my frugal parents allowed themselves. I respectfully examined the many faded records of happy times, reluctant to destroy such hard-earned memories. Yet I grew impatient after the first box. Their memories weren't mine and there were simply too many. Only after I'd tossed everything into black plastic utility bags did I recall those Argus snapshots, but it felt too late to try retrieving them.

Just before leaving their bedroom for the last time I caught sight of myself in the mirror above my mother's dresser. I recalled it draped in observance of her and my

father's *shiva*, a ritual that discourages us from viewing ourselves, just as we are deprived of seeing a departed ever again. Mirrors emphasize the present, the tradition says; our reflections feed our vanity at being alive. A masked mirror trains the focus away from ourselves and onto those we have lost so that we see them not with our eyes but with our hearts.

Something made me lean toward the dusty glass, perhaps prompted by thoughts of those lost snapshots. My face bore no trace of the shopping cart incident, appropriate enough for a court case that never materialized. Yet scarless, those snapshots gone, and without my parents for confirmation, could I even be sure the whole thing ever happened? My *luftmensch's* hazy reflection alone remained, a face my parents did their best to love and protect, and in those last moments in their apartment, I tied up the black plastic bags and I forgave and was sad and was grateful.

The driver who toppled my Raleigh approached with an apology. I had fully intended to be angry at him, but pain and the lingering shock of my bruised face in the woman's mirror slowed my tongue. His shaky English made me feel sorry for him. He offered to drive me home, so I fitted my damaged bicycle into his back seat, and off we went. The guy jerking to a stop or knifing through traffic to change lanes satisfied me that I hadn't been the *luftmensch* back at the intersection, or at least not the only one. He spoke of coming to America from China with nothing but a degree and the desire for a freer life. He recounted how much he enjoyed biking to his engineering college in Beijing. Now he worked for

the New York City Department of Transportation. He owned a home and his son was about to graduate from a prestigious New York City high school. When we reached my building he gave me some money for my banged-up front wheel. I sensed him studying my bruises, seeing his own younger face in mine, or perhaps his son's.

Not long ago I was biking to work, approaching the familiar corner of Dr. Gudeon and the Baby Steps Preschool, when I noticed a bike painted all white, chained to a No Parking pole near where my Raleigh went down. *Cyclist Killed Here* read the accompanying sign bolted to the pole, one of many such “ghost bikes” erected throughout the world to memorialize a cyclist’s traffic-related death. I gripped my handlebars, looking right and left as I proceeded through the intersection, trusting the Raleigh, the laws of physics, and the good will of all forces present at that intersection, visible or otherwise, to get me safely to the other side and beyond.

My Real Life Superpower

By Nelson R. Smith

Society calls it a disability, a disorder, a syndrome. I call it a superpower. However, that would depend upon the condition, since it's a spectrum. If I was asked what my real life superpower would be, it would be autism. More than that, it's the intellect that stems from it. Some of the smartest people in the world have Asperger's or a different form of ASD (autism spectrum disorder). It was this that allowed Albert Einstein to become one of the greatest scientists in the world, providing us with the theory of relativity. It was this that allowed Bill Gates to found Microsoft. It was this that allowed Elon Musk to acquire Twitter, and establish companies like SpaceX and Tesla, becoming the wealthiest figure in the world today. Yet, intelligence is one thing; autism is a whole other story. At the same time, autism is also a double-edged sword.

At age two, I was diagnosed. All my life, I grew up knowing I was smarter than many kids my age. I grew up being told that "knowledge is power" and "education is important." I know that sounds cliché, but knowledge is indeed a pathway to abilities that grant you access to the wonders of the world. I'd been talented in anything from drawing, competing in chess, and playing "The Entertainer" on the piano. Yet, for me, intelligence is also a curse. That's why I don't go around bragging about my high school GPA. My father enforced straight A's on me from K-12, grounding me if I made a single B. Now, any one small mistake turns into something

serious. Because of this, and my inability to multitask, I was always the quiet kid in school. This, combined with growing up without a mother, caused me to have trouble speaking and navigating relationships.

I haven't had a lot of friends throughout school, and the ones that did "befriend" me were infantilizing at best. It's meant to seem nice, but the treatment toward those with autism is more dangerous than patronizing. Hence, it fits under positive ableism. That doesn't mean negative ableism is any less harmful for its overt delivery. I was always treated like garbage in fifth grade for seemingly rude behavior, but in reality, I lacked the neurotypical social skills for the world not built for me. I remember being threatened at one point by some idiot's uncle for this. Nothing is more hurtful for me than popular kids talking about their autistic peers shooting up the school, or hurling homophobic comments at them for no reason, all because they're eccentric, quiet, or lack the same social skills as everyone else. Although I had been more privileged than other autistics in special education classes, only attending regular classes because of my high intellect, I realize how much harder and more dangerous it is for them to be placed there, since some of them also have learning disabilities. I had the worst second-hand trauma of my life, and I can honestly flip off Dixon High School without the slightest regret. Apparently, they do nothing to stop bullying because the sheeple are apathetic in voting them out. The place is just swelling with drama and toxic behavior, and I'm glad I escaped.

