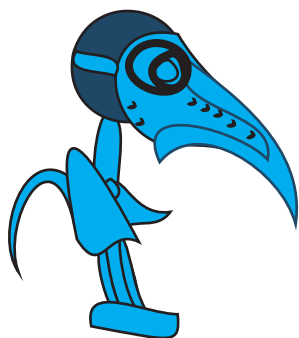


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COVER ART



La romantica perdita della libertà

Delta N.A.

Agua es Vida / #waterislife

Dr. Melinda Gonzalez

Bebe.

Nena, bebe agua.

The words so easily, casually roll off my mother's tongue.

Drink. Drink water, girl.

I go to oblige, but when the sink opens,

it's the color of bronze, chunks of rusted metals threatening to sneak by,
covered in --

these things I try to forget, like the bottles of opioids we flushed down
the toilet, and now,

the water is hardly safe for flushing down excrement with it, and I,

I wake up in a cold sweat on many nights envisioning the equator all
made of water bottles,

plastic in my chest, marinating in my guts, a sort of cyborg I've become,
and then,

Nena bebe. Bebe agua.

Water drink, drink water because all the things that ain't it are gonna
kill you, girl. Bebe.

My mother brags about looking so young because she hydrates,

Sun-kissed skin drenched in water; but,

I wake up in a cold sweat when I remember,

Swans a swimming in crude oil, white feathers blackened by debris.

Bebe. Nena bebe agua,

but my throat closes up with the words.

A Nestle tycoon aims to own the water in Bolivia, a war breaks,

An oil tycoon threatens the sacred lands of Standing Rock, a war
breaks,

A political tycoon does nothing about the infested waters in Flint or
Newark, and still,

Nena bebe. Bebe agua.

Replenish with this thing you're 78 percent of,

I awake but asleep.

An ocean full of it, my guts, too, all plastic.

Nena bebe. Bebe agua, but even that is poison now, too.

Passing By

Clio Thayer

SANDRA

Sandra gets up before the sun does. Even though the flower shop she owns is a few blocks away, business was done before five a.m. Sandra starts her day with a long shower, choosing to let the building's supply of hot water tell her when to stop. She shivers her way into a professional blouse and paint-stained jeans, then spends five minutes pushing and prodding her hair into a bun. She slaps on lip gloss, kisses her yet-to-be-coffee wife goodbye, and takes the apartment steps two at a time out to the street.

Sandra likes the way her route to work looks. It's simple, moving along one of the livelier morning streets, and it has its fair share of what Sandra's mother had called "city color." She took to humming usually whatever song her wife had been playing in the kitchen. If you saw Sandra while she was hopping along her route, you'd probably think she was in some kind of musical. That morning, it was The Beatles' 'Here Comes The Sun.'

There aren't crowds of people out on the street at this time of day, but they aren't empty by any means. It's a big city, so of course there are other early-risers. Dog walkers, runners, businessmen, people coming home from night shifts, and everything in between. One familiar set of faces each morning was the cast of characters on the steps of the bank. Sometimes it's the same few people, sometimes there's new people there for just a day, but there's always someone there.

Today, it's the regulars. There is a young woman curled up in a large comforter cradling a backpack, a routine crasher there. There are two teens with bags under their eyes clinging to the handrail as if it's the only thing keeping them from slipping away. There's very little foot traffic moving up and down, just one middle-aged man climbing the steps shakily.

Sandra used to talk to the woman. After seeing her there for

a few weeks straight, she brought an extra snack in her purse, an apple or a sandwich, and she would wake her up and offer her the meal. One time she offered to give her a ride to a homeless shelter, but the woman refused. Sandra was confused, but the woman insisted that if she wanted to help all she needed was to give her something warm to sleep with, so Sandra bought her a twin-sized comforter. The woman was very excited by this, especially since the comforter could be easily crumpled into her backpack. Sandra doesn't talk to her as much anymore. She doesn't know what else she can do. Her wife told her to just focus on herself.

As Sandra is almost past the steps, she hears a thump and breaks the unspoken rule to look at what happened. The shaky man had tripped and was now lying on the steps breathing heavily.

Sandra snaps her head back to look forward. What could she possibly do to help? Someone else will step in if it's serious. She has to get to an early morning flower delivery. It is going to be a long day. She has a wedding to prepare for that needs all their arrangements done by noon. It's basically a full slate for the whole shop until then. Plus, she is already running a little late. She can't spend her entire life helping out others, she has things to do. Someone else is just going to have to step up for once. She picks up her pace.

THOMAS

Thomas has been up for eighteen hours. He is used to this, but still feels odd when he watches the sun rise without having slept yet. Thomas thinks that the world turns green during those in-between hours. Agatha says it's more of an indigo. Thomas tries to tell her that's ridiculous. It's clearly green, because it's the sun's yellow color mixing with the blue of the night sky. She doesn't listen to him. They keep having this argument until the sun is stabbing through their corneas.

