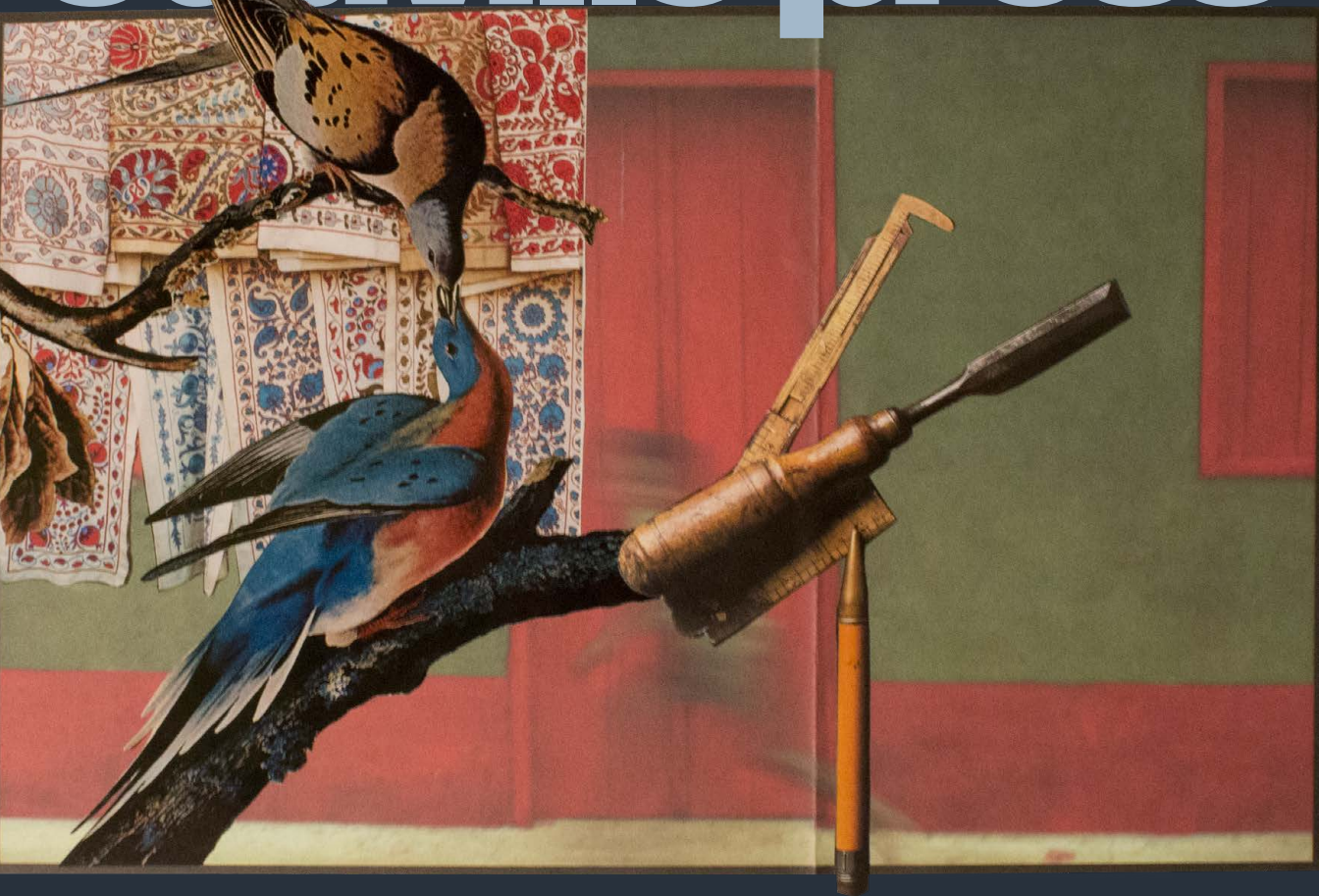


T H E

oddtville press



W I N T E R 2 0 2 1

Some Assembly Required

C O V E R

Daniel Forbes

Daniel Forbes received his BA in Studio Art with an emphasis in sculpture and ceramics from Whitman College (Walla Walla, WA) in 1993 and an MFA in Studio Art with a focus on sculpture from Vermont College (Montpelier, VT) in 2007. His creative productions occupy many forms, ranging from ceramic and steel to textiles and assemblage. Forbes maintains several different artistic styles. His commercial work is described as whimsical and often incorporates animals in its imagery. His academic work, meanwhile, follows darker veins exploring the complicated territories of gender, identity, psychology, ritual, fetishism, and the extraordinary body. His art has been displayed in the Northwest in numerous solo and group shows in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, and California. He has also exhibited in Colorado, Alaska, Maryland, and Connecticut.

Currently, Forbes resides and maintains his studio in Walla Walla, WA. In addition to his art-making, he co-directs the Sheehan Gallery at Whitman College (2007-2021) and has regularly taught as an Adjunct Assistant Professor (2006-2018). He is also an instructor of art and art appreciation at Walla Walla Community College (2002-2012, 2018-2020).

the oddville press
Promoting today's geniuses
and tomorrow's giants.

S T A F F

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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On The Rocks: A Song for the Lovesick Siren

Claire Van Winkle

The Siren is alone again, drowning
her sorrows in a happy-hour whiskey sour
at a hard-luck bar off Utopia Parkway.
Her bag vibrates as the men of Queens
blow up the Tinder account
she keeps meaning
to cancel.

Maybe it's old-fashioned,
but online dating just isn't her style.
Half the guys who super-like her
are looking for unicorns, or they're poly, or
they just want a fling. They swipe right
without taking two seconds to read her profile.

But who is she kidding?
The whole til-death-do-us-part thing
isn't exactly doing it for her either.

Her therapist insists that it will work itself out.
That her "slump" won't last. That her belief
in curses and fate is just
an unhealthy thought pattern brought on
by the stress of everyday urban life.

The man at the end of the bar smiles at her
and she starts to cry. She moves through the rhythmic
breathing techniques her yoga instructor/late ex-boyfriend
had recommended for her anxiety.
Ocean Breath, he'd called it, tragically oblivious
to the irony.

(continued on the following page)

On The Rocks. | Poetry by Claire Van Winkle

(continued)

She's just beginning to get her shit together
when Drunken Sailor comes on the jukebox
and she loses it. "Boyfriend troubles?" the bartender asks,
pouring her a shot on the house. The Siren nods,
wiping her nose with a cocktail napkin.
The bartender tops her off. "It'll be ok," he says.
"There are plenty of fish in the sea."
"Don't I know it," she replies,
blinking back tears.

Her phone buzzes. TallDrkHndsm736 wants
to take her to karaoke. SMeffingH. She sighs,
opens the app, and orders another drink.

Claire Van Winkle is a poet, fiction writer, essayist, and literary translator. Her poetry appears in publications including *The Penn Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Oddville Press*, *Poor Yorick*, *No Dear*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Three Line Poetry*, *Sixfold*, and anthologies by *Rogue Scholars* and *Black Lawrence Press*. Her short fiction, literary essays, and translation reviews have been featured in *Belle Ombre*, *3 Percent*, and *Prometheus Dreaming*.

Claire has been the recipient of several honors including the inaugural Queens College Foundation Scholarship for Poetry Writing and Literary Translation, an American Literary Translators Association Travel Fellowship, an American Academy of Poets Award, the Mary M. Fay Poetry Award, and the Lenore Lipstein Memorial Prize for Formal Poetry.

Claire runs the Rockaway Writers' Workshop and teaches writing and literature at CUNY and SUNY. In addition to her creative and academic pursuits, she advocates for the mental health community through a Writing Therapy project she initiated at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Reconciliation

Thomas Bulen Jacobs

THEY WERE AT THE FUNERAL MASS for their father when she saw her. Ginnie almost didn't recognize her. She was at the back of the church, almost in the last pew, dressed in a long-sleeved black dress and pillbox hat. There was even a veil.

Ginnie hoisted herself into the aisle, over her husband's knee. He glanced up.

She mouthed the words: I have to pee. He nodded.

She waddled down the aisle, one hand on her belly. The baby was kickboxing her bladder. And anyway, maybe it wasn't really her. Maybe it was just an illusion.

But no, there she was. Amelie.

Her head was bent in prayer, her eyes screwed shut. Ginnie coughed significantly as she went past—she really did have to pee—but Amelie paid her no mind.

When she came back from the bathroom, they were standing for the Gospel reading. Ginnie slipped into the pew behind Amelie. The first few rows of the church were mostly full, but there was a long stretch of empty pews between them and the rest of the family.

"What do you think you're doing?" she hissed.

Amelie turned slowly. "It turns out, I needed to be here."

Ginnie clenched her teeth. The lingering scent of the incense, usually so otherworldly,

was nausea-inducing. She thought she might retch. "This is a terrible—"

But then she saw the hurt in the eyes, eyes that were crying real tears.

The rest of the congregants, perhaps sixty or seventy of them, sat. Amelie said softly, "Praise to you, O Jesus Christ," and did the same. The priest closed the bible and descended from the lectern to give the homily in the crossing.

Ginnie sighed and unclasped her handbag. She handed Amelie a packet of tissues. "Your mascara is running."

Amelie dabbed at her eyes with a twist of tissue. She turned and smiled as if in grudging repentance for her presence. "How do I look?"

Ginnie took her in. She didn't know where she had found the dress, which was stunning. But of course, everything she wore was. The hat. The makeup, now, was perfect. Demure blue eyeshadow, pale pink lipstick.

Ginnie reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. Gave a squeeze.

Her brother really was gorgeous.

He had been estranged from the family for twenty-three years, now, ever since he was outed in high school and thrown out of the house. Ginnie was eight when it happened, her recollections of him then vague and fraught. He was forty-one, now. There were ten years between them.

They had reconnected five years ago by total chance when a bachelorette party for a friend had found itself in a Manhattan drag club where he headlined as the comedy queen Amelie le Coq. He had recognized her from the stage. Slowly over those five years, they had built up an adult friendship.

Her husband, Eli, was the only one who knew.

She was with Ian when her mother called to tell her about the first heart attack. That night, when their father died, she texted him that she would be attending the funeral.

He had responded that he would be working. But, it turned out, he had to be there.

She did not have the bandwidth for this.

After the mass, her mother, eyes dry from shock, took her by the hand. Together they supported one another towards the cars, each a time-warped mirror of the other. Eli walked a few paces behind them.

Ginnie reflected bittersweetly that all of them were there. For the first time in twenty-three years, all six of the other brothers and sisters had been under one roof. And her mother did not know. Could not know.

Ian was the eldest. Trish, second, was there with her husband and their five kids, all boys, whom, like their mother, she had produced at tidy two-year intervals. They were handsome, well-behaved boys and Ginnie adored them.

Anthony, third, was there with his wife and their only daughter. Ginnie's mother confided to her frequently that they had struggled to conceive, and that Lily was "their little miracle." Eric, the spiritual middle child of the family, was there alone, unmarried. A generation or two ago, he might have been

the family priest; now, he was an assistant professor of mathematics at Xavier in New Orleans. Eli was from there, too, so Ginnie saw him more than all the others (save Ian, who also lived in New York).

Elizabeth and her husband were in from Colorado. Things there had not changed since college. The youngest two, not even two years between them, they had been so close, and then... She and her husband had sat across the aisle, apart from the hubbub of the greater McCann brood. They were apart now in the parking lot, already over by the black rental SUV. Ginnie paused to take her in. She was so thin, and not in the enviable way that Trish, somehow, had managed to retain her figure after the kids. Elizabeth was gaunt; a prettier Gollum.

"Who's your friend, dear?"

Ginnie, lost in her thoughts, didn't follow. "Elizabeth?"

"The woman at the back of the church."

"I don't know. Maybe dad had a mistress."

"Mary Virginia!"

"Mom, I'm kidding. We all cope in our different ways." She turned to see Eli's reaction. He shook his head in bafflement at the comment and mouthed, "What the fuck?"

"I thought I recognized her from your wedding, is all."

This was a bone of contention. Ironically, it was reconnecting with Ian—himself a fervent churchgoer—that had given Ginnie the courage to show her parents that she had moved on from the church. She and Eli had married at City Hall on a whim. Ian, on his way to a show, had come in drag as a witness. Eli's bandmate, Molly, was the other. A picture of her and Ian chatting at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, Ginnie visibly pregnant, wound up on Facebook. Which was how that news got out. To their immeasurable credit—or perhaps it

was the intercession of a thirsty saint—her parents had taken it all (more or less) in stride. The secular institution would, they hoped, stand in in a pinch.

“Oh, look, she’s right here.” Her mother pointed. “I didn’t see her as we were coming out.”

Amelie was standing at the trunk of a rental car with her back to them. The trunk was popped. She was carefully removing the pillbox hat and veil.

Ginnie’s stomach turned. She prayed—to what she did not know—with all the fierceness in her heart that her brother would slip quietly into the rental and drive back to New York City, never to speak of this day again.

Instead he turned and saw them. Ginnie met his eyes and she pleaded with him not to do it, not to make a scene, not to roil their father’s funeral with prodigal son histrionics.

Prodigal son on the best day. Because the fact was, she still had no idea what the rest of them would do. Their parents were conservative Catholics. They had been raised as conservative Catholics, and as far as Ginnie knew, that still meant what it had when her brother was kicked out.

There was a moment during which Ian seemed to consider her plea; another in which he searched within himself. Then, with a strength Ginnie could not imagine, he reached across his forehead and drew away the wig.

Their mother began to scream.

Nothing was as it seemed.

She had expected something from her enormous conservative Catholic family. Some check, some hesitation at seeing Ian again at their father’s funeral. In day drag.

After the initial shock, her mother had run—*run*—across the parking lot to Ian,

thrown her arms around his neck, covered him in kisses and sobs. The dam was annihilated.

In fact, everyone was crying. Eric came over and shook Ian’s hand, beaming. Ginnie had always suspected he was a secret leftist. Less dogmatic than the others, at any rate. Anthony, too, his four-year-old in his arm, had leaned in for a side-hug. He, four years younger, had absolutely worshipped Ian as a child.

Someone from their father’s firm pointed out—politely but firmly—that they were blocking the parking lot exit. The mass of family wobbled and began to split off into its separate cars. Trish, whom Ginnie had suspected would be the most reticent, embraced her brother and kissed him on the cheek. She was crying.

“Where are you staying?”

“I was driving back to New York tonight.”