Intelligence is the most dominant force to change the world. Isn't that how we became the most dominant

species on Earth? Some of the most powerful and famous people have tremendous IQs, all thanks to autism. To that end, this outstanding quality in humans is also the most feared. All non-human animals have come to view humanity as the ultimate threat. Even others who see people with autism are repulsed by the fact that we aren't "normal." I mentioned before that my intelligence is a curse, because the further your IQ is from the general population, the harder it is to communicate. It's like you're speaking Latin and the rest are Neanderthals. The answer is simple: humans operate like wolf packs. An autistic person who is not like everyone else is likely to be off-putting, either due to a perceived lack of empathy (something autistics express differently), or that you can't easily deal with them. I derided mindless, group behavior. In this country, there are two types of people: the ones who embrace difference in others, and ones who feel threatened. In other words, you either have an open mind or you are one with a primitive species.

When I came to Wilmington for college, I've since left the cesspool known as Onslow County. My neurotypical father and his MAGA-loving neurotypical friends would claim that I was lazy or didn't do anything as they ostentatiously showboated their 1st Amendment rights. It's one thing to shut down an entitled, bratty leftist when they cannot back up their argument, but for middle-aged adults more than twice my age to disparage me solely based on my young age, or for struggling with executive dysfunction, demonstrates unmatched immaturity and a glaring ignorance on their part. Does getting a bachelor's degree from a world famous

university mean I don't contribute to anything? How cowardly must a two-faced wretch be to shower praise with a sycophantic façade one minute and then say existing is the only thing I'm good for behind my back the next? Why too should I concern myself with the opinions of the alcoholic breadwinner who hits animals and yells at children? Such shameful, insignificant lowlifes indeed. But I could never criticize psychopaths like them, or I would be in a hospital. And I'm the one who's hypersensitive? Then again, I wouldn't stoop that low anyway.

Being pushed to achieve higher grades and these other unrealistic expectations has drained me so much that I began dealing with autistic burnout, which can last for days, weeks, months, even years. My father told me I should go for the "Chancellor's Achievement Award," which hasn't even existed since 2013. Also, I don't like the term "normal." Until I made it to UNCW, I never heard of the term "neurodivergent," which fits me better. I like being different. It really goes to show how much I had to endure the ableist agenda of everyone in my life at Onslow, making sure I didn't become smart enough to break away from the system. Heck, society still tries to cure and snuff out this incredible ability in us with prescribed medicines. I can't exactly determine the causality of my autism, if it was genetics, family history, drugs, health issues, or environmental factors. Vaccines are definitely not one of them, and they haven't changed the structure of my brain over the years. Who would let themselves become brainwashed by all the unfounded assumptions the media perpetrates? I don't blame my father for the physical and verbal abuse he put me

through, aside from forcing me to act neurotypical like everyone else to his liking, or pressuring me to obtain good grades. Before the Marine Corps brutally destroyed him with PTSD, he'd been stealing from convenience stores and getting into all sorts of mischief, with felony upon felony as a teenager. However, what shapes a person's character is their reaction to trauma.

Ultimately, my father succumbed to his PTSD. He hated drug addicts as much as he hated my stimming to music, attacking them like the scumbags who gave in with vicious delight to molesting children. You never know what might lead someone to drug abuse. My mom overdosed when I was nine. I never got to meet her, but I was told she was a great mother. According to an obituary, she loved to cook and spend time with her family. I heard plenty of other amazing stories from my maternal grandmother and the rest of my mom's family. Most importantly, she really loved me very much. I saw an old VHS tape of her taking care of me, before we moved to Jacksonville for the Camp Lejeune base, away from my hometown of Canton, Ohio in 2003, before my autism had been discovered. Around the same time, both of my parents separated.

Somehow, while my father had been deployed in the Iraq War, my mom spent approximately \$13,000 on drugs, destroying his credit and leaving us moving around and struggling financially for years to come. Christmas never happened that year. My father claimed it to be the full story, but I think there's a lot more he's not telling me. I don't know if he abused my mom so much that she went into a depression and abused drugs, or if such substances led to my autism. What I do know

is that I had been cut off from my mom's side of the family, as well as my aunts and cousins on my father's, and anyone who tried to save me. I only ever saw them once during my lifetime, and that was at my mom's funeral. My father told me they had the opportunity to visit me, but they didn't care. He told me they blamed him for my mom's death, but that my mom chose to use drugs. I hated them. I truly did. I hated all of them with passion. The hate persisted so well that I cut off my maternal grandmother from everything before my brother's graduation from the Marine Corps on Parris Island. But now, I wonder if he'd been lying to me all along. He loathed liars just as aggressively as he loathed drug addicts, but seemed to get away with doing it himself. I also wonder how many women he impregnated and broke to the point they had to shift to substance abuse. It's as if everywhere he goes, destruction follows. I tried not to overthink it.

Today, that wasteful, narcissistic good-for-nothing stays with his friends and leeches money from me now that I'm a full-time college student working full-time. He thinks I still owe him everything after all my trauma, or I'm considered "ungrateful." Interestingly, for all his efforts to keep food at the table, a roof over my head, and clothes on my back, he never once kept his promises on getting me gifts, or saved up to buy me a car like everyone else my age, or helped me get into college. For all his efforts to push me to a college education, he despised internships as they don't generate any pay. When all you care about is money versus potential, you only set yourself up for failure. I came to surmise that he was going out of his way to prevent me

from becoming independent, further reaffirming that autistics can't lead normal lives.