She pretended to slap him across the face. She absolutely never swore, and to compensate sometimes had a stilted way of being emphatic. “Don’t even dare to pull a stunt like that, now.”

Her youngest was on her hip, his chubby little arms flung around her neck. “Do you see, Seamus? That’s your uncle Ian.” The baby buried his head in her shoulder.

“Trish,” her husband said. He was bundling the other boys into the van.

“Yes. OK. Come to mom’s. Come, Ian. If there’s no room there, you can stay with us.”

Ian nodded. His mascara ran down his cheeks in elegant black strings.

Their mother was standing beside him, her fingers interlaced with his, the other hand holding their hands together like a seal. She had not torn her eyes away from him.

Ginnie felt the sudden onset of pregnancy brain exhaustion.

“Mom, I need to lie down.”

Her mother, who knew pregnancy, assented. She took her keys from her purse and

handed them to Eli. "Take my car."

"I'm riding with Ian."

"The conspirators," her mother said with a half-smile. There was an unmistakable sharpness to it.

"That's entirely on me. I asked her not to say anything." It was the first Ian had spoken.

"I respect that. You're a good sister." Her mother smooshed her lips into Ginnie's cheek. "Get home. Lie down. We're right behind you. Your gentleman of a husband will drive me."

Eli smiled through his beard. He made a show of bending his arm for his mother-in-law to take. She was unsteady on her feet and happily took his arm. Another intercession. Ginnie had never imagined her mother would so quickly embrace a black husband. Her parents were, well... they watched a lot of Fox News.

Ginnie opened the car door. Ian had already turned it on. Though it was late October, she cranked the A/C. Half a minute later, he slipped into the driver's seat.

"Where's Elizabeth?"

Ginnie leaned her head back. "I didn't even notice. She's probably at her hotel. She's not staying at the house."

"I wasn't trying to make a scene."

"Bro," she said. She rolled her head to take him in. "If you apologize, I'll kill you."

He backed up and pulled into line behind their mother's car.

"You remember where to go?"

"I could never forget."

Ginnie closed her eyes. "I know what you mean."

They drove in silence. There was something weighing on her, a little twist in the belly that wasn't there because of the baby. When they stopped at a light, she reached over and put her plump little hand on his.

"I really never—I never thought it was

going to be like this. I don't think it's just, you know, dad being... gone. As if that opened a space or, or..."

Ian nodded. He pushed his sunglasses up to his forehead, resting them on the nylon skull cap still affixed for attaching the wig.

"I just don't want you to think that I was—"

The light turned green. Ian drove. Ginnie was silent. It wasn't until they pulled up into the driveway of their childhood home that she found the words.

"I wasn't trying to keep you to myself."

"Ginnie. I know."

Their mother was giddy. Ginnie hadn't seen her like this since—she had never seen her mother like this. She floated around the house, popped in and out of the kitchen. She scooped up the younger grandchildren and raspberried their tummies. She kissed the older ones as they colored and squabbled at the dining room table.

Ginnie had gone directly to her old room and slept. When she emerged it was not long before dinner. She was still dressed in her funeral black. The others had changed into less formal clothing.

She came down the staircase into the foyer between the vast living room and the dining room. The house was dark: wood-paneled, with burgundy upholstery, thick dark Persian carpets. Every room had a nook or a cubby, every staircase a delicious triangular closet for hiding in or just reading, alone. The house had retained the sense of magic and romance that permeated the memories of her childhood.

Eli was seated on the narrow brick foundation of the fireplace, large enough to warm the enormous house. He had unearthed a guitar, no surprise, and was passing it back and forth with their eldest nephew, Jacob, who was ten.

"Eli, can you help me with the zipper?"

"You sit." Trish rose from where she was seated on the couch with her husband and Eric. "I bought you something. Let's get it now."

"Where's Ian?"

"He's with mom in the kitchen."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it."

Ginnie wobbled her way through the foyer to the front door. She opened it to see Elizabeth and her husband, Patrick.

"Oh," Elizabeth said. She scanned Ginnie with actual panic. "We changed clothes, we thought—"

"I'm the only one still dressed—come in."

Elizabeth gave a small nod. She slipped like a mouse into the house. She was so very thin.

Patrick came through behind her. He was tall and good-looking in a bland way that Ginnie had never found attractive. He was pale and thick, with wavy jet-black hair pomaded back away from his face. The first time they had met, he had worn his collar popped unironically. He did some kind of financial management consulting. Ginnie stepped backward to give him space to come through. He couldn't stop himself from putting his hand on her belly. She shoved it off.

"Heard we've got an addition to the fam. Where's the queer?"

Before Ginnie could disembowel him, he raised his hands in obsequious apology. "Not my word, I know, I know."

Just ahead, Elizabeth was trying to claw her way into the wallpaper. For her sake, Ginnie decided not to push it. She slipped the comment into the private rolodex of hatred she maintained for Patrick.

"Gin," Trish called from the foot of the stairs. She had a brown paper shopping bag in one hand. She twisted her head suddenly. "Matthew! Peter! Hands to ourselves, please.

I see twenty blue crayons. Beside the candle. Thank you."

Patrick was descending the couple of steps into the living room. "So, the prodigal son returns. Where's the man of the hour? This calls for a drink."

Elizabeth had disappeared. Ginnie closed the front door. Trish met her eyes and made a mouth as if she was throwing up. Then she bent her head to the staircase. Ginnie followed her upstairs. In the living room, Patrick was making Old Fashioneds from their father's bar cart. He called up after them to see if they wanted one. Trish, rankled, ignored him.

"Not someone I'd be inclined to bring home to mom."

They went into Ginnie and Elizabeth's room. Trish unzipped the back of her dress and helped her step out of it.

"It feels like you're so ready, doesn't it?"

"Two weeks."

"Jacob was two weeks late."

"I can't do another month. Eli is literally rolling me down the street."

"Yeah, it was easier being tall, I'm not going to lie."

"Well, I got mom's figure."

"Yes, but you also got her hair, which: jealous."

It was true. In their six-kid family of full-blooded Irish Bay Staters, she was the only redhead. And it was glorious thick wavy dark red hair.

"Anyway, I got you an early post-pregnancy present. I love this brand, they make things just for pregnant and post-baby-bod women, and you can wear them out or at home. Equally comfortable. I know for me, especially with the last two, I could put this on and not feel one hundred percent like a pile of dirty laundry."

Trish spread a few outfits out on the bed. They really were cute.

Ginnie started to cry. She leaned over and gave Trish a big squeeze. “Pregnancy tears.”

“I can’t believe my baby sister is about to have a baby! I’m so excited and proud of you.”

“I swear to God, I’ve hugged more in the last twenty-four hours...”

Ginnie wiped the tears out of her eyes. She picked out a pair of jeans with a cutout elastic waistband, shuffled into a black top.

“You look amazing. Perky, my goodness.”

Ginnie blushed.

Trish took her in. “Can I ask you a question?”

Ginnie nodded.

“How long have you—”

“Five years.”

“Five.” Trish nodded slowly. “And he’s well?”

“He’s... he’s actually amazing.”

Someone shouted from downstairs. Trish bent her head to hear. “What did they say?”

“They said dinner.”

“Oh, God. Let me get the kids so they don’t murder each other. You look darling. It doesn’t last forever. But, then again, nothing does. ‘What can be seen lasts only for a time...’”

Trish slipped quietly out of the room.

Ginnie followed more slowly. The clothes did feel good. It was weird; nice-weird. She hadn’t had a normal conversation with her sister in forever. Trish was eight years older, a stringent Catholic stay-at-home mom. Genes aside, they had little in common. First, there was the age gap, but for the last ten years there had also been a wall of kids to get over whenever they were together, which was fine because Ginnie liked being helpful with her nephews.

There was a long time that Trish had worn a veil to mass. She had clearly... mellowed.

Ginnie reached the landing. To her left was the vast dining room table. As a very young girl, they had all sat around it. After Ian left, and then two years later, Trish, for college—slowly they had been winnowed down. She recalled

fondly the years when it was just she, her parents and Elizabeth, both girls in high school. Then, for a year, it had been just three of them.

There wasn’t enough space, even at the table for eight with extra chairs. A row of card tables had been erected in the living room across the foyer, draped with a colorful plastic tablecloth. Kids and spouses had been relegated to this table. Eli looked up and blew her a kiss. He was really very good with the older boys, so their father could focus on the little ones.

Their mother insisted that her children sit with her at the family table.

They took the seats they had taken since childhood. Ginnie settled in at her mother’s right. Elizabeth sat with her eyes downcast across the table. Patrick was loudly telling borderline inappropriate limericks to Eli and Trish’s husband, Dan. Neither was laughing.

Ian and their mother brought in the food; they had made their father’s favorite, Irish stew, soda bread. They flitted around the tables like two little birds, making sure that everyone was squared away. He was dressed in black. He had their mother’s bright floral apron tied snugly around his waist.

Across the way, Ginnie could hear one of the little nephews refusing even to try a potato. Eli would be looking fruitlessly for hot sauce.

When at last she was sure that everyone else had been served, their mother took a seat. Ian lingered, standing. He set a hand on the high back of the chair that had been his for eighteen years. Ginnie watched him with tears in her eyes. He had been so quiet, so inauspicious, in his return. Yet he wasn’t hiding who he was. He was fully there, fully gay, out, unashamed, glorious, handsome.

She had long known the iron strength that ran through him. He used it now to draw the chair back from the table. The others were

watching him too.

"Wait," their mother said. She rose, went around the table. She pulled back their father's chair. "I'm not used to seeing it empty. That chair," she took his hand in hers, pushed him towards his father's place. "That chair is for those who aren't with us."

Ian took their father's seat.

Trish dabbed her eyes with her napkin.

Their mother stood behind him for a long time. At last, she set a small envelope on his empty plate.

"From him. Not for now. For when you're ready."

Trish and her family were gone; they still lived in Newton, just a five-minute drive from grandma's. Anthony was upstairs putting his daughter, Lily, to sleep. His wife, Angela, was on the couch in sweatpants and an Assumption College sweatshirt, her eyes half-shut, absently running a finger around the rim of her third Old Fashioned. Patrick and Elizabeth were there, too.

Eli had offered to do the dishes and was now on the back porch playing guitar. Ginnie had gone out to sit with him but it got too cold. She was restless and her legs hurt. Walking felt better than sitting. She heard voices from the study and went in to see what was going on.

Ian and Eric were standing on opposite sides of their father's desk. Eric was talking about math, scribbling something on a sheet of paper. Ian was nodding along. When Ginnie came in, he looked up and gave her a miniscule smile of bafflement.

"Eric's blowing my mind. Did you know there might be more than four dimensions?"

Eric looked up. He had barely heard her. "Oh, hi, Gin."

"Where's mom?"

"She went to bed."

"Can you drive me to CVS?"

"Natch, darling. Or, if you'd rather, something I can pick up for you?"

"No, I'll come. I need sour candy. They're the only place open."

"Get the pregnant woman some candy!"

Ian said. "Show me more tomorrow?"

Eric nodded. "Is Patrick still making drinks?"

"I think so."

They left together. Eric made his way to the living room.

"Can I be an asshole and ask you to get my coat from upstairs?"

"I need mine too." Ian tripped up the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Anthony passed Ian on the way down.

"CVS, to get candy. Want anything?"

Anthony pursed his mouth. "No. Trish should be coming back over when the kids are out. It'll be good to talk. Learn your side of the story."

He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. She put her head on his shoulder. Ian reappeared at the top of the stairs.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

They slipped into their coats, asked whether anyone else needed anything. They had no takers. For the briefest moment Elizabeth met her eyes. Then she cast her eyes down to stare at her fingers, interlocked between her knees.

Ginnie and Ian stepped out into the cool October night. Thankfully, Ian's car was the last in the driveway. Ginnie bundled into the passenger seat.

"Thanks for driving. My license expired, like, six years ago."

"I got mine because I needed to rent cars when I travel for shows." He made a face. "And I've forgotten my wallet. Be right back, darling."

Ian slipped back up the driveway and into the house. The car was too hot. Ginnie turned off the heat and opened the moon roof. To her surprise, the garage door opened and Elizabeth came out. She jogged quickly down to the car and slipped into the driver's seat. She wasn't wearing a coat.

"I'll drive you."

"You saw Ian?"

"Mm-hm!" A little too perky.

Elizabeth backed quickly out of the driveway and shot down the street.

"Whoa, slow down."

"Sorry."

"No, it's—everything makes me want to vomit."

"I thought that was only the beginning of the pregnancy."

"It never left."

Elizabeth stopped at a stop sign. She turned in her seat and scanned the darkness behind them. Ginnie angled her head to see better in the mirror.

"Everything OK?"

"Mm-hm!"

They drove the rest of the way to the CVS in silence. Ginnie found a humungous bag of sour gummy worms. Elizabeth wandered the aisles. Under the fluorescent lights, she looked like she might have been a ghost.

Back in the car, Ginnie tore open the bag. She offered some to her sister.

Elizabeth eyed the bag suspiciously. She shook her head, and again Ginnie was struck by just how wiry she was. Was she anorexic? Bulimic? She had eaten at dinner. After a minute, Elizabeth seemed to change her mind. She took a worm and pretended to slurp it up. They giggled.

It was a quick drive home. When they reached the corner where she should have made the last turn, Elizabeth kept driving.

"That was—"

"I know. Let's go for a drive."

"Yeah, OK."

She drove slowly through the neighborhood, past boxy, outwardly modest million-and-a-half dollar colonials and brick-and-stone houses with Lexus SUVs and Teslas in the driveways. There was barely any traffic. Elizabeth drove randomly at first, but after a while, Ginnie started to recognize where they were going.

"You're going to St. Benedict's?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "I haven't been back since your graduation."

"Me neither."

"I know I haven't been in touch much. Recently. You're a social worker?"

"Yeah. I work for the public schools."

"So, you see a lot?"

"Yes."

"And you can't judge, right?"

"No. Elizabeth?"

"Mm-hm?"

"Nothing."

Elizabeth pulled into the parking lot of their old Catholic school. There was a teacher's lot around the back where they could park and cross a narrow patch of asphalt to the elementary school playground. They had done it a million times when they were in high school and Elizabeth had first gotten her license. Back then they would swing and gossip or talk about boys, each of them trying to be the more modest, the more *Catholic* of the two in romance, neither believing a moment of it. They had laughed till they needed to pee, and once Elizabeth had done so, squatting behind the dumpster while Ginnie pretended to be on the lookout for the custodian or the police.

But now Elizabeth made no move to get out of the car. Ginnie knew she wanted to talk.

She gave her space. She traced the contour of the beautiful old brick school with her eyes.

"How is your pregnancy?"

Ginnie turned back to her sister. "Good. I mean, I'm ready for it to be over. I've forgotten what it's like to not be pregnant."

Elizabeth lowered her eyes.

"I've forgotten what it's like—to be pregnant."

Ginnie inhaled deeply. Her head felt suddenly cavernous, focused. "I can just listen."

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes squeezed tight. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"It was right after we got married. I was about sixteen weeks. I lost the baby. It was before I was ready to tell anyone. Which I know is so long to wait but—"

"I'm so sorry."

Elizabeth was quiet for a long time.

"He pushed me down the stairs."

Ginnie must have made some noise, some movement.

"I lost the baby. And the thing is, Ginnie, I was so relieved. I was so relieved I lost the baby because I couldn't imagine... and I had never told anyone, so it was like it had never happened."

Ginnie could hear the blood pounding in her ears. She watched her sister's movements. She was rubbing her hands together between her knees. She would bend and press her forehead against the top of the steering wheel.

"He controls everything. He controls *everything*. I don't work. I have no money. I have no friends. He orders our groceries online. He controls everything I eat. I don't have a cell phone. A cell phone, Ginnie!"

Ginnie didn't know what to say. She knew she should fall back on her training, but she was pregnant and hormonal, and this was her sister.

"He doesn't know I'm on birth control."

Ginnie's eyes widened to saucers. This surprised her more than anything. The other women in her family, the Catholics, revered the Church's teachings on sexual morality. She thought.

"He thinks I'm barren. His word."

"How do you do it?"

"I got an IUD at a clinic. I walked there while he was at work. Six miles each way. I had to explain to them that I couldn't pay."

Ginnie leaned over as far as she could in the car, but she couldn't reach her sister. "Get out," she said. She unfastened her seatbelt and went around to Elizabeth's side. She had to help her out of the car, but she did, pulling her into the warmth of her enormous maternity coat and holding her tiny frail body against her jellybean belly while she sobbed.

"Honey, I've used every birth control under the sun. If you didn't think he could—You did the *right* thing."

"I just feel like God hates me. He must think I'm so weak and pathetic. I'm so ashamed, I've hated myself since the first time I didn't leave. It didn't happen until we were married, but there were signs, and I just feel like such a... fucking failure."

"Lizzie, my God. You haven't done anything wrong. I love the shit out of you. We all do."

"I know," Elizabeth said. She drew away to wipe her nose and eyes. "I know that logically. But, like, the Catholic thing is hard. I don't want to be divorced. I don't want to be on birth control. I want to eat cheeseburgers and get fat and be surrounded by babies."

She took a deep stabilizing breath.

"I think it was seeing Ian again. And I just saw that he's, you know, homosexual, but he doesn't hate himself. He's just Ian, my brother, who's a homosexual. And someone, maybe you, anyway, they said he's still Catholic, and

I haven't been so brainwashed that I can't let him be both those things. So, I could imagine, like, being divorced and Catholic and also not hating myself."

"Yes. Yes to all of that."

"What I'm saying is, I'm ready. To leave him." Elizabeth pushed a stream of tears from her cheek. "Ginnie, I'm so ashamed to ask but I need your help."

"Stop it. You're my sister. Whatever you need. Eli has tons of money. I mean, I guess we have tons of money. It all pre-dates me. It's very weird."

"He's rich?"

Ginnie nodded. "Not, you know, one-per-center, but he's 'comfortable.' His first band blew up about ten years ago, and he made bank. They used one of his songs in that old Kia commercial. Anyway, more than that, we have space. He bought a brownstone. For the two of us. Three. Come live with us."

She could see that her sister was trying to imagine it.

"It's not even a question anymore. You're moving in with us. Whatever comes next, you can work it out from there. Brooklyn's great. Now get in the car, I'm freezing."

They climbed back in. Ginnie blasted the heat.

"Can I ask you a question?" Elizabeth.

"Of course."

"Can I have more of those gummy worms?"

"Oh, hell yes." Ginnie handed over the bag. "Fuck Patrick."

"Not anymore."

Ginnie couldn't believe what her sister had said. Neither, apparently, could she. Elizabeth broke out in squeals of laughter. It was like when they were kids.

When the laughter finally tapered off, Ginnie told her to drive home.

Elizabeth's eyes widened.

"We're not going inside. You're never going to see him again. I'm texting Ian. He'll drive back with us."

Elizabeth drove. She was clearly nervous. Ginnie group-texted her husband and her brother.

"Did they say anything? Did Patrick notice?"

"No."

Which wasn't true. Patrick had started screaming, enough to wake Lily.

When they pulled up Elizabeth asked her if she was going to go inside.

"If I go in there, I will John Bobbitt that motherfucker. Just wait."

A minute later, Ian hustled out through the garage. He indicated that Elizabeth should pop the trunk. She did and he tossed a few things inside. He slipped into the backseat. He was wearing his enormous sunglasses. A pink scarf was swooshed around his throat.

"It's like Thelma and Louise and their fabulous brother! Lizzie, darling, hit the gas. I've been filled in on everything. Goodbye, Patriarchy. Hello, Brooklyn. Mary Virginia, your husband is a saint. I truly thought he was going to garrote the bastard with a guitar string. I had to remind him that his child might prefer to have a father out of prison.

"At any rate, he got the rage on video with his cell phone. Anthony was on the phone with the police when I skipped out."

Later, when they had switched and Ian was at the wheel, Elizabeth asleep under a blanket on the back seat, Ginnie asked him how in God's name he had managed to get through the day.

Ian reached into his breast coat pocket and withdrew the little envelope their mother had given him at dinner. His name was printed neatly on the front. It was unsealed.

Ginnie drew from it a small rectangle of heavy card stock. On it were a few words in their father's stubby handwriting. She couldn't make them out in the darkness.

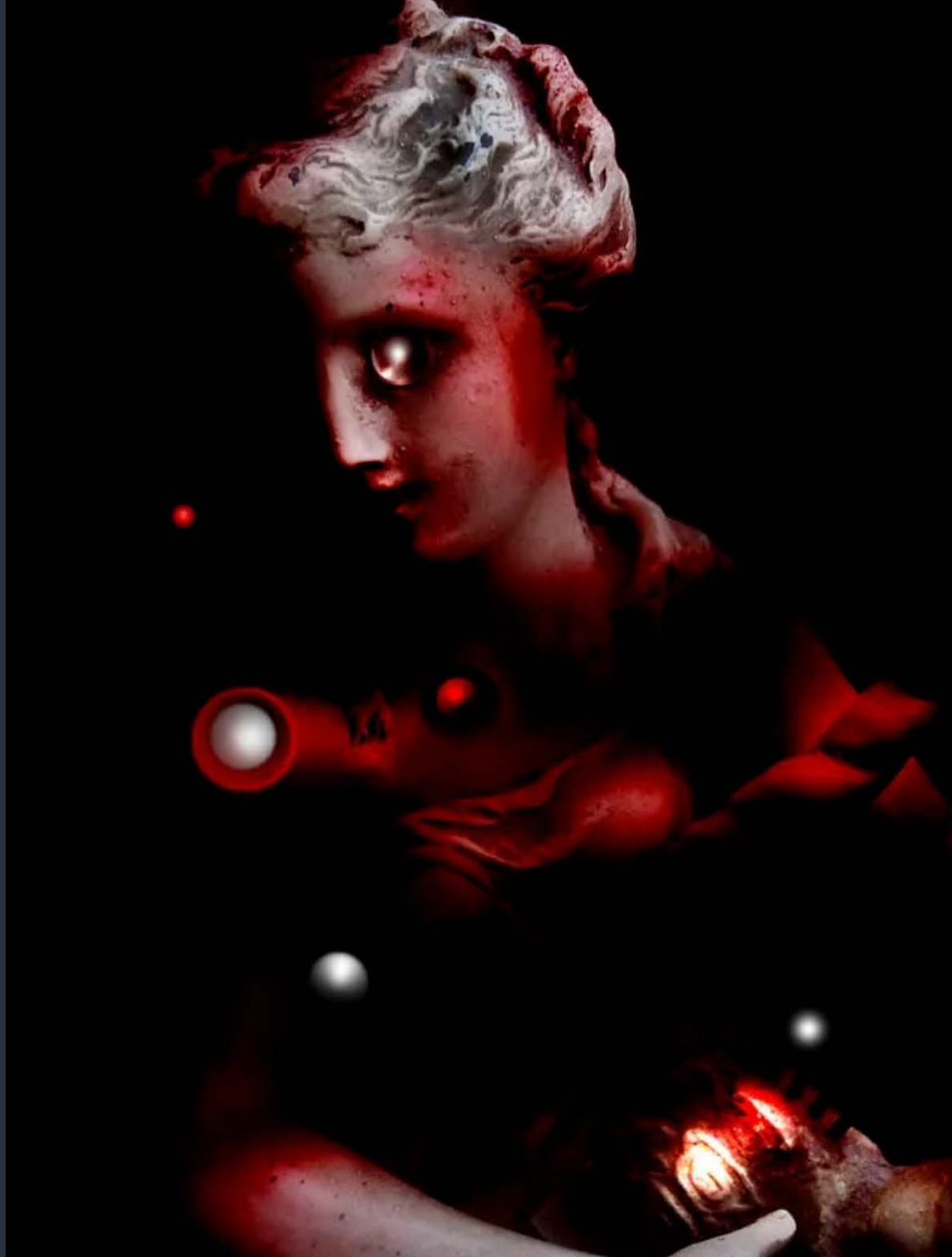
"May I?"

Ian nodded.

Ginnie turned on the car light. She looked down again.

*I am not worthy that you should enter under
my roof, but only say the word and my soul
shall be healed.*

Thomas Bulen Jacobs was raised overseas, mostly in South America, Turkey, and Spain. He is a graduate of St. John's College in Annapolis, Md. and the New School in New York City. His work has appeared most recently in *Scribble Literary Journal*, *The Oddville Press*, and *Variant Literature Journal*, among others.



v325 | Joe Lugara

Joe Lugara works have appeared in more than 40 exhibitions throughout the New York Metropolitan Area, including the New Jersey State Museum; Gallery Bergen (Bergen Community College, New Jersey); Proteus Gowanus (Brooklyn, New York); Drawing Rooms (Jersey City, New Jersey); Curious Matter (Jersey City); and in New York City with, among others, Castle Fitzjohns Gallery and 80 Washington Square East Galleries at New York University. Lugara's work can be found at joelugara.com.

[Untitled Work in Charcoal]

William Welch

Darkness, who understands
the jokes you tell?
You hide your smile
behind garages. Late at night, you talk,
like someone rehearsing for an argument.
When the moon shines its flashlight
down the alleyway, you fall
silent, afraid you'll be seen,
and crouch inside my door.
A cloud comes,
then you resume
your one-sided conversation.
I listen. Too soft—your voice—
to make out words,
but I hear your laughter.
You make me feel like a child.

William Welch works as a registered nurse in Utica, NY and also as an editor of *Doubly Mad*, a literary and visual arts journal published by *The Other Side of Utica*, a community arts center. Welch's poems have appeared in journals such as *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Pudding Magazine*, *Belle Ombre*, and others.

Passing Through

Michael Overa

THERE ARE TWO FEET OF WATER at the far end of the pool, in what used to be the deep end. Ribbons of silt have settled to the bottom of the pool. Empty beer cans and other detritus float on the surface. The light is beginning to fail and further down the block a lone street lamp flickers on.

There is the pop of the pellet gun, as Emerson aims an empty beer can floating on the surface. The pellet splashes to the left of the can. He pumps the gun five times and aims again. The wind cuts across the water from the East, rippling the surface of the water. He waits, the stock pressed into his cheek. The wind slackens, and he squeezes the trigger. There is the pock of the pellet hitting the can.

He upends his beer and drains it, crushes the can, and pitches it towards the water. The can falls short and goes skittering across the banked bottom of the pool, stopping just short of the water. Emerson reaches into the case of beer sitting between them on the aggregate.

“Running low,” Emerson says to himself, fishing out the last three cans and setting them on the ground beside him.

There is the clackclackclack as he pumps the rifle.

He’s been living in the motel room for the better part of two months. He’d stopped only to

get gas, but there was a “Help Wanted” sign in the gas station window. The previous mechanic had recently died of a heart attack. It was a small town crossroad, the owner said, but there would be plenty to keep him busy.

The town is aptly named Junction, and its decay has reached such a state of half-life that every time a citizen moves away, the town seems to contract in on itself. Across from the gas station are a restaurant and a bar. More than a dozen abandoned brick buildings still bear the hallmark of the timber boom that is long gone. He crosses at the main intersection of roads so seldom traveled these days that weeds have sprung up in the cracks in the cement. The blacktop is seamed and scarred with black tar that stinks and glistens in the sun and lends an oily film to the puddles that gather in the potholes when it rains.

Every other Wednesday, he takes his paycheck from the gas station, crosses the street to the small bank, and converts the check into cash. He’s hidden extra money in several places but doubts anyone would look to him as the sort of person who was worth robbing. In threadbare work jeans and crumpled flannel shirts and scuffed boots, there is nothing about him that screams money. With his knuckles cracked and the palms of his hands imbued with grease,

there is little to differentiate him from any other local.

Mondays, he counts six twenty-dollar bills out on the counter of the motel. He does this slowly. Cassidy, the owner's step-daughter, slides the bills from the counter and tucks them into the cash register. Emerson has never been good at guessing the ages of other people. The crow's feet at the corners of her eyes are hairline fractures, but she wears clothes he would think more fitting for a teenager: tight jeans with jeweled designs and crop tops.

Two dozen rooms branch out on either side of the main office. If there are guests at the motel, they are people who stay a day or two and are gone. He's seen families in large vans and solitary men in work trucks. Several times he's seen the same black Mercedes and red Jeep park side by side at the end of the bank of rooms, furthest from the office. He'd only glimpsed the people at a distance, but they were always quick to enter and leave the room and rarely stayed for more than a night. On a few occasions, they stayed only for an afternoon.

He tried to imagine what that would be like. These lovers traveled from some distance away. A brand new Mercedes was like a unicorn in Junction. So they each drove two or three hours to meet at a dive motel in the middle of nowhere. And then what? They entered the room, flung off their clothes, and five or ten or fifteen minutes later, they were done and trying to figure out how to manage the time? Or, maybe they sat like an old couple, talking and catching up. Perhaps they brought fancy cheeses and wines, had a picnic on the bed, and shared a solitary kiss before departing.