I still remember when he used the puzzle piece as the official logo for autism when running a food drive at his tattoo shop, which is offensive because of the perceived conservative notion that autism is a puzzling condition, a disease to be cured. He was quite popular with the locals at Jacksonville, too, and they supported his ableist mission. His “sympathetic” attitude on the outside and his psychological abuse behind closed doors weren't much different. He only ever cared about the benefits of my autism; he despised my rocking to music or when I talked to myself, and once called me the R-slur when I had trouble locating and touching the heat of an MRE meal when we took shelter in his tattoo shop, riding out the treacherous winds of Hurricane Florence. His sick view of autism held an exploitative nature. I don't think I'll ever forgive him for what he did, no matter how many times he guilt trips me in a fruitless and pathetic attempt to make himself and his opinions more relevant than any decent human being in my life. It's inspiring how well he pretends he's right all the time, even when he says I care about nobody but myself, or when he seeks conflict with other people, all that for purely nothing. I never did anything wrong to the world, nor did I ever get an apology from him. He seems to care more about the well-being of his friends than his own son, and treats my social life as irrelevant.

After leaving that household and going to college, the world's cruelty didn't stop there. In my sophomore year at UNCW, I encountered more fake friends who tried to manipulate and peer pressure me to do illegal

things. With personalities resembling frat boy stereotypes, they possessed a pound of marijuana, gambled with cryptocurrency, swindled money from unfortunate people, trespassed private property, stole things, and dined n' dashed. A lot of autistics have the tendency to be overly honest, as well as extremely empathetic and kind. While these moral qualities are another superpower of mine, it can allow shady people to take advantage of an unsuspecting individual. They used me and another friend of mine for food and money, then turned on him as they accused him for stealing their contraband, which he didn't. At the end of the academic year, countless red flags suggested this was the last straw and I should bail on them for good. At least I could escape from them, but my father still has his villainous grip on me until I have my big boy office, if he doesn't stop that from happening all because internships don't make money. I learned from these experiences that I needed to stop being a pushover and set boundaries for myself, which I'm still mastering to this day. Frankly, I'm so sick to death of being nice to the wrong people. They don't deserve me, nor do I deserve them.

This year, I managed to stay strong and never give up. As a student in the BFA creative writing program at UNCW, I battle every baseless misconception about autism, whether such ideas are that autism is confusing, or that we're unemotional and dumb. This is never the case. As I mentioned before about the puzzle piece, I believe it is missing the point. The infinity symbol works better for a variety of reasons and even encompasses neurodiversity. First, it symbolizes unlimited potential,

which is something I use to my advantage. It also represents the lifelong impact of autism and the endless support we must give to autistic individuals. After several years of masking myself to death from eighth grade and trying to challenge my condition to become a more socially acceptable person, I became fed up. I grew tired of being silenced from conversations, since we need social skills to survive. I also grew tired of looking dumb in front of peers despite my masking, since my condition still tended to seep through. Every time I've walked into a room full of people in a creative writing class, I felt like they either don't like me or excluded me from conversations unless I stepped up and initiated an exchange, which is something I've always struggled doing. As an autistic male, the treatment for me is much worse. The sexist notion that women and girls cannot have autism still persists. I knew better; I had first-hand experience dating women who were also autistic. Now, I'm done trying to gain collective approval. I'm done trying to impress destructive conservatives who don't give me credit for my accomplishments. I grew tired of feeling worthless.

Despite all this, I maintain a close-knit group of best friends, none of which live at my dorm or share the same classes with me. A few don't even go to UNCW. They are probably the safest place where I can express my true self without adversity. I could never thank them enough. I've been able to light up a room with my sense of humor still. Social skills are a muscle for myself and like individuals to build consistently in order to fit in, and I'm still in the middle of my wellness journey. I've had several relationships with girls in high school, and

even pursued a couple more in college, but failed. These might serve as stepping stones for a better opportunity at working on communication skills, but they rather showcase how stuck up most people at the university are, especially the fraternities and sororities who dictate all of social life at UNCW, rich kids who are given everything. My experience is different from all others, a spectrum if you will. As humans, we all have flaws. As individuals, we shouldn't have to try to fit in with mindless, group behavior. I try so hard just to be accepted like everyone else, but no one cares. We shouldn't have to try to be "normal" to impress others.

If people would just open up to me in classes, then I won't have to feel judged. That goes beyond spilling my autism in a more liberally accepting program, especially as I'm wary of my classmates trying to sway my autistic voice in creative writing workshops. Along with my communication skills, I'm still mustering the courage to exhibit public speaking and eye contact with strangers, even though the idea seems intimidating at first. All I really want is to fit in with everyone, to connect with others and be in a place where I am truly understood. I am not asking for pity or sympathy. I suppose I could say my real life superpower, after all my experiences and severe hardships, is having to strength to push through all the torment. I realize the reason I aspired to become a writer is to help prove society wrong about the autistic community, to improve the world for the better. Even though people don't see it at first, I'm just as likable as everyone else. I'm neurodivergent, autistic, and proud, and I would encourage everyone to embrace their differences rather

than fall prey to the screwed up world we live in. My superpower then would be to transform humankind. With more knowledge of the autism spectrum comes the power for us to change the narrative in the future. This is why education is important. That's what my father taught me at least, and I'm grateful for where my smarts have taken me, even if I'm "ungrateful" otherwise. Finally, as an autistic, my potential is limitless. For now, I still have a long way to go.

The Gray Road

By Mahdi Meshkatee

“The road was straddled by towering rock cliffs on one side and a deep dark valley on the other. Before the classic hard-lined Chevy disturb the natural silence, one could even hear the leaves rustling, the pebbles rattling by the mild breeze. Every now and then, the road curved into another straight mile of the same scape. No breath of life seemed to be present, as if threatened by the ominous murk obscuring the valley’s deep end and the insidious sharp stonewalls on the mountains.”

I first wrote the Gray Road in my late teens. I had just entered university, and was living a prolonged phase of depression which had begun in my second year of high school, and would continue into the first years of my twenties. I was then going through tough times, changing schools after regretting the decision to pursue Computer Science at Sharif University (the most renowned engineering institution in Iran,) and it was an arduous process of going from office to office and collecting signatures and kissing ass and pleading and ruminating in despair and hearing it from parents and people who thought I was making the wrong decision or rushing it. It took me more than half a year to assure myself a place at the Architectural Engineering program at the University of Tehran, and during this time I was able to attend the classes due to my uncle—a successful alumnum of Architecture from three decades before—endorsing my learning verve. I was soon good friends with a large group of same-years, and not long after that embarked on my first romantic relationship with one of

my fellow classmates. The sole reason I introduced this period is for you to understand the bit of conversation I had with my girlfriend then and will never forget. Before the relationship started, we had gone out with a few friends—we would occasionally hang out as freshmen who were excited by the atmosphere of post-secondary education, where the sex-based segregation is no more, and women and men study in the same classes—and while walking side by side, she asked me why I was sad and gloomy all the time. I presented my case, talking about the absurdity of life and the constant suffering one must bear before one dies. She countered by stating some stock phrases about the value of life and its inherent beauty. I listened actively, but didn't want to argue with her in return, since my passion for her made me admire her positive outlook on life, and her role as the consoler had been established and I enjoyed the dynamic. So I just said if the transfer process is finished, I will have no more problems, at least for a long time. I'm going to be happy, truly. But she didn't finish here, and made one last memorable comment: that even if this one comes to the perfect conclusion, I will find another thing to be sad about.

It was the truth, bare and nude, presented to me on a silver plate, and I'm still not done masticating it to this day. The crux of the matter is, you can always find something to be sad about, and not unjustifiably so, since the world is a cruel place. People are humiliated, abused, molested, raped, tortured, and killed on a daily basis, and most of us have no direct power to prevent any one of them. Yet to live is not to drown yourself in sadness. As much as ignorance is not bliss, so is not

counting the sorrows of the world. One must accept one's agency, and be demanding of one's freedom.

At the time I pecked the girl for naïve—but lovely—and continued on with my lethargic days. I was in a state of impassivity and unproductivity I couldn't even leave the bed. The only thing I would do was to write short pieces on my phone every now and then, disturbing and violent, and read them over and over again to feed my sadness. A cloudy day brought me to the edge, and suicide only felt one step away.

“The gray Chevy couldn't be more harmonious with its surroundings. It was driven smoothly on the beaten one-way track, and the driver didn't feel the need to hit the brakes once, not even when he was supposed to graduate a bend by slowing down. The man was nearing thirty. He was lean but firm, expressionless, with no facial hair, not even a single lash or brow, and his black, downturned eyes were fixed on the road ahead, serious and determined. The only moving part of his body was his right arm, masterfully changing gear from time to time, not raising a finger, as if it was deadly to make any unnecessary movement.”

I always thought about writing professionally, but it seemed too wishful and out of reach. I had no clear idea what I had to do to be published, and to be honest, did not try as hard as I should have. There was always something to be distracted by, while the writer in me pleaded for a way out, for me to take him more seriously, to pay heed to the literary path I had taken ever since I was a mere child and that nothing's going to fulfill me as much as writing.

The Gray Road came to me one night when I was at my maternal uncle's, and my aunt who owns a publishing company encouraged me to send her some of my writings so she could see what she could do for me. I was excited, in my own unexpressive way, and the seed was sown there, of a man driving expressionless toward an unknown destiny, just as I was at the time. As usual, I let the idea develop and simmer, and only when it boiled did I begin writing it down. The atmosphere was clear in my mind, gray and somber, and I knew I had to follow the man in order to find any sort of resolution. I needed to fly over him and let him drive, not to interfere with destiny's course—just as I learned by reading Darren Shan's Saga when I was nine years old, and felt the sickeningly powerful presence of Mr. Destiny, and how quickly he was annoyed into altering one's life for the worse.