It seemed like a lot of trouble to go to just to get laid.

At the end of his shift, Emerson gathers spark plugs, oil filter, oil, and an air filter and places them in a battered cardboard box and carts them home. He has been in the town for three months and, even so, he isn't sure if this is a sign that he is ready to leave.

Back at the motel, he sets the box on the concrete and squirms beneath the chassis, inching backward on the rough and uneven pavement. He sets the oil to draining and stands to the side in the early evening sun, feeling the prickle of sweat on his scalp.

A white Subaru pulls up and parks several spots down. He glances that direction and sees a young woman get out fast food bag in one hand, and soda in the other. His stomach rumbles, and he realizes that he hasn't eaten. The woman glances back at him, as if aware that she's being watched, and disappears into the office.

He is sitting in the back of his pickup truck, several hours later, sipping beer and watching the sky turn tangerine hues when he hears laughter. Cassidy is leaning out of the office door, saying something to the driver of the Subaru. He glances over at the woman as she walks back towards her car, keys jangling in her hand. She opens her car door and then turns to look at him. He is not embarrassed to be caught looking at her.

"You work at the gas station," she says.

He nods, then realizes it might be imperceptible from a distance and says yes.

And then she is driving away.

The truck starts up with a cough but runs smoothly. He sits in the parking lot for a few minutes listening to the engine and watching the tachometer. Satisfied, he backs out of the spot and drives out along the highway. The

stereo in the truck no longer works, and the AC has been shot since long before he bought the thing. He drives now with the windows down, listening to the wind and the rattle of the machine.

An hour later, he is back at the motel. Cassidy is standing in front of the office, smoking.

"You planning on leaving?"

"Eventually," he says, "I haven't really decided on when."

The woman that he saw at the motel shows up at the gas station a few days later. He recognizes the white Subaru first, and then he recognizes her as she gets out of the car and approaches the shop. He's been working through inventory, checking things off of a clipboard when she enters the shop.

"Morning," he says. "What can I do for you?"

"Just an oil change," she says, "how long will that take?"

"Not long. Nothing else going right now."

"You got a discount for friends of friends?"

He laughs, "Everyone in Junction is a friend of someone's friend or a cousin of someone else's cousin."

She sits on the workbench as he sets to work. It doesn't bother him to have someone watching him. Often people feel the need to watch a mechanic if they have the luxury. It's part of the mistrust sewn by bad mechanics and TV shows. As he works, she peppers him with questions. While there is nothing specific that he is trying to hide, or needs to hide, he feels compelled to keep his answers brief, trying, when he can to turn the conversation back towards her.

"Cass says you might be leaving soon."

"Haven't decided yet."

"Where would you go?"

"Southeast," he says, "keep following the road."

"What are you, some sort of modern-day cowboy?"

A few days later, he sat at the edge of the pool, sipping beer and taking potshots at the flotilla of cans on the surface. Some of the cans have sunk below the surface, punctured with too many pellets. It was late afternoon, verging on evening and above he could hear the crows making their way across the sky in loose patterns.

He'd seen the Subaru parked by the office when he arrived but hadn't thought much of it. Earlier that day, he'd stopped by the office to pay the last of his bill, adding an extra twenty to the stack as a type of gratuity. Cassidy had nodded and said that she had figured that he would be leaving sometime soon. It would be, he said, within the next few days, but he would pay up through the week.

Now, as he sat there sipping beer and clacking the pellet gun, he stared at the sky and thought about where he would head next. There was no one expecting him anywhere, and he had a decent amount of money in his pocket. He was lost in his thoughts, imagining the next town and a little curious about what he would be doing next for work.

"One to spare?" She said.

He'd jumped a little, kicking over his can of beer. He turned to look at her and then down at the beer that was foaming over the aggregate.

"One less, now," he said, setting the can upright.

And then she was dragging over a chair and taking the rifle from his hand. She glanced at it, clacked it four or five times, and took aim at one of the cans. She hit the can low, near the waterline, and it jumped a little in the air.

"Nice shot," he said, handing her a beer.

They went on like that for a while, trading the rifle back and forth and taking shots at the cans. The sun started to set, and the street lamp at the end of the parking lot blinked on. The parking lot was empty except for their two cars.

Without knowing how or when they were in his hotel room, things were a blur of skin, clothing, and laughter. It was unexpected and sudden, and when they were done, she got up from the bed, and he watched the curve of her spine and leaned on an elbow to watch her reach into her purse for her cigarettes. She turned and stood smoking, leaning against the low counter that held the TV.

"Figured I couldn't let you go without a goodbye," she said.

"Well," he said, "maybe I ought to stay."

Her expression changed—a flit of something that he couldn't identify.

"You have to go now," she said. "This was just a fuck."

"There are more where that came from."

She crushed out her cigarette and began picking up her clothes, "there's also my husband."

He could see now the ring on her left hand.

"You have to go now," she said, in something on the cusp of a threat and a prophecy.

And so, in the morning, he was gone.

Michael Overa was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. He is the author of two collections of short stories published by Unsolicited Press. Michael currently teaches writing at Shoreline Community College, just north of Seattle.

The Good Witch of the West Side

George Kramer

Into the rattling subway silence
came her familiar moonlit pitch,
her worn smile always
on like an occult crown,
her thoughts radiated
outward, saturated inward
the crevices of her mind.
The songs that rang out from her
nonsensical and deeply true, echoed
off the walls of headlines
to be long remembered by some,
like certain moments

with small children.
When she ended her chirping and
hopped away to the next car,
she left unspoken
words, caught like flies
in flypaper, in a swaying breeze
of silent straphanging passengers.

Some days she reached
into her rumpled bag for
the clay bowl
from her lost daughter.

She told a gray man in a gray hat
on the Number 3 train
how she swept the cars with her invisible broom,
he asked if that meant she was
the Good Witch of the West Side,
and they laughed together.
She saw him often on the train after that
and traded smiles.

(continued on the following page)

The Good Witch of the West Side | Poetry by George Kramer
(continued)

Once she showed him the holy letters
from her children,
telling of their lives in foster care.
She wanted to fly to them
but her wings were trapped in glue.

Instead
she asked him
if he could,
he said
he was sorry
but,
her glance wandered
from his face
like a ghost of a bird
and somehow

she flew to the next car
on stumps of broken wings.
He never saw her again after that.
Mornings later he was dozing in his seat.
he opened his eyes at his stop.
Next to him he found
a small bowl of dead flies.

George Kramer hails from Canada, Colorado, Kenya, Alabama and New York, but is' a long-time Virginia transplant. Kramer was once told that this averages out to Philadelphia, though he has never lived there. The child of European refugees from Nazism and Communism, Kramer's parents' legacy and his peripatetic childhood leave a trace in much of his writing. Kramer makes his living as an attorney. His recent published poems are on his website, blueguitar58.wixsite.com/website-1.



A Special Rose, London | Ray Marrero

Ray Marrero's artistic vision could be called emotive expression, melancholic and beautiful, even romantic. As a teenager, his first inspiration was Diane Arbus. He studied at the Academy of Art in San Francisco, and at that time also assisted and was mentored by the late Charles Gatewood. Ray Marrero is process oriented, preferring large format and medium analog cameras, hand printing and alternative processes. He splits his time between Astoria, Oregon and Meadow Glade, Washington.

Crows

Jim Reynolds

I like how you describe that poem
more than the poem itself.
You see things I don't,
and the things you see have deep meanings—
deeper perhaps than the poet intended.

You see birds symbolizing change.
The young leave the old
and neither knows the impact of the parting.
Shockingly this lack of comprehension is of no consequence
because there is love in the leaving.

Even after reading the poem several times,
I see crows.

I am not sure you are right,
but I know you are not wrong.
You amaze me.

I would like to see that poem as you see it.
But whenever I see you and me in a mirror,
I am reminded:
you have poor eyesight and a temperament that is too tender.
They are your most egregious shortcomings,
and I have benefitted from both.

Jim Reynolds lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. His work has previously appeared in *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Defenestration*, *Parody*, *Lighten Up Online*, *Ariel Chart*, *The Broadkill Review*, *The Loch Raven Review*, and *Scarlet Leaf Review*.

As Good as Dead

John Mara

ON A SECLUDED STREET in a small New England town, a black hearse pulls into Walter Nelson's driveway and, next door, Paddy O'Hegarty's favorite night of entertainment begins. "Ach, Nelson looks pretty good over there," O'Hegarty says to his wife Fiona, "for a dead man." Short and portly, Paddy clambers up onto the kitchen counter. Then, red-faced from the ascent, he angles a pair of binoculars just right to steal a peak out the window of this, Walter Nelson's tenth annual resurrection.

"What's dead should stay dead, Paddy. So the nuns taught us back in County Cork!" Fiona crosses herself—twice. "For ten years, bajesus, Mr. Nelson's kept St. Peter waiting at his golden gate. Why, the old man thinks he's Lazarus!"

The O'Hegartys migrated—or beat feet is more like it—out of Ireland and to Boston ten years ago, after they were chased from a Cork monastery and convent for a few fleshy transgressions of their respective divinity codes. Since then, as penance, the pious duo has concerned themselves with the moral turpitude of others in their adopted land.

The O'Hegartys made one exception to their calling, however, when they overlooked the Nelsons' trespass of the Lord's inviolable boundary between life and death. "After all, who in the Lord's flock hasn't wandered from the Church's narrow path?" Fiona divined. In truth, when they got wise to Mr. Nelson's

deadly homecomings, the O'Hegartys vowed to keep their mouths shut in exchange for the Nelsons' rhubarb patch. Under the heavenly covenant, Walter Nelson maintained immortality, and Paddy O'Hegarty scored eternal rhubarb pie.

In the Nelsons' driveway, the mortician, sailing under the banner of 'Mortie,' opens the rear door of the hearse with the affected grace of a valet. Walter Nelson climbs out of it, dressed in the same dark suit and blue silk tie he wore at his funeral. The red rose Mortie stuffs between Walter's fingers is the only fresh thing about the dead man. This year, Walter's skin is a shade paler and his hair a tone whiter. His vision has deteriorated too—but Mort may've grabbed the wrong glasses out of the shoe box at the funeral home.

"We're each entitled to one ride in a hearse, Fiona," Paddy says over the binoculars. "And here's Nelson on ride number ten. That son-of-a-bitch bounces back like a dead cat!"

"Stop your goddamned swearing, bajesus!" Mrs. O counsels as she brandishes a tin baking sheet, "Or you'll be getting your entitled ride aside Nelson tonight!" Fiona packs a wallop that belies her ninety pounds. She's bedecked in hair curlers, and the yellowed housecoat she wears looks like one draped over a coat rack.

Outside, Walter Nelson, a bit stiff from

the ride, lumbers up the steps and through the front door of his Victorian-style home. The door opens into a finely appointed dining room, where the Victorian furniture and wood floor are clean and polished, and the fireplace crackles. Walter spots the cremation urn—his—that adorns the mantle. *There I am*, he snickers at the ruse. The dining room table holds two silver place settings and a candelabrum. Nelson's favorite meal steams on hot plates: carrots, mashed potatoes, and of course, roast beef—rare.

The dinner was arranged by Gerty, the Nelsons' live-in housekeeper for fifteen years. Gerty moved out of the house ten years ago when Mr. Nelson died, but she returns every year to fix the Nelsons' anniversary dinner. Next year, though, the dinners will shift to her apartment, on account of what happened to Mrs. Nelson two months ago.

Feeling his collar, Nelson prudently takes the seat further from the fireplace. Mort seals Walter's face and hands every year with wax as a preservative, and last year's wax melted and congealed on his white collar, the victim no doubt of Walter having chosen the warmer seat.

As Walter pours two glasses of Brunello wine, his wife Grace sashays down the curving staircase and into the dining room. Elegant in a red dress and white gloves, her jewelry sparkles when it meets the candlelight. This year, her hair is black, not gray. *Dyed?* Walter wonders.

"Oh, thank you darling, it's so good to see you again!" She takes the red rose. With lips pursed for a kiss, Grace opens her arms for a warm embrace.

"No touching!" Nelson recoils. "Mort says, after ten years, one squeeze could break me to pieces, and he means it literally, Grace. He says I should have a label that reads 'fragile.'"

Mrs. Nelson sits down instead. "Sorry

darling, I lost my head."

"I'm worried about losing mine." Then, Nelson notices another change in his wife as the dim candlelight flickers across her face. No makeup? Her skin looks glossy. "So Grace, tell me about the past year while I've been ... away." With the carving knife, Walter slices the wriggling roast beef.

Next door, Paddy O'Hegarty shifts the bins from the Nelsons' dining room window to some faster action in the adjacent kitchen. There, another roast beef is wriggling, this one a rump roast—raw—in the form of Gerty's rosy bottom. Gert sits atop the kitchen counter where she was plunked by the ever helpful mortician.

"Has Gerty started cookin' over there, Paddy?" Fiona says.

"I'd say so, love. She'll be needin' the oven vent before long."

"That Gert's always been on the cheeky side."

"Looks like that's the side she's on now." Paddy catches the reflection from the mirror in the Nelsons' kitchen. "Yup, there it is."

The Gerty-Mortie annual kitchen tryst began ten years ago with flirtatious eating, with sexual innuendo, of raw fruits and vegetables. Over time, the two vegetarians became carnivorous. Ten years on, it's an all-out food fight.

Fiona takes a rhubarb pie out of the oven. "I'll bet they're having the roast beef again, Paddy," Fiona says.

"Roast beef in the dining room and kitchen both." Paddy wipes sweat from the lenses of the binoculars. "Except in the kitchen, it's that mortician fella workin' awful hard at the slicin'."

When Mrs. O brings her husband a piece of rhubarb pie, she finds him contorted on the

counter. “Whatya all twisted up for, Paddy?”

“The Virgin Mary is blockin’ me line of sight!”

“It’s a divine intervention, no doubt.”

“Damn, that Gerty’s showin’ off some fine cupcakes there, too.”

“Cupcakes? I thought she makes the soufflé,” Fiona says. “I wish she’d bring a warm piece of it over here sometime.”

“Oh, so don’t I, love. So don’t I.” Kneading the crick in his neck, Paddy hands Fiona the binoculars. “Here, hold these.” Like a chubby gymnast dismounting a pommel horse, he leaps from the counter and rushes outside.