“The silver clouds in the sky did not move, as if afraid of intimacy and disturbing the uncanny peace. They were monotonous, and one could not see any trace of shades on them caused by the sun. In fact, there was no shadow on the cliffs, the road, and even the interior of the car. It seemed like the valley of death had sucked all the shadows inside into a murk of the unknowns, where sun didn't dare shine, and the dark seemed at utmost ease.”

I was struggling to find my place in the world. After Konkoor—the national university entrance exam—while on one of my frequent night walks, listening to gloomy songs on my white wireless Walkman, I thought I should work on my social skills; I need to communicate with people whether I like it or

not, whether I'm currently capable or not. So I continued walking my usual path, and reached the famous bookstore called Book City, went upstairs to the Social Psychology section, found and purchased a random book called *How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends*, and the same night I got back home and started reading. I was hooked from the first chapter, since I felt an urgent need to actively do something about my social life. The most important lesson I learned from that book was in a conversation, when your counterpart is talking, do not try to think of what you should say in reply, since it results in you missing most of what they are actually saying. By actively listening, you are opening yourself to assimilating their body and verbal language, and would most definitely have a better, more quality dialogue.

Apart from reading the book thoroughly and applying it to my interactions with classmates and friends—which by the way enhanced my human relationships—I also began studying about the mind and psychology, buying Jung, Freud, and Lacan, and going through the words one by one to fully grasp what they meant, since the terminology, especially Lacan's, could get quite complex, and at times a paragraph would take over twenty minutes of reading. I was mesmerized by the definition of the Shadow presented by Carl Jung, and it has stuck with me ever since. It is the emotional blind spot, the unconscious urge that resists the authority of the Ego-ideal, and is repressed to let in the light. This highlighted, I found the shadow present in my writings. Even though I understood that I *needed* to write to express innumerable things I couldn't normally, the Shadow shed a new light on my understanding of

the inner workings of my mind. It made me notice physical as well as mental shadows more consciously, and I recollected memories of when I was so little and I saw my shadow much taller and lean and I was overwhelmed by the power it signified. It was only ever since I stepped in a process of befriending my Shadow.

It was not until twenty-five I finally read *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. I was reading *Kafka on the Shore* at the same time, and it was as if I was once again lurched into the realm of the unconsciousness and could probe the intricacies of my quirks and desires. I was captivated by Faulkner's Negative Capability, the way he could float between characters, from racist rednecks to the existentially desperate intellectual, from a mentally disabled entity to a compassionate middle-aged woman. But one of the most significant parts of the book that struck a chord with me was the bouts between Quentin and his shadow. They could never truly synchronize, and it seemed time and time again that the shadow eluded Quentin. I believe this hinted at the main reason for Quentin's hapless demise.

Faulkner's masterpiece is one of a kind, and his depiction of the Shadow—for me—is unprecedented in literature. *The Sound and the Fury* has stood the test of time and will remain one of the greatest modern novels in the history of literature, just as the human's struggle with its Shadow will never come to an end.

“the driver increased his pressure on the gas pedal by a notch. The Chevy roared solemnly. Its tough and unchanging countenance resembled that of its driver. The headlights looked ahead and blinked not once. The

doors remained closed, their hard lines breaking at hard angles, and the rear tail lights didn't add any color to the environment they passed, since both were tinted clean matte gray and there was no halt in the drive. One could say the car and the driver were but one; mechanical, expressionless, and determined to reach an end line.”

I doubt my skills at description, be it in English or Persian, and I have valid reasons for that.

Throughout my life, I have been introverted and inward-looking. My first attempts at writing odysseys and fantasy novels aside, I mostly wrote abstract pieces, emotion-fueled and plotless, without revision or editor-preferred structure. I never had to describe a landscape or virtually any place, since I was, for the majority of times, concentrated on myself and what was going on inside my troubled brain.

It was only when I grew older and thought more about publishing that I introduced plot and structure to some of my pieces. I tried hard to focus on details, setting scenes and giving precise prescription in order to make the story clearer for the reader. Before that, I had no regard for the reader and thought of my creations in relation only to myself. It is not that now I write for the reader, it's just now I take them into consideration as well.

So when I was sitting on the toilet seat, and the thought of the Gray Road just came to me out of the blue, going back years in time, understanding life backwards in a way, I couldn't help but imagine how it would be like to add more vivid descriptions to the piece. As it was, I loved the absurdity and partial nihil in the Gray Road, yet I was also mature enough to know the alpha version

was too raw and demanded revision and enrichment. At last, I did not even read the piece I had written when younger, but only trusted the idea that had parasitically persisted in my mind, and again let it simmer 'til ready. It was in the afternoon I had gone to the bathroom, and by midnight I had a clear idea of what I had to do when I woke up.

“the driver passed another bend. This time, the difference was there was a semblance of a control room a hundred meters ahead. It was a two-by-two concrete structure, white and clean to the most unseeable particle, with a square, glassless window, without a door, sitting there in perfect stillness. Inside, sat a man naked, porcelain-skinned, unbending as reinforced steel, looking road ward. He had not a single hair on his body, his eyes were black as night and as reflective, and two insignificant round holes were pierced where his nose should have been. An amiable smile permeated his face, as if plastered there since the dawn of time—or the unit of mystery applicable here.”

When I woke up the next day, I knew exactly where I wanted to start. I went from bed to bathroom to wash my face and from bathroom to kitchen to see what I could have for breakfast. I ate cheese and walnut on bread with lime-scented green tea, and came back to my room with the half-glass still left of the drink. I was more than excited to begin my new project. The night before, I had ample time to ponder it thoroughly enough.

As my concentration at the moment was nonfiction, initially I thought about postponing the idea to work on my other projects. It lasted with me for a

few minutes, until the more mature idea burgeoned: I could hybridize the abstract fictional idea with the process it took me to write it the first time, the steps I had taken to put it into words, and the steps I was taking to revitalize and reform it. The form and content made more sense when I imagined the reader knowing about the personal intricacies: my severe depression, my suicidal tendencies, my then bleak outlook on life, the process of growth, making peace with myself and befriending my Shadow, the literary influences, and the whole collection of hours that propelled me to write this story down.

So I sat fast behind my laptop and created a new word file called *The Gray Road*, adjusted the font and size, wrote the title, and began writing the first sentences: The road was straddled...

“the driver noted the man in the frame, which ignited a surreptitious glimpse of light in his left eye. There was no mistaking him being alive and not just a picture. He was in his room in the middle of the road, blocking it with that picturesque, amiable smile, gazing down at the driver. From his bare, slender shoulders it was apparent he was wearing no upper garment. The driver’s rhythm remained unaltered, and his arms danced eloquently on the gear.

Ten cars to the clean, white block, the driver forced his right leg, which had seemed inseparable from the gas pedal, on the brake. It gradually dominated the pedal, and the Chevy gracefully came to a halt right opposite the block. The driver looked down, head not tilted, taking an unwilling breath, an air of frustration surrounding him. Then lifted his eyes, and gazed back at

the cordial eyes locked with his. A few seconds of silence lingered around, like audacious pigeons on the sidewalk, then tersely opened their wings and flew off.

Why are you here?

The voice shouldn't have reached the driver so easily, considering the few meters of distance and the windshield in between. But it did, and it was as smooth as its agent's skin; timeless.

He didn't answer. He reached for a convincing one in his mind, but no matter how hard he tried, they seemed fuzzy and unutterable. The gaze upon him was weightless and did not pressure him into a quick response. So he tried harder: 'to break the habit.'

What is wrong with the habit?

Now that he had let out the first answer, the others flowed more easily: 'it is arduous. It is suffering. It is pain and pain and pain. Why should I keep up with that?'

You shouldn't. It is up to you. Your choice.

'I know. But since you asked, just give me a reason why I shouldn't break the habit?'

I do not interfere with decisions. I only ask questions and state facts.

'So what is this fact? Is there an inherent meaning in life?'

There is not. It is established as you move forward.

'What does it matter if it is established or not?'

It doesn't. It is an opportunity to build up on the meaning. It is what many a human has done throughout the course of history, and what many a human will.

'What is death then?'

It is where opportunities cease to be. Close to what you comprehend as nothingness.

The driver seemed desperate now. The emotions dormant on the road were beginning to bloom on his face. His eyes were not as dry anymore: 'But I am too trivial, too negligible. It doesn't matter if I live or die.'

To whom?

'To anyone. Even the ones who love me will forget sooner or later.'

Is that true?

'It probably isn't. But they will die one day too.'

Tears welled up in his eyes. The guard didn't break the silence for a few seconds to let that sink in.

Do you matter to you?

He tilted his head down and broke contact with the guard. 'I am nobody.'

There is no nobody who could say that.

'What should I continue for?'

That is for you to find out.

He snapped and the room vanished along with him, leaving the driver with two similar road branches. By the side of both, there was a road sign, reading:

WELCOME.

There is a vast ocean of data, but only a grain of sand is perceivable, and one merely perceives an atom of that grain. It is a paltry amount, a fraction of the whole.

I believe that is what results in the ambiguity of life. The pre-situational existential freedom, the contingency of love, the fragility of one's mind in the ever-expanding universe. An action is put into gear for so many reasons and could bear millions of diverse outcomes. Ray Bradbury understood this clearly when he wrote a

Sound of Thunder; the story that introduced the term *Butterfly Effect*. A minor action in the present ripples and leads to major consequences in the hands of time. Chaos ensues and cosmos is longed.

So when one looks at things subjectively, the options one has are extremely limited, and within that limitation is harbored an abundance of freedom. One has to seize the opportunities freedom offers and take those steps that are negligible in the eyes of human history. However ambiguous the grand scheme of it all, one must not lose one's agency.

I wrote the few preceding paragraphs to justify ending the story unresolved in the eyes of many who read it. Why did I finish with a mere word, two equally desirable roads to take, the obscure dialogue that comes and goes like a mild breeze? Well, it is a sum of what I said before. Life is ambiguous, and within that ambiguity there is freedom, and within that freedom lie decisions, and those decisions are not easy to make. It is not clear whether the driver chooses to go to the right or to the left or even stay, and even if he does, we do not know the consequences of that action. There is no resolution, as there is not in the greater portion of a lifetime.