Fiona looks through the binoculars. “Awww, how sweet, the two of ‘em,” she says while panning the dining room scene.

Outside, Paddy drags the life-sized statue of the Virgin Mary, careful not to rake his hands across the Virgin’s stony breasts. Mary smiles sublimely as her heels furrow the ground, pulled by Paddy with strength neither she nor Mrs. O knew he had.

Fiona moves the binoculars into the void Mother Mary leaves behind. “Oh, good Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” Fiona hyperventilates and crosses herself—three times.

“I’ll be rinsin’ me eyes out with the holy water come Sunday, Mr. O’Hegarty!” she says as Paddy hustles back into the kitchen. “And you nearly wearing a priest’s collar!”

“Do you think that mortician fella would put me to work as a driver?” Paddy grabs the binoculars. “What’d I miss?”

Fiona whacks Paddy with the baking sheet. But, with the meat eaters next door in a full gallop, Paddy is oblivious to the sting. “Now why can’t we get some of that over here, I ask you, Fiona?” Every year, he lobbies for an amendment to the terms of their matrimonial covenant, usually when the shenanigans in the Nelsons’ kitchen reach a crescendo.

“Is it the soufflé you’re after, Paddy? It’s the rhubarb we serve up here. Isn’t that good enough for ye?”

“The rhubarb would be just fine, love, if we could make it tart, not sweet. The fellas at the club say it’s good tart, every now and then.”

But Fiona doesn’t hear the suggestion to spice up the marital menu. She’s rummaging the kitchen closet in an all-out search for the second pair of binoculars.

Back in the dining room next door, the scene is more tranquil. Delaying permanent death, Walter cherishes the one hour of renewed life Mortie grants him every year. He spends the precious time on dinner with his wife Grace. After their marriage, Grace taught kindergarten for forty years until she retired five years ago. A church deacon, volunteer librarian, and president of the garden club, Grace was satisfied with a simple, private life. She doted over their only child and let Walter stand in the spotlight.

With time short, Walter knows to skim only the high points of the life he left behind. “Tell me all about Walt Jr., Grace.”

“He got word that he passed the bar exam. On his wedding day! Oh, I wish you could’ve been there. Walt and his bride were as handsome as you and I on the day we were married.”

Walter moves the candelabrum to hide his misty eyes.

“There’s bound to be a new baby to tell you about this time next year, Walter. I wish you could see them.”

“I can’t see anyone but you, Grace. Mort says emotional strain shortens the hours I have left. Besides, if the FDA finds out I’m injecting an unapproved serum, it’s game over.”

Before he retired, Walter Nelson headed research at a Boston biotech firm, where he was working on a serum to bring the dead back

to life, if only briefly. But the CEO shuttered the clandestine project ‘on ethical grounds’ after a resurrected cat escaped the lab, streaked a company picnic, and jumped into the lap of his mortified granddaughter. The serum was destroyed, but Walter, on the sly, stored two vials on ice.

When he turned seventy, Walter was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he called Mortie, a childhood friend. Walter thawed the serum and trained Mort on every aspect of bringing him back to life—briefly—once a year. Mortie learned how to suspend Walter’s body in a liquid nitrogen tank and how to mix and inject the life-giving serum. As cover, Mortie faked Walter’s cremation. The urn on the mantle supposedly holds Nelson’s remains, but a faint cigar aroma wafts from the urn at close range.

Gerty was enlisted in the death-defying scheme too. Before Walter semi-died, he settled Gert with an annuity to cover payments to Mortie of \$50,000 per year and to herself of \$25,000 per year. The annuity was structured to pay out for twenty years, equal to the twenty doses of available serum. No wonder Mortie was doing his level best in the kitchen to ingratiate himself with the keeper of the purse.

Nelson refills the wine glasses. Checking his watch, he turns the conversation from Walt Jr. to Grace. “How are things at the garden club, dear?”

“The same.” Grace looks away, suddenly subdued.

“And your golf handicap?”

“No change there either.”

Nelson squints and leans toward Grace. “What are you doing to your hair? There’s not a single gray.”

Grace fidgets and adjusts her wig. Nearly a year ago, radiation treatments robbed Grace of her hair. Two months ago, cancer robbed Grace of her life. But not fully. She decided to hide

her death from Walter and to split his ten years of remaining serum doses 50-50. *That’ll give Walter and me five more hours and five more dinners together. Walter would want it that way*, she reasoned. She arranged for Mortie to simply replicate for her what he had done for Walter and to drop her off at the house for dinner ten minutes early. A second cremation urn, this one tucked away on a side table, lends proof to Mortie’s execution of his double duties.

But the new arrangement would cost Grace. Both Mortie and Gerty insisted on a doubling of their annual fee. “You can’t take it with you,” they reminded Grace. Grace had little negotiating power; the situation for her was literally ‘do or die.’ In the end, Grace deemed the double payments a worthy investment.

Back in the O’Hegartys’ kitchen, Paddy again has himself in a twist on the counter.

“Can you see all right there, Paddy? What’s goin’ on now?” Mrs. O says as she takes a rhubarb pie out of the oven.

“Ach, that mortician fella is a pig!”

“Didn’t I tell ya, Paddy, about the morals in this Godforsaken country?” Fiona says. “We’d be headin’ back to Cork, I’ll tell ya, if Saint Brig-id’s Parish hadn’t banned the both of us.”

“He’s got the poor woman buckled over the butcher block now. He’s angling for another slice of that rump steak, by the looks of it.”

“Let me see those,” Fiona says as she grabs the binoculars. “Ohhh, dear Jesus! Can it be? I’ve never seen the likes of it.”

“Neither have I, but I’d sure like to,” Paddy says. “That lass must be double-jointed.”

As the O’Hegartys wrestle for control of the binoculars, Mort and Gert finish off their second helping. Then, they put themselves—and the kitchen—back in order.

"I've been thinking, Mortie. Here I am sitting on an annual annuity of \$50,000. You're sitting on an annual annuity of \$100,000," Gert says, lighting a cigarette. "We ought to merge."

"Isn't that what we've been doing, dear?" Mortie says. He gives Gert a squeeze and then peaks into the dining room.

"No, no. I'm talking about a business consolidation. Our annuities flow whether you inject Walter and Grace or not. Whether I serve dinner in there or not."

"But I'm tied to the two stiffs. They're floating in a liquid nitrogen tank in my basement!"

"Cremate the two of 'em for real. Then sell the tank. Sign over the funeral home to your son. Retire, Mortie! With \$150,000 combined, we can be in Boca Raton by next week and stay there for good."

"You're right, Gert! They're outta gas anyway."

"Right. What's five hours more or five hours less? They're as good as dead."

"Yeah, it's our turn to live large!"

In the dining room, Walter and the serum are indeed wearing down. "Goodbye dearest, until next year." He pockets the front tooth that falls into his lap and, forlorn, blows Grace a kiss through the gap it left behind.

Mortie helps Walter down the steps and back into the hearse. When Mort drives away, the curtain closes on Paddy's perennial amusement. A moment later, probing inside the refrigerator, Paddy doesn't see Grace decamp the Victorian and join Gerty in her Honda Civic. This year, the Honda trails five minutes behind the hearse so the semi-dead Grace can follow her husband into the liquid nitrogen.

Two hours later, Paddy O'Hegarty changes into pajamas and plops onto the couch in the den.

With eyes closed, he recounts an exciting day like a ten-year-old on Christmas night. Visions of cherry-topped cupcakes dance in his head, and he wonders if a hot soufflé will ever find its way into the O'Hegarty household.

Just then, the Honda Civic careens up the street and screeches into the Nelsons' driveway. Fiona tiptoes to the kitchen window with the binoculars. She sees Mortie jump out of the Honda, wearing a tropical shirt, khakis, white shoes and a belt to match. Gert follows, wearing a tennis skirt, sneakers, and a sports top. She holds onto a panama sunhat that misbehaves in the breeze.

Nice hat, Fiona thinks. She traces Mort and Gert as they race inside the Victorian, each carrying a cremation urn. Mortie exchanges his urn with the one on the mantel, and Gert exchanges hers with the one on a side table. Then, they race outside with the two urns.

Fiona gasps in disbelief at the blasphemy that unfolds next. In the back yard, Mort and Gert each arc a stream of ashes out of their urns as though they're emptying two cigarette ash trays. "Ohhh, 'tis a sacrilege!" Fiona shields her eyes and crosses herself—four times. "First the counter. Then the butcher block. And now this? What are they doing, the godless heathens?!"

When Fiona dares look up, the idolatry is somehow getting worse. A cloud of discarded ashes are drifting earthward, alighting on the hallowed rhubarb patch! Fiona shuffles outside to intercept the two reprobates on their way back to the Honda. "Who in God's creation do ye have fertilizin' me rhubarb patch?"

"Oh, Mrs. Hegarty, it was nothing but cigar ashes in them urns," Mortie says, looking up and down at the pie-stained housecoat.

"Cigars? What do you take me for, Mister? And what might you be leerin' at?" Fiona tightens the wrap of her housecoat.

"That's right, Fiona. Cuban cigars, too," Gerty adds. "Nothing but the best for the Nelsons!"

To placate Fiona for the garden infringement, Mortie decorates each of the two empty urns with a red rose and places them on either side of the Virgin Mary. Then, he hangs the Nelsons' house keys on the two fingers the Virgin has raised in a blessing.

Slack-jawed, Fiona endures the pagan ritual in stunned silence.

"Bye now, Mrs. O'Hegarty," Gert says. "We have a flight to catch in an hour!" Rethinking her unruly headwear, Gert sails the panama sunhat onto Mother Mary's head like a ring toss yard game. "Bingo!"

With eyes agog, Fiona watches the two miscreants speed away in the Honda, her mind forever altered.

"What's the rumpus about out there?" Paddy says from his headquarters on the couch, when Fiona returns.

"I've been speaking to them two kitchen contortionists."

"What'd they say, love?"

"Ohhh, they had plenty to say, Mr. O'Hegarty. And I'll tell ye this. They've made a different woman out of me. There'll be no more rhubarb pie in this household."

"And why not, Fiona?"

"Because from this day forward, Paddy, we're switching to soufflé."

"Soufflé?" His domestic outlook apparently improving, Paddy leaps from the couch. In the kitchen, he slides his thick arms around Fiona's waist. "Hot soufflé?" he says, with one eye on the counter and the other on the butcher block. "You're not double-jointed now, are ye, lass?"

Fiona reaches around Paddy too, but to grab the baking sheet on the counter. "Keep ye hands off me soufflé!" she says, and the bite of the baking sheet punctuates her request. Freed of Paddy's meat hooks, Fiona escapes for a warm soak in the tub, there to reflect on all she's seen and heard on this momentous day.

Paddy, with feathers stiffened from the day's culinary exhibition, follows five minutes behind. He finds Fiona's housecoat hanging on the bathroom doorknob. Ever the optimist, he knocks, and is greeted with the promising words, "Ohhh Paddy, I knew ye'd be comin' along!" As he turns the knob, though, the siren within adds, "That's why the door's locked!"

Paddy tramps back to the kitchen and looks out the window. Outside, the Virgin Mary, modeling headwear, dangles a set of keys like a curbside valet. *Nice hat*, he thinks. Otherwise, things are dead at the Victorian next door. He sits at the kitchen table and wonders if the taste of a rump roast or hot soufflé will ever cross his lips. For now, Paddy settles for a slice of the tamer fare the good Lord ordained for him: he finishes the last piece of cold rhubarb pie—sweet.

John Mara is a 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee, 2020 Best of the Net nominee, and Best New England Crime Stories 2020 finalist who writes lakeside in New Hampshire with the creative input of his wife Holly. They often attract mortified glances in restaurants while discussing dastardly characters and plots. A multi-genre writer, John tends to converse in the genre he's thinking about and makes better dinner company when it's humor, not horror. You can find John's 20+ short stories published in *Liquid Imagination*, *J.J. Outre Review*, *Youth Imagination*, and other venues.

Code Elopement

William Welch

I like being a medical anomaly
with my crooked pinkies.
The doctors listen for my heart everywhere,
even in my leg, and when I tease them with a pulse
behind the IV fluids
they go mad with their stethoscopes
listening to faucets.

I found my heart one day
sitting in the bus stop
at Nostrand and Myrtle Avenues.
He was carrying a table,
and a dozen brochures for electricity.
The bus is already ten minutes late, he said.
Haven't missed it, at least, I answered.

Doctor, did you know that the human knee
is a knot someone tied the wrong way?

My heart waiting for a bus is a bad salesman.
He looks awkward in his khaki pants.
He is sweating.
Do you need some saline? I ask.
That's too old fashioned.
Old fashioned? Tell me, why don't you believe in love?
I will when you tell me why you don't believe
in electricity.



Smoke from Ancient Fires | Daniel Forbes

A room to be felt in

Arlyn LaBelle

I built a room for you.
Grey grass curls against bruised
walls. If I could touch you here
I would. Instead,
a bicycle bell in wind.
The grass swell
quieting, quieting.

If I buried myself here,
my arms lacing with tree roots
as it bows for you, could I
feel you walking?

Would you know,
eyes closed for the smell of rain
that you were not alone?

Arlyn LaBelle is a queer poet and writer living in Austin, Texas. Their work has appeared in the Badgerdog summer anthologies as well as North of Oxford, The Oddville Press, Songs of Eretz, Grey Sparrow Press, Cease, Cows, Panoply Zine and The Southern Poetry Review. Their premiere book of poetry, *Measurable Terms*, is available through The Main Street Rag. You can find more of them and their work at arlynlabelle.com.

That's Not Me

Tim Frank

THE PROBLEM WAS SERIOUS but I wasn't going to use any twelve step programmes, support groups, help lines, psychotherapy, religion, or how to books, none of that—it was all too lacking in authenticity and I didn't need any dogma to tie me down. I was going to sail the turbulent seas alone, riding the maelstrom in my parents' home, locked behind my bedroom door, where I had developed from a painfully shy boy into a pill-munching, chain-smoking, semi-alcoholic raver with a penchant for tattooing my own face like a prison inmate—inking patterns I would soon regret only to try and find some more real estate on my forehead to go again. It was a sign I didn't give a fuck but recently I was beginning to so the tattoos were now beginning to speak untruths.

My parents were thrilled about my decision to clean up my act. Many evenings I would creak my bedroom door open and hear mum sobbing, gently banging her forehead on the kitchen table, crack, crack, crack, moaning I would never get a job in finance with the names of my favourite pornstars tattooed on my temple.

When I told them my plan to detox and I needed their help, I did so while popping out all the studs from my face, and they knew I meant business as I stood holding a fistful of metal like a game of Jacks.

The addictions started with a trip to Amsterdam with Kyle, my equally timid partner in crime who sought fierce adventure and the so-called gateway drug, weed. At eighteen years old I was so quiet I needed a lifestyle to help conjure a new voice, to tune in to a different frequency. My personality felt as imperceptible as dust. In my life before drugs I was brutally exposed to the social elements—I blushed when spoken to, clammed up around girls, I couldn't even hold a conversation at my grandma's tea parties, surrounded by geriatrics.

The first time I smoked weed with Kyle in a coffee shop I blathered on for five hours consecutively about dogs, parliamentary etiquette, art nouveau, zombie apocalypses and Hollywood B-movies and Kyle slept through most of it only to discover when he woke, I was still yapping away. Suddenly there was inspiration everywhere, always something to alert my mind to the revelations of the natural world and the rampant city.

Months later the weed began to turn its back on me and my mind became like sludge. No more words, just grunts and silence. That's when I hit the harder stuff in the ever-elusive hunt for a more electric persona.

It all fell apart for me when I forgot my name for a day and half. When I finally remembered, I was so ground down I dropped to my knees in the early morning fog outside the

nightclub “Speakeasy” and begged for clemency from a god I had no intention of believing in, promising him I wasn’t going to play anymore games.

My parents locked me in my room and I waited for that slow feverish sensation that signalled my body demanding another hit. One night in, I sprained a finger from punching the flat screen that I had played so loud to quell my thoughts as they struggled to shovel the glass shards skewering my brain. Without TV I had to fall back on my memories of myself through time—an attempt to fill the aether with people I was or could have been.

My parents allowed Kyle to visit. He was clearly wired but my folks always had a soft spot for him and fell for his winning smile every time. I was drowning in my sweaty bedsheets when he sat at the edge of my bed, crossed his slim legs in the style that identified him and he leered at me.

He held out a wrap of coke and leered some more. I shocked him with my resistance. He looked like he’d just lost a friend. He pocketed the drugs and walked around the room relaying tales of sex in diners, a spate of suicides by boys we grew up with and dreary details of nine to five office work.

I heard it but I wasn’t listening. This was a significant sign that didn’t register immediately. I was moving forward, stretching free of the constraints of addiction and now I faced

something new, inevitable, yet unexpected. The boredom, the fucking boredom.

I remember being allowed to have dinner with my parents, sitting in silence except for the clinking of cutlery and my mother crunching chicken gristle with a sour expression. It was a sterile marriage lost in a hypnotic trance—the couple hardly seemed to recognise each other.

The time came when my parents trusted me to go out, find a job, build a new life with a new self. That was the goal and slowly but surely, I was able to do so without the tentacles of addiction pushing and pulling at me with every breath.

I went for walks in parks, drank iced lattes outside coffee shops, entered data in offices while listening to Hendrix and went for soft drinks on Fridays. No one knew my former life. I blended in. I met a girl who I really liked. She was kind and was always truthful. I hid everything from her. And yet the boredom persisted.

I craved another high, one last journey and I thought about calling Kyle to find a space where everything meant nothing again. But I realised the maze of my mind would always ensnare me and whatever direction I chose to take, there I would be—present and waiting. I’d just have to forget my past and my former selves and carry on clean. There was no other choice.

Tim Frank’s short stories have been published in over sixty journals including *Bourbon Penn*, *Oddville Press*, *Intrinsick*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Literally Stories* and *The Fiction Pool*.

Aqua Tofana

Sophia Vesely

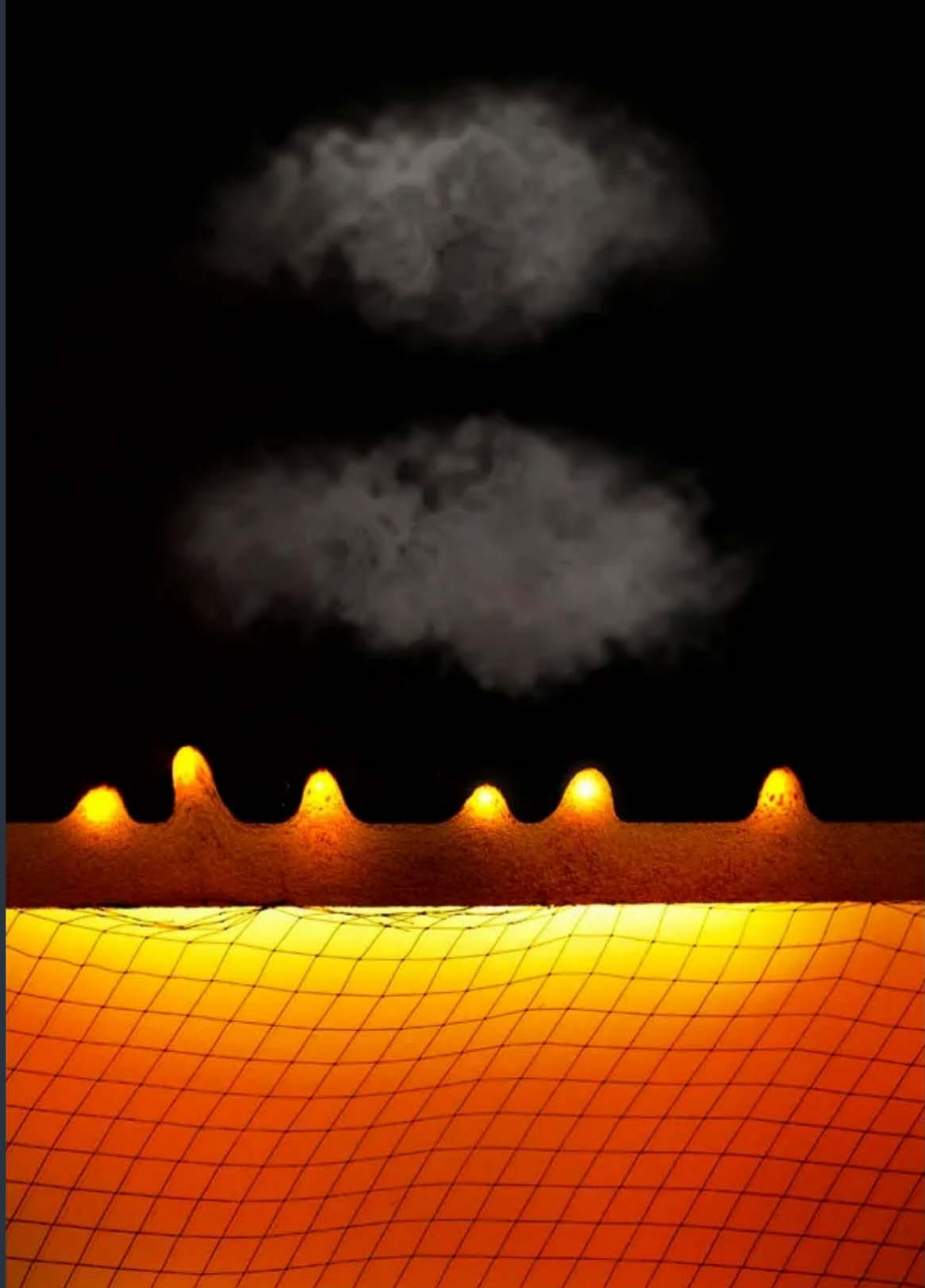
I sit so quiet here beneath your fist
of torture, while you bruise and batter me,
like all those men, whose honeys called for this.

I will tell what I know, six-hundred sum
and not a single one, those filthy pigs,
can snort out apologies from me, please.
I, greatest hero, saint, the angel dear

of God, breathed chances into deflated
and wheezing, gasping lungs, for refreshing
opportunity, life unsullied by
the drunken cackles, screams, and blackened eyes.
Anger out-throbs the pain hysterically.

But, fine, burn me at the stake, behead me,
hang me by this throat: porcelain, fragile,
yet holds a head more righteous, honest than
your hacky-sack. Before you do, though, hand
me my shiny ceruse, then kiss me—just
the poor, sweet girl that I am—right here on
the tender lips.

Sophia Vesely, 19, is from Florida. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *W-Poesis*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *The Fiction Week Literary Review*, *The Blue Marble Review*, *Writer's Egg Magazine*, *Bandit Fiction*, *Brown Bag Online*, *Girls Right the World*, *Bridge Ink*, *Route 7 Review*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Oddville Press*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, *Delmarva Review*, and *The Big Windows Review*. She also has a published poetry collection on Amazon.com entitled "The Road to Amour de Soi" that explores the complexities of first loves and heartbreak in order to empower young women through the notion of self-love.



υ614 | Joe Lugara

Hair

Claire Van Winkle

Young girls spend years brushing their hair, tucking long strands
of spun gold behind carefully scrubbed ears. Later,
they'll wear diamonds there. They will paint their nails
and plait their hair. They look forward to lashings
of braids and barrettes.

The daring experiment on dolls, shunning safety
scissors for mother's shears to better slash and hack;
they return the borrowed tools to their cabinets
and leave their own locks intact.

No one prepared me for the alchemy that changed
my tresses to rat tails, or the fairy who stole my teeth
and planted dirt beneath my nails, so I turned
the scissors on myself and drowned
my dolls in dishwater.

Red Line

Mark Jacobs

WALKING HOME from the Dix County fair on a mild summer evening, Marlon Woods took a call on the red line. The familiar caustic voice assaulted him without preamble.

“Consulting a gypsy fortune-teller at a county fair. Really? How old school is that? You’re a mess, dude. Next you’ll tell me cotton candy was involved, you’ll describe in loving detail how you fished for the plastic duck with the lucky number on its ass.”

Marlon felt no obligation to respond. Why rise to obvious bait? Rufus McDougal was clever. Along with his attention, he commanded Marlon’s respect. That was ironic, since Rufus used his intellect mainly to inflict pain on Marlon. Marlon always pictured his tormentor with a wild red beard, which doubled the force of his angry red face. Facts were facts and must be faced. Fact the first: Rufus existed mainly or only to terrorize him. Fact the second was a curious corollary of the first: Marlon kept taking his calls. He was long past wondering why. The theories of Rhee, who had been his wife for eighteen months a long time ago, lacked objectivity.

“How’s the anxiety?” Rufus wanted to know.

Marlon mumbled into his hand. “Under control.”

Rufus snorted. “Hah! You wish.”

Thankfully it was one of his short calls.

Lightning strikes, Marlon called them. When he hung up, Marlon continued down Birch Avenue in the direction of Eglantine. The scent of lilacs hung agreeably on the small-town air. The sound of bicycle tires on warm pavement was reassuring; a transient verity, if such a thing could be. Issuing from an open upstairs window in a house of several gables, a woman’s laughter was the very description of domestic delight.

But Marlon’s reverie was shortlived. It appeared that every last dog in Dix City was gathering in a pack to trail him home. Did they smell the fear on him? Marlon disliked dogs, and dogs knew it. He resisted the urge to run. That would only incite their bloodlust, of which he was already the unhappy object. Every muscle in his sixty-year-old body, every cell in brain and bone, filled up with dread, but he maintained his deliberate pace. He passed the big brick house with the grand wraparound porch that belonged to a prominent alderman. Teenagers were sitting on the porch playing with their telephones. They looked up from their screens and down at him with pity and contempt, as though they saw the specific disaster barreling toward him. That was impossible, of course. Or was it?

The dog at the head of the pack was a Doberman, or might be. Almost certainly its coat was sable. The ring of slobber around its

mouth suggested rabies, or worse. The important thing was not to provoke the creature by a sudden or unpredictable movement. A steady tread was called for. Marlon so treaded.

Making the left onto Eglantine, he sensed the dog pack losing interest. Otherwise how explain the growing distance between them? Midway down the block he lifted the gate latch at 51 and let himself in. Bats were making their genetically-determined forays in the gloaming, and the big old house loomed. He breathed in slowly then exhaled, collecting himself before making his way around the side of the house to the circular stairs in back. His legs climbed; the rest of him followed. He turned his key in the lock. Home.

The attic had a comfortable smell redolent of old shoes, coffee grounds, scouring powder; smells and the memories of smells. He rented the place from Mrs. Ruffhouse, whose difficult personality practically guaranteed the apartments in the rest of the house stayed empty. Nothing gave Nadya Ruffhouse more pleasure than picking a fight with a tenant. She had long ago given up trying to antagonize Marlon, contenting herself with lobbing the occasional verbal bomb in his direction. Shrapnel only hurt if it hit you.

He brewed a pot of oolong tea and sat in his rocking chair. Immediately an image of Ms. Odessa's hands came to him, and he felt a stirring he recognized as desire. The same old story, leading to the same old dead end. He was living proof that some men were, in fact, islands.

She was appealingly blowsy in her fortune teller's get-up. A velvet dress with gilt brocade, disconcertingly like a bathrobe. A hat with peacock feathers whose eyes sought out their owner's mark sitting across from her in the gaudy striped tent. A necklace of glass rubies, and more rings than fingers to put them on.

The pathetic gratitude he felt as she took his hands into hers shamed him in retrospect.

"You see this line, Marlon, do you not?"

She used the red nail of an index finger to point out a faint striation in his palm that began randomly and traveled nowhere in particular. He told her he saw it. Gardenia. That was the flower in her perfume. It came to him like the solution to a puzzle.

"It should be longer," Ms. Odessa informed him. "The line, that is. In a perfect world it would be a good deal longer."

A short line going nowhere. To the fortune-teller it indicated a catastrophe-in-waiting.

"Fire?"

"Possibly."

He knew her sympathy was phony. He knew the warning was pro-forma, her Slavic accent a put-on, the suggestion of intimacy in a colorful tent on the fairgrounds merely part of the show. The cheapest of cheap thrills. But he also knew that truth traveled its own road to reach its destination, and writing off the session would be a mistake.

Fire. He put down his teacup and stood. Mrs. Ruffhouse didn't know it, but he had keys to all three empty apartments in the house. Methodically he went into each sniffing for a gas leak, a pile of combustible rags, anything that might conceivably set off a blaze. Nothing. Going down the cellar stairs, he heard rats racing across the cement floor when he flipped the light switch. Damn the filthy creatures. Some nights they kept him awake, playing their dirty games behind the attic walls. He stood for a long moment next to the water heater studying the pilot light. He considered turning it off, but the tiny steady flame was precisely what it ought to be, and he did not relish the thought of a cold shower. He went back to the attic.