The Gray Road is a mood at its core; a murky, expressionless, perilous mood of gray. Free, monochromatic, as heavily empty as depression, and active in its narrator feeling the need to say something. To express the insignificance of human decisions, yet showing the necessity of making one. So whether the driver remained there for an eternity, took the right or the left branch, got out of the vehicle and jumped into the valley of death, climbed the stern rock mountain, or

went on and decided on anything else, the important thing is I was there to accompany him in a vital part of his story.

Contributors

(arranged in alphabetical order according to the third letter of the author's last name (notwithstanding the unavoidably ambiguous positions of the two Jennings ((namely,) Rafael and Caroline (or (rather) Caroline and Rafael (as printed (below))))), whose spellings *per se* lack (obviously) the cardinal (viz. the literal (indeed, literally the *literal*)) distinctions necessary to make their place in the ordering anything other than arbitrary (and for this: our apologies (but (for all that) who could really blame us (or blame anyone (at all), unless (alas?(?)) one blames parents (who are givers of names (but who (frankly) can only (ever) give as they were (once) given (a name) to give (a name (that is (thus) not (properly (or (alas(!)) even improperly theirs either))))))?) (thus not (strictly speaking) arbitrarily))

Lea Graham is a writer, editor, critic and translator who lives in Hyde Park, New York. She is the author of two poetry collections, *From the Hotel Vernon* (Salmon Press, 2019) and *Hough & Helix & Where & Here & You, You, You* (No Tell Books, 2011), a fine press book and three chapbooks. Recently, she edited the anthology of critical essays: *From the Word to the Place: The Work of Michael Anania* (MadHat Press, 2022) and won the Michelle Boisseau Poetry Prize. Graham is an associate professor at Marist College where she's been on faculty since 2007.

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Kentucky-based poet whose work has appeared in many publications, including HAD, Livina Press, The Storms, and The Bombay Lit Mag, and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He currently lives in Bardstown, KY with his wife and three children.

Joe Ryan is an engineering educator who lives in Phoenix, Arizona. He writes to explore the absurdity of technology, music, and overpriced cocktails.

Michael Anania was born in Omaha and studied at the University of Nebraska and the University at Buffalo. His recent books include *Heat Lines* (2006), *Continuous Showings* (2017) and *Nightsongs and Clamors* (2018). A collection of critical essays on his work, *From*

the Word to the Place, edited by Lea Graham, was published in 2022. He lives in Austin TX.

Shawn McCann is a writer, husband, stay-at-home dad, and a disabled combat veteran who served four tours in Iraq. He writes about those terrifying moments that disabled him. His stories and poems try to find some beauty and humor in all the sadness of war. You can find some of his work in the *Nude Bruce Review* and *The Raven Review*, with more on the way.

Garin Cycholl is author most recently of *prairie)d*, an autobiography of waters crossed, forthcoming from BlazeVOX. His other recent work has appeared with *The Fortnightly Review* and *Denver Quarterly*. He lives just south of Chicago.

Sailor McCoy didn't provide a bio, but we feel it is safe to presume that they are a shining, ecstatic star in the human heaven.

Chris McDermott has lived in New York, New England, and the Carolinas. He is a veteran lawyer, and a life-long writer of fiction. He also has work forthcoming in *Write City Ezine*.

Matthew Wherttam has a JD degree and a BA with a major in chemistry. He has drafted hundreds of US patents. Now retired, Matthew has worked as a lawyer, chemist, and summer camp counselor. He enjoys writing and playing chess. His work has been published in *Fiction on the Web*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, and *Voices de la Luna*.

Blain Logan has been stringing words together in an attempt to save his soul for a number of years, across multiple states and countries; usually found scribing, scoring, and drawing convoluted

arrows to rearrange these jumbled thoughts in a spiral notebook late at night, and often in some bar. As these efforts of self salvation have fostered some limited success he thought maybe they could also save someone else's soul, and so *Nude Bruce Review* is the first time any of these works are being published.

Eric Lehman has published three novels (*Summer's House*, *St. Martins*, and others), numerous short stories (*Raritan*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *New Letters*, and elsewhere), as well as essays (*New York Times*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Jewish Journal*, among others.) He has been awarded a National Arts Club Prize and a Vogelstein Grant, and has been granted residencies at Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, Ragdale, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. He received an MFA from Stony Brook University in 2015. He teaches at Queens College in New York, where he lives with his husband, always trying to maintain the inner Buddha when negotiating Gotham's traffic on his bike.

Nelson R. Smith is an aspiring, high-functioning autistic writer, with humble beginnings in Jacksonville, NC. After graduating from UNCW with a B.F.A. in creative writing, an English minor, and a certificate in publishing, Nelson aims to represent all neurodivergent voices with inventive, never-ending, world-changing forces of fictional prose and poetry.

Eytan Pol lives and teaches in West Texas, where their personal and professional focus is on nature writing and wilderness of the American West.

Salem B Holden—like their gender—can be found everywhere and nowhere, probably hugging some tree in the woods, talking to spiders and praising them on their beautiful webs, or foraging

mushrooms. They've completed three chapbooks: *How to They/them*, *Life in the Body*, and *Rebirth* and have been published in Babyteeth, Many Nice Donkeys and Lions Online. Their collages and poems have been featured in SOS Art Cincinnati's Pride Celebration and have won the R.M. Miller Fiction award twice for their Young Adult novel.