He stretched his bamboo mat on the bedroom floor, but meditation was beyond

him. Ms. Odessa's prophecy had given focus to an anxiety that had been creeping up on him the last few days. He had tried to ignore it. Not possible. Fire was the most likely but not the only possible disaster that lay ahead of him. A flood was unlikely, but there was always disease, a stroke, an accident in the street. Plague could not be subtracted from the equation; a rat with the contagion could bite him as he slept.

Forget it. Why bother speculating? Anxiety was only the flag. Disaster was only the mode. The goal, that was what he had to hold in the forefront of his consciousness. The goal was the obliteration of Marlon Woods from the face of the earth.

He returned to his rocker. The tea was cold, but he poured himself a cup anyway. The red line lit up.

"Marlon?"

"I'm here."

"You think you're special, don't you? You think you're one of a kind?"

No answer.

Rufus kept pushing him. He always pushed him. "Tell me the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"You wanted more from the fortune teller than she was about to give you."

"That's a lie."

"Is it? Comfort, understanding... sex. Did you imagine you could buy all that for ten bucks? You're the crown prince of the absurd. I'll lay another ten the lawyer laughs in your face tomorrow."

He won't, thought Marlon. There was no use saying it. Rufus was gone. In the stillness of the crickets summer night, Marlon put down his tea cup and listened for the telltale scurry that meant rats.

A framed photo of an ambulance on the office wall behind his desk was Dexter Grillo's idea of funny. If people wanted to call him an ambulance chaser, he would embrace the insult. A reverse raspberry.

"You want a guarantee, Mr. Woods? That what you're looking for? No can do."

Dexter was a thin man with speckled skin who dressed to meet Dix City's expectations of him. A shiny green suit with lapels like the fins on an old Cadillac, a shirt with a collar that was too big for his neck, a fat bright tie clasped with a bar on which rhinestones clustered.

"I'm not asking for a guarantee," Marlon said.

He was sitting across from the lawyer more like a suspect than a client. It took every ounce of discipline he had not to allow his body to tremble. There was a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach. Foreboding, he had learned to his cost, took its daily toll.

Dexter ran a hand through the stiff brown pelt of his hair. He nodded, drummed his fingers on the desk top, contorted the features of his face as if in sympathy with Marlon's internal distress.

"This is the government you're taking on."

"I realize that."

"Bad nerves, the heebie-jeebies, some sort of PTSD brought on by excessive vulnerability to environmental factors. You say it entitles you to disability. The government says it doesn't. The government says it's all in your head. The government, I've come to realize, has practically no sense of humor."

"I want to appeal the decision."

"We appealed it. We lost."

"I want to appeal the appellate decision."

Dexter drummed his fingers again. He looked as though he wanted a smoke. He stared at something on the wall behind Marlon and told him, "The wife and I, we've got twin girls. I ever mention that?"

“No.”

“They’re nine. The other night I was outside teaching them to ride a two-wheeler.”

He stopped, as though the anecdote were over and everything explained that needed explaining. Marlon waited. After a pause, Dexter said reflectively, “Kind of a normal dad thing to do, you follow me?”

Marlon nodded. There had been a brief interval during his eighteen months with Rhee when they talked about children. He recalled it as the Golden Age of their fleeting union. It came to an abrupt end when Rhee chickened out. Thereafter she turned mean, as if the dream of shared happiness embarrassed her, alleging in a raised voice that the idea of Marlon Woods as anybody’s father was insane.

Dexter said with sudden heat, “People in this goddamn town think I’m only in it for the dough. They think I got no principles. Shyster, they call me behind my back.”

He was working himself up to tell Marlon the appeal had no chance; he didn’t want to see his client waste the money in a vain effort. Marlon was touched. He asked him what the twins’ names were, and told him he wanted to press the appeal regardless. Dexter shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s your funeral. Financially speaking, that is. Melissa and Ashley. Ashley and Melissa. They’re identical. Everything okay at work?”

Standing to leave, Marlon nodded. He knew from experience that explaining his dilemma at Dix City Consolidators was beyond him. There was something in the nothing going on at his place of work.

Work that night did not start out feeling momentous. The property he guarded was an easy walk of a mile from Mrs. Ruffhouse’s, and the weather was fine. He had no need of a car, which was a good thing considering his parlous income. Dix City Consolidators had cleared out

years ago, abandoning a complex of hulking buildings on five acres located on the northernmost limit of the municipality. Marlon was not permitted to enter any of the buildings, which were double- and triple-locked. He spent his time in a guardhouse at the front gate, or walking the perimeter of the property according to prescribed instructions that sent him out four times a shift in all weathers.

Timekeeping was on the honor system. He wrote his arrival and departure times on a paper log, which he submitted to Dexter Grillo every two weeks. It was Dexter who had given him the job, for all practical purposes, acting on behalf of DCC. When Marlon answered the newspaper ad, it was Dexter’s number he called. The lawyer, he presumed, was operating under his own set of precise instructions. That included pretending there was nothing odd about the arrangement: year after year, round-the-clock guards at a cluster of abandoned buildings no one ever visited. Protecting, it seemed to Marlon, really meant hiding something, although after five years on the job he had no clue what it might be.

Marlon worked from eleven at night to seven in the morning. Furness, who worked the afternoon shift, left in a hurry when Marlon showed up. Furness was always in a hurry, as though worried he would catch the night-shift watchman’s odd-duckery.

At midnight Marlon made his first circuit of the perimeter. There was nothing to report. There was never anything to report in the activity log, which he also turned in to Dexter every two weeks. Month after month, the logs read the same. *Nothing to report*. What were they hiding? Walking back to the guardhouse, he felt a muffled sense of apprehension. Nothing strange about that. Sometimes his apprehension was muffled. Other times it was naked and shrill.

The floodlight on the front of Building 37 was trained on the company logo, which consisted of the letters DCC in blue inside a red oval. The logo was weather-faded and hard to make out, but Marlon had seen it so often he had no trouble recognizing the same image emblazoned on the side of a white panel truck that pulled up at the gate. Marlon's anxiety spiked, but it was matched by a keen sense of anticipation. Something, finally, was about to happen. He knew it. He had always known it would.

The driver who climbed down from the truck had a disarming air about him as though this were a routine visit, he showed up at the abandoned plant every night. No uniform, but he did flash a DCC identity card, an item Marlon did not himself possess.

"You're Woods, right? Marlon."

Marlon shook his head.

Impossible to guess the guy's age. Sandy hair, beefy build, jeans and a polo shirt. He might be thirty, he might be forty five. Just the forgettable ambiguous look you'd go for if you wanted to make a person hard to trace.

"You wanna open up there for me, Marlon? Can't stand around jawin' all night."

A moment of decision, and Marlon made the wrong one.

"I can't do that."

"Come again?"

"Nobody told me you were coming."

Biff. That was the name that occurred to Marlon for the driver. Biff looked him up and down a couple of times, and shook his head. "You think they give a shit about you?"

"Nobody said anything to me," Marlon repeated stubbornly, aware how weak it sounded.

"They warned me about you," Biff said, shaking his head in disgust. "I got your dossier in the truck."

That was the first clear indication of something fishy going on. Nobody said dossier anymore, least of all a driver whose appearance lent itself to the nickname Biff. If he were on the level he would have said personnel file.

"I won't unlock the gate," Marlon told him, not sure why he was standing firm. Was there a point of principle involved? If so, he could not identify it.

Biff dangled a set of keys in Marlon's face. "So I'll open it myself. Go on, get out of here."

Marlon had no choice. He retreated into the guardhouse where he stood rigidly, watching Biff back the truck up to the loading dock of Building 37. He unlocked the door and rolled it up. Before disappearing inside he looked over at the guardhouse and shook his head, warning Marlon away. Marlon was more easily cowed than he liked to admit. He stayed away. Twenty minutes later Biff jumped down from the loading dock, rolled down the door and locked it. He climbed into the truck. Springily. Going through the gate he did not bother to look over at the guardhouse, did not acknowledge the presence of the night watchman whose responsibility it was to watch.

Had he picked something up, or dropped something off?

After that, the last thing Marlon wanted was a call on the red line. He took it.

"Well, my friend, you fucked that one up royally."

"What was I supposed to do? He had keys."

"They're tightening the net," said Rufus. He sounded gleeful. He always sounded pleased when things were going poorly for Marlon. "If I was in your shoes, I'd plant my feet carefully."

There was nothing to be done. Marlon got through the rest of the shift because he had to. Walking the perimeter in the dark, uncomfortably aware of the night animals in the black

fields, he thought about Rhee. He seldom did that. Now, under the pressure of events whose meaning he could not grasp, he felt again the devastation she had left behind. If she had stayed, if they had conceived and raised a child together, he could, for example, ignore the ringing of the red line.

After five years on the night shift, his body had adjusted to the time difference. He was able to sleep in the mornings without difficulty, especially when the apartments at Mrs. Ruffhouse's were vacant. Dismay battled suspicion as he turned into the yard at 51 Eglantine and found a man with his hands in his pockets who claimed to be a new renter in the downstairs apartment. A cheroot was tucked behind one ear.

"Howdy, neighbor," he said, thrusting out a paw. "Name's Moffatt. That's with two f's and two t's, when Christmas card season rolls around."

Moffatt was a born glad-hander, an insinuator, a seeker of confidences. He was of Marlon's medium height with no distinguishing features apart from the eyes, which were tawny, lazy as a tiger's and just as watchful. Marlon mumbled something unsatisfactory and escaped to the attic. It always threw him when someone new moved in. He preferred the company of quiet.

That evening a knock on his door startled him. When he opened it there stood Moffatt with a bottle of rye. He bulled his way in baying, "Don't mind if I do," just as though Marlon had invited him. In the kitchen he helped himself to ice and two glasses and wanted to know if Marlon took his whiskey with water.

"I don't drink."

That earned him a guffaw, a conspiratorial wink, and the whistled intro to *Stairway to Heaven*. He followed Moffatt to the living room and took a seat on his own old sofa as though

he were the guest, not the reluctant host. His new neighbor took the comfy upholstered chair on whose back rested an antimacassar, the only family heirloom Marlon possessed. Moffatt, he noticed, had one gold tooth, up top and prominent. It irritated Marlon no end.

Maybe that was why he took a sip from the glass Moffatt handed him, and then a gulp. Going down, the rye burned in traditional fashion. This, all of this, was part of a plan whose pattern he was as yet unable to discern.

In his ingratiating voice Moffatt said, "Guys like us, you and me, we know a thing or two about how to get by, don't we?"

Ask him what in hell he means, Rufus phoned in to say, but Marlon did not. He took another slug of whiskey. Pretty soon he had to get ready for work. And if he didn't go, if he simply filled out his time card and submitted it to Grillo?

"The big guns, they've got it in for us," said Moffatt, who was loudly enjoying his rye.

"Big guns."

"You know who I'm talking about. Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, that whole trainload of desperadoes."

Marlon nodded, and Moffatt told him, "The main thing is, you keep your head down, you maintain a low profile. Out of sight, out of mind. That way you get to live to whatever ripe old age you're destined to live to."

"Nobody knows I'm here," Marlon admitted with reluctant pride.

"That's the ticket, partner. Smart, very intelligent. Say, you mind rustling us up some more ice? My sciatica is acting up again."

Marlon did not know what sciatica was, although it sounded painful. He got more ice, and Moffatt poured them both generous shots. Remembering to sip rather than guzzle, Marlon wondered whether his neighbor was connected somehow to Dix City Consolidators.

The timing of his arrival, so soon after Biff's nighttime visit to the plant, could scarcely be coincidence.

"What's your line of work?" Marlon worked up the nerve to ask.

"Import-export. You know, buying low and selling a little higher, trying to eke out enough to keep body and soul together. That's all the big dogs will let you get away with. What about yourself?"

"I'm in computers," Marlon said, not sure why he lied.

It didn't matter. Moffatt appeared not to hear him. Besides, the coin had finally dropped into the slot. It was obvious. The man had been sent to lull Marlon into complacency.

Wasn't going to happen.

He might not have figured out, yet, the pattern of events. He might not recognize the avatar of the disaster that was courting him in all its imminence. But Marlon was not so foolish as to walk blindly into the trap being laid for him. Two days after Moffatt moved in, Dexter Grillo called. That was unusual, and the rat Marlon smelled was not in the attic walls.

"Why don't you stop by," Dexter invited him, "and we can go over our appeal."

This was a change in tone on the lawyer's part. Did it betoken a change in tactics, a change of heart? Marlon hated to think Dexter was in on the plan, but he could not discard the possibility. So he hedged. The hedge sounded a lot like mumbling. He hung up the phone and packed a sandwich to take to work. Bologna and American cheese. All his sandwiches were old-school, made in fidelity to memories of growing up that he did not really have.

That night he happened to glance at the clock when Biff's truck rolled up to the DCC gate. Twelve fifty one. Fifty one minutes into a

new day. The address at Mrs. Ruffhouse's was 51. Policemen on television were always saying that they did not believe in coincidence. For the first time, Marlon understood what they were getting at. The plot relentlessly thickened.

Two eighteen-wheelers, both clearly identified with the DCC logo, pulled up behind Biff's panel truck. Marlon's first order of business was determining whether the trucks were there to deliver things or to carry them away. Easier said than done. After opening the gate to let in the big metal mastiffs, Biff made his unconcerned way to the guardhouse.

"You again," he said. "I thought you were in Tahiti."

His toothy grin offended Marlon, who said nothing.

"Did you get the letter they sent?" Biff wanted to know.

"What letter?"

"That answers my question. Dix City was bought out by one of those big hedge funds. You'll be getting your notice. New broom sweeps clean and all that."

"You're lying."

Biff raised his hands in a gesture of pseudo-sympathy. "Wish I was."

Marlon pointed toward the trucks. "Are they delivering something, or picking it up?"

"That's classified on a need-to-know basis, and you don't. Need to know, that is."

Such elaborate maneuvering, such tangled complexity, all for a man of such little consequence as Marlon Woods. The only sense it made was counterintuitive, a form of thinking at which Marlon excelled. Biff wore a plain gold wedding band on the standard finger. Marlon pictured him at home in the back patio grilling fish while trying to justify to his wife the actions being taken against the midnight-shift guard at the DCC plant. There was little doubt in Marlon's mind she was the leggy type,

with a breezy demeanor, who spoke barbed little truths with her second drink. It fit. When a piece of the puzzle fit, you inserted it.

He left work in the morning still not knowing what was going on at the plant. He thought about requesting an appointment with Dexter. Surely if DCC had been bought by a hedge fund, the lawyer would know. But just as surely his cooperation had been bought along with the company. College tuition was expensive, and his twins would be freshmen the same year, doubling the financial burden on a middle-income attorney. Marlon was disappointed but did not hold Dexter's collaboration against him. Family trumped other obligations. Marlon, after all, was only a client. He went home and practically leapt into bed, eager to lose consciousness before Rufus called to aggravate him.

Moffatt had the decency to wait until he was awake, that afternoon, before climbing the stairs to pester him again, although perhaps there was less courtesy than calculation in it. He wanted a loan.

"You know how it is, Marlon."

"How what is?"

In Marlon's living room, in which a faint after-odor of whiskey was detectable, Moffatt's lazy tiger eyes looked anywhere, everywhere, but at the object of his supplication.

"The big guys are putting the squeeze on me. It's what the accountants call a cash-flow problem. It's temporary, but I won't lie to you. Just now I'm a hurtin' cowboy."

"A thousand dollars is a lot of money."

Moffatt conceded that it was. Unwelcome pressure was building up in Marlon's head so he excused himself to take a call on the red line in the kitchen.

"To quote the Bard," Rufus scoffed, "this is a fine kettle of fish you've cooked up."

Marlon tried, for a change, to stand up to

him. "You're no help. You're never any help to me."

"It's not my job to help. I'm here to speak truth, since obviously your command of the facts is subpar."

"All right, go ahead and tell me what the truth is."

"They're out to get you. You don't know why, you'll never know why. But they're closing in. And just about everybody is in on the action."

"Including Ms. Odessa?"

"Hah! Good for you. Your instincts are sound. The fortune teller is pretty much the only one on your side in what I would call a titanic clash, if there were a bit more substance to you. Have you looked into getting a skeleton?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't, pal. Sure you don't."

The way things worked, it was Rufus' contempt that finally made up Marlon's mind. He returned to the living room with what would have been, on anyone else's face, a shit-eating grin.

"Does that mean yes or no?" Moffatt said.

Marlon wrote him a check for eleven hundred dollars. He added the extra hundred because making a decision felt so good, after all the dithering. Clarity was bracing and brought out the generous side of him, which he normally suppressed.

He waited until Moffatt left the house, on his way to cash Marlon's check. The extra hundred would go to whiskey. Moffatt was that kind of guy. But Marlon did not begrudge the man his celebration. It was the only way he had of thumbing his nose at the big boys, who never in their privileged lives had a cash-flow problem.

If there had been more time, Marlon would in fact have purchased a skeleton. It would not

fool a serious investigator, but Dix City would not waste a serious investigation on him.

He must have practiced in his mind, although he had no rehearsal memories. The blaze in which the Ruffhouse manse went up was fast and furious and all-consuming. From the hedge behind which Marlon contemplated the fire, it was a delight to the eye. And it gratified him, as a taxpayer, to see the dispatch with which the firefighters arrived and took on the conflagration. Despite their speed, their efficiency, they were too late. One thing Marlon had not known he knew was how to set a fire. Arson was a slithery word, very much like a snake.

Not until the house was a smoking ruin did he leave his observation nook. As he walked down Eglantine toward Birch Avenue, arms at his sides ignoring the neighbors out rubbernecking, he could not avoid a modicum of self-satisfaction. They

had threatened him with disaster. Very well, he had lit the match himself, denying them the pleasure.

In the buoyant mood that propelled him across the placid streets of Dix City, he thought it was high time he turned the tables on Rufus McDougal. Call him rather than wait to be the victim of yet another verbal assault. But here was a strange thing. The red line was dead. Marlon made a good-faith effort to call, but there was no dial tone. In its place was a silence the size of the world.

It took a moment for the consequence to register. But hit him it did. He was free. At last. In the anachronistic dark of a Dix City night, he stopped. He laughed aloud, savoring the moment. Then he started walking again. He had read in the paper that the fair was moving next door to Whitney County. It was Marlon's turn to pick up Ms. Odessa's hands—those secret-sharing hands—and read her fortune.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 160 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

Three Thirty Nine

George Kramer

according to the somnolent clock,
a pale green sun over her sleeping form

that I watch on her inward flight
through whichever cityscapes and jungles

her flicking eyelids choose.
I ebb in somnia and

dream that my dreams and hers
intertwine, waves washing down alleyways and

receding, oceans tugging
our difficult shorelines, each whitecap

a marriage of air and water,

a serrated roof over such depths

of lost wrecks, of water swinging
over the aloneness of green and black

krill as whale flukes crack
silver into the night air, swallowing stars

that perched above as she passed through
churches and pastures of her tangled country.

Each night our skin somnambulates
to places our bones cannot follow. I stay up waiting.

That's a Gibbon

Mike Hickman

“THAT’S A GIBBON,” said Brian Hole and I checked over my shoulder for any arboreal apes that might be sloping past. Perhaps this was sarcasm on my part, or the effect of a Brian Hole conversation on my faculties, which were right now straining his words for sense like cottage cheese through a sieve.

“It is?” I asked. “Is it?” I said. “Well,” I added, “I hadn’t seen it that way, and that’s a fact.”

That was, indeed, a fact. Difficult though it was to find any certainties around Brian Hole.

“Oh, yeah, it’s a total gibbon,” Brian said, meaning ‘given’ and revealing distressing teeth as he scratched his surburnt bald spot with a heavily tattooed arm. The only word I could make out in the mass of blue curlicues was “Anchovy”. No doubt he’d thought he was asking for anarchy.

Not for the first time, I held back the snigger. Not for the first time, he failed to notice. Because he was, as ever, keen to tell me everything in that head of his. Every single time I’d step out of the house, there he’d be, in his tiny front garden with its fifteen foot flagpole—seriously—with its flaccid Union flag, and he’d be tending to the baby grave. That was what I had taken to calling the tiny patch of ground at the base of the flagpole. He’d had the grass taken up, had it replaced with those coloured stones you see in graveyards, and then he’d got himself a slate memorial vase,

placed it dead centre, and stuck daffodils in it. And this was a garden that required tending eight hours a day, every day.

On the basis of such evidence, there was clearly nothing whatsoever in Brian’s head. But it didn’t stop him making a special effort for me every time I ventured outside. When I had to. When I believed it might make some kind of difference.

“We’ll be better once we’re out, absolutely,” Brian continued. “350 mil more for the NHS, mate. We won’t need to be at Europe’s beckon call anymore, right enough. Won’t need to be at anyone’s beckon call.”

Right enough, I thought. In as much as whatever was right in this conversation had been given a heavy wrench to the perpendicular and was now face down on the ground and pleading for its lawyer.

I didn’t do politics. Not since the move, anyway.

“We won’t be at their beck and call,” I said, feeling guilty at the correction but knowing that he would still hear it the way he heard everything.

“Like hell we won’t,” Brian said. “It’ll be good to see some of those MEPs get their upcommence.”

“Upcommence, right,” I said.

“It’s mind-bottling, the amount of money we’ve wasted on these shirkers,” Brian said.

I shuffled my feet, bit my lip, watched his flag flapping feebly in the breeze.

"And yet they snob us..."

Snub, said my head, idly.

"...looking after theirselves at our expense every time."

Brian continued his anti-EU not-really-a-rant and I watched the flag fail to fly and I noticed how wilted Brian's daffodils were and I wondered what he thought he'd been buying when he'd bought the urn.

I should have expected the *Lilt*.

This went back a bit, to not long after I'd moved into the little corner house opposite his little corner house.

You simply couldn't imagine a stupider sight than a flagpole that height standing outside a house that small.

Brian had been out in his garden, tending the baby grave, and I'd been trying to smuggle myself past. With no back door to the house, and with my front door directly facing his, there wasn't, I'd quickly discovered, any easy way to escape his attention. And, for some reason, he'd offered me the *Lilt*.

"Look like you need it," he'd said, offering the can. And then he'd launched into how the government said you needed your "five a day" and how there were more than five fruits in a can of *Lilt* and so he was quids in. And, for that, and for the loan of his half-drunk can, complete with spit, I'd had to be thankful.

He offered it to me now. Said something about me looking a bit peaky and then, as I was faux gulping, said that he'd not seen me in a while.

"If you ever need to talk about anything," Brian Hole offered.

This from the man who thought "from the get go" was "from the gecko". This from the man who thought it was "bowl in a china shop", not "bull in a china shop". This from the man who I doubted had ever read a book in this life and so, no, no, there was nothing we could talk about because I couldn't bring myself down to his level. Even though I was already down at his level because I was damn well living here now—opposite him in this poxy street as a persistent reminder of everything that had gone wrong and, therefore, Must Not Be Talked About.

But what did Brian Hole know? Nothing. Less than nothing. Out the other side of nothing and on some way into the distance.

If I ever needed to talk about anything it wouldn't be to him.

Or anyone.

"I'm fine," I told him, handing him back the fruit concoction and considering where I'd head today. The Enclosure? The Water? Somewhere for my thoughts and mine alone, unpolluted by the nonsense.

"course you are," said Brian Hole, smiling through bad teeth. "That's what we've got to be, ain't it, when we come out the other side of it all? When we've got to start again. Gotta be fine. What else is there?"

I paused over the words, considered the flag that had no chance of ever picking up a breeze. Brian turned to tend the wilted daffodils.

"Yeah," I said, "you're right enough." And, by God, he was. "That is a gibbon."

Mike Hickman (@MikeHicWriter) is a writer from York, England. He has written for Off the Rock Productions (stage and audio), including a 2018 play about Groucho Marx. He has recently been published in the *Blake-Jones Review*, *Bitchin' Kitsch*, *the Cabinet of Heed*, *the Potato Soup Journal*, and the *Trouvaille Review*.

Arthur Going Blind

John Grey

According to my eyes, the subject matter
is merely wiggly lines, inexplicable shadows.
No matter how close to the table I droop,
the book cannot be rescued.
Darkness is my master going forward.

I can feel the volume well enough.
And there are still some in the world
who would bother to read it to me.
But my vision is at an end.
And my fingers are too old and crinkled
to learn braille.

Now, the space I occupy takes on new meaning.
It doesn't just appear before me.
I must take my time to know just a little
of what I once understood in an instance.

Distance is no longer mine.
Up close is my hands' domain.
I feel myself growing smaller.
Even what I think has nowhere to go for confirmation.

Yes, people tell me I'm a good man,
that I don't deserve this.
So what do I deserve at my age?
A brief glimpse of insight? A quick peek there?

I am depressed.
I am despairing.
And I am not a good man.
A good man is a blind man who can see.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Soundings East*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest book, "Leaves On Pages" is available through Amazon.



Birds and bees | Daniel Forbes

The Suicide Survivor's Cookbook

Zachary Kluckman

Maybe one more lived today. Maybe the words poured through me like flood water receding, urgent rush then ebbing flow. A softening as danger passed. A tear that became a mud slide in the living room. An emptying cup. Silt rising on the floor, swallowing the rug. Maybe they walked across this wreckage, examining their footprints as if looking for starfish. Proof of life. Amazed at the size of their impact. Maybe the sun kissed their ears, there is

no guarantee. This is not the work that we do. The calls come every day and I curl my hands into fists because the knuckles remind me how the heart shapes its hurt. All blunt edges and hard memory. A survivor myself, I have walked across my own ruins. Bathed in the rage of waters I cannot control. A decision that cannot be unmade, like a life. I have been the storm that craves salt

and warmth, rebirth. Understand, it is a kind of hunger that drives the body to destroy itself. That asks the light to imagine its own shadow. An appetite for drowning to spite the wounds that swallow. I try to teach them the art of cooking, to bake a bread other than their own bodies. To feed hunger to itself, an ouroboros worm feasting its own flesh while the storm leaves the kitchen. Sprinkle the flour. Witness the birth of your hands. Whatever you make next, you do not eat alone.

Zachary Kluckman, the National Poetry Awards 2014 Slam Artist of the Year, is a Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Gold Medal Poetry Teacher and a founding organizer of the 100 Thousand Poets for Change program. Kluckman, who tours the nation as a spoken word artist, was recently one of three American poets invited to the Kistrech International Poetry Festival in Kenya. He has served as Spoken Word Editor for the Pedestal magazine and has authored two poetry collections.

I'm not ready

Tohm Bakelas

plagued by insomnia
and fevered nightmares
of murdering spiders
who simply multiply
upon each time
they are killed,
they have me cornered
and I awaken when they advance

the cat purrs under my arm
she likes the heat from my fever

I get out of bed and pace the entire house
down the stairs to the first floor
back up the stairs to the bedroom

nothing is working,
nothing is right

is this madness?
am I dying?
am I somewhere between the two?
am I closer than I thought?

I tell myself: I am not ready yet,
I'm not ready yet,
I'm not ready.

Tohm Bakelas is a social worker in a psychiatric hospital. He was born in New Jersey, resides there, and will die there. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, zines, and online publications. He has published numerous chapbooks in America and the UK, one full length collection of poems, and two micro-chapbooks. His work has been nominated several times for the Pushcart Prize.

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Always London | Ray Marrero

Invisible Partner (For David)

Timothy Robbins

It's time Williams found out
there's more to his house,

more to his household
than he guesses. At an

unnoticed keyhole on the
south side of his northern

room I drink in his nudity.
My focus curves,

conforming to the
contours of his sympathetic

middle-aged rump. I
too am naked,

pitiful as a winter patio,
sitting on my clothes, ear

pressed to wood, awake
when Flossie's dream

slakes its thirst at the
sink, when the suckling

baby tugs the daughter-
in-law toward dormancy.

Danced down like a flame,
Williams lies in his

sweat. I trot to the
kitchenette for a plate.

Timothy Robbins grew up in a small town in Indiana, raised by parents who were always supportive—of his gay identity. He now lives with his partner of twenty years in Wisconsin, where he teaches ESL—and does freelance translation. He has a BA in French and an MA in Applied Linguistics from Indiana—University. He has been a regular contributor to *Hanging Loose* since 1978. His poems have also—appeared appeared in *Three New Poets*, *Long Shot*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Off the Coast*, *The Tishman—Review*, *Tipton Review*, *Slant*, *Main Street Rag* and others. He is also a visual artist and songwriter.