Alina Zollfrank is from (former) East Germany loathes wildfire smoke and writes to get out of her whirring mind. She cares for two teens, a husband, three rescue dogs, and countless plants in the Pacific Northwest and finds inspiration in the lightness and heaviness of this world. Her essays and poetry have been published in Bella Grace, The Noisy Water Review, Last Leaves Magazine, and Thimble Literary Magazine. More at <https://medium.com/@zollizen>.

James Bradley Wells has published one poetry collection, *Bicycle* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2013), and one poetry chapbook, *The Kazantzakis Guide to Greece* (Finishing Line Press, 2015). His poetry has appeared in Anti-Heroin Chic, Main Street Rag, New England Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Painted Bride Quarterly, Solstice: A Magazine for Diverse Voices, Spoon River Poetry Review, Stone Canoe, and Western Humanities Review, among other journals. Wells has written two poetry translations, *Vergil's Eclogues and Georgics* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2022) and *HoneyVoiced: Pindar's Victory Songs* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024). With his partner Stacey Giroux, Wells tends MorrowHaven Gardens in Bloomington, Indiana.

Rob Armstrong's book, *Daddy 3.0: A Comedy of Errors*, won the 2017 Independent Author Network Award for Best Comedy/Satire Novel. He's attended several writing workshops,

including the Gotham Writers' Workshop and the International Thriller Writers' Workshop. He earned his master's degree in communication management from the University of Southern California. His work is forthcoming in Chamber Magazine, El Portal, Euphony Journal, Evening Street Review, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, and Perceptions Magazine.

Caroline Jennings is a graduate of the University of Arkansas, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics. Her poetry has appeared in *The Diamond Line*, *Black Moon Magazine*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. Her chapbook, *Stop and Smell the Fractals (and Everything in Between)*, will soon be published by Finishing Line Press.

Rafael Jennings is a Senior at a small, independent high school just outside of Syracuse, New York. Jennings, an Afro-Latino US-Colombia dual citizen, recently earned finalist status in the Subnivean New Writers Awards, a competition run by an international publication lauded by the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses.

Misha Lynn Moon (she/her) has worked as a sawmill janitor, a nursing home attendant, a school counselor, and most recently at a medical and homeless services non-profit. Her poems have appeared in various journals. She currently lives and writes in Portland, Oregon.

Ayòdéjì Israel, a poet, writer and editor, is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Channel Magazine*, *Ake Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Counterclock*, *Defunct*

Magazine, OneArtPoetry, Livina Press, The Bitchin Kitsch & elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter @Ayo_einstein.

Dashiell Byrne is a writing undergraduate in Austin, Texas, and the winner of St. Edward's University's 2023 New Voices in Writing Award. He works mainly in prose or screenplay formats, draws inspiration heavily from the world around him as a silent observer, and is interested in collaborating with other artists of any style or medium.

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, Virginia. He is the author of *Now Let's Get Brunch: A Collection of RuPaul's Drag Race Twitter Poetry* (Querencia Press, 2023) and *May All Our Pain Be Champagne: A Collection of Real Housewives Twitter Poetry* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). For more information, visit carriganak.wordpress.com or on Twitter @carriganak.

Christine Perry (they/them), originally from rural Vermont, is currently the Camp Director at the summer camp they grew up attending (a dream come true). During the off-season, they reside in Brooklyn where they spend their time thinking about camp, raising two guinea pigs, and painting and writing poetry that explores identity, the challenges that can come along with discovering yourself, and how to love that person. Their poem "Bestiary" appears in Folio; their poem "Water-Body" appears in MockingHeart Review.

David Larsen is a writer who lives in El Paso, Texas. Over the past two years his stories and poems have been published in more than twenty-five literary journals and magazines including Aethlon,

The Heartland Review, Oakwood, El Portal, Floyd County
Moonshine and Aethlon.

Esther “Essie” Martin works in Maine as an aquaculture researcher and sea farmer. By day she spends almost as much time in the water as out. You can find her work published in Muleskinner, Nude Bruce, and After Happy Hour. Her poem “Why we love fish” was recently nominated for Best of the Net Anthology.

Mahdi Meshkatee is a UK-born, Iranian creative writer and poet. He has experimented with different forms and genres and is consistently on the outlook for new ways of literary presentation of language. The Gray Road is a fiction-inside-nonfiction, a writing process described with hindsight and reflection.

John Tustin’s poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009. His first poetry collection from Cajun Mutt Press is now available at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C6W2YZDP> . fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to his published poetry online.

Meredith MacLeod Davidson is a poet and writer from Virginia, currently based in Scotland, where she recently earned an MLitt in Creative Writing from The University of Glasgow. Meredith has work forthcoming in Cream City Review, Poetry South, and elsewhere, and serves as senior editor for Arboreal Literary Magazine.

D.W. Davis is a native of rural Illinois. His work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can find him at [Facebook.com/DanielDavis05](https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavis05), [@dan_davis86](https://twitter.com/dan_davis86) on Twitter.

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