Thomas takes a drag of his cigarette. He needs to go to sleep soon. The city is about to get boring. People are already heading off to work, traffic has picked up, people are climbing the steps of the bank

even though that's their turf.

Well, someone had tried to climb the steps of the bank. Now he's just... laying there. Thomas thinks that he tripped but he's been on the ground for a really long time for just having tripped. Thomas stares at him even though his eyes are killing him. The man is laying on his stomach, so Thomas can only see his back. The man's wearing a long brown coat which is fluttering slightly in the wind. The back of his head shows a short mop of curly dark hair. Strangely, he doesn't seem like the other homeless people who rest on these steps. He looks middle-class. His coat is clean and well-made and his shoes are those tight black loafers that make Thomas squirm in his beaten-to-hell thrifted sneakers.

He was probably a recent victim of the homeless epidemic, maybe living out of his car, quite a few people do that. Thomas feels such a burning rage in his stomach when he thinks about it. There's nothing that they could do about it. The policy-makers have to be the ones to take charge and put a stop to it. They never do though.

Those corrupt bastards, Thomas thinks. They're just going to let all these people fall off the face of the earth because they aren't a part of their voter base. The entire system is broken. The world is broken, isn't it? It's all falling apart.

Thomas shares some of these thoughts with Agatha. Agatha hums in agreement. She leans her head back and blows a perfect ring of smoke. Thomas punctuates it with a puff of his own. That's nice. He likes making a bit of art that will quickly drift away. At least he and Agatha saw it.

BRIAN

Brian's mornings tended to go fairly chaotically. Fairly routine when you have three kids all in your tiny apartment at the same time. He would be woken up by his youngest, Breanna, slapping him in the face with her teddy bear. She would demand pancakes for breakfast, every morning, pancakes. He usually tried to convince her towards something healthier, or at least with less sticky syrup involved, because George was

Fiction

going through a phase of experimenting with his food. The boy would mix it all violently together in a bowl and mash it into a “soup.” It was just better if that soup mopped up easily. His oldest, Jessica, never got up for school on time, and had a habit of karate kicking anyone who tried to wake her before noon. So after breakfast, he would flip on the light in her room and shout for her to wake up. He would then take the little ones to the bathroom to get cleaned up. While they were getting dressed, he would go into Jessica’s room and shake her somewhat-awake cocooned figure to full consciousness. She would groan and yell at him to get out, but as soon as he left, she would start getting ready. Then he would have to make sure that everyone had their homework and their lunches. If he didn’t double check, it would end up with him driving to the school with a bag of you-forgot-this. By the time the kids had headed out the door for their bus, the house was a wreck and Brian was still in his pjs without having even brushed his teeth.

Thankfully, on every other weekend, they stayed with their mother on the outskirts of the city. It seemed like it wasn’t that far, but it made a world of a difference. He was able to wake up to his own alarm, make his own breakfast, and watch the news before going to work.

Regretfully, it doesn’t always work out that way. Today he isn’t woken up to his alarm, but instead to the ringtone for his ex-wife. He picks up the phone.

Breanna had come down with a powerful fever. She isn’t holding down any food or water.

Where are you?

Memorial Hospital downtown, hurry.

So he pulls on pants and a shirt from his laundry because he can’t find a clean one despite ripping through every drawer in his dresser. It would’ve taken too long to find his car a couple blocks in the opposite direction and drive it there through the city traffic, so he decides to walk, or more accurately, runs the mile to the hospital.

Brian’s slides slap on the sidewalk as he books through the mostly-empty morning sidewalks. He hasn’t run in a long time but manages to keep pace for the first three quarters of the mile. He has to

stop to catch his breath before the steps of the city bank. A pair of teenagers give him raised eyebrows and get up from their spots on the handrail nearby, walking away while whispering. Brian sucks in gulps of air that make his chest hurt and looks at the steps.

There is a middle-aged man splayed across the center of them breathing as hard as Brian was. Brian watches him as he chases after his own breath. The man is wearing a large brown coat despite it being early May, and the coat blends in with the man's hair and skin to turn him into a swimming pile of dark brown in Brian's vision.

Brian thinks for a moment that the man might be having a seizure, he was certainly shaking enough. Brian finally catches his breath. He looks around at the other people nearby. There are other pedestrians in a hurry passing by the steps. There is a woman bundled up, sleeping maybe? Why is no one else doing anything? Is it an act, some kind of street performer?

More likely, the man is an addict. On a bad high or passed out, his bundled friend too doped up to even be conscious anymore. Brian takes a step towards him. Maybe he should say something, or give CPR, or...

Brian doesn't know CPR. He was going to take a class, for the sake of his kids that is, but he never had the time. The kids immediate safety always came first. And they had to come first now. He has no idea how dire the situation is with Breanna, but he knew he had to be there.

The other man would have to deal with the consequences of his actions. Brian didn't even see him. Brian needs to reach his daughter. He takes off running.

He should have brought her teddy bear, he curses himself. It's laying on her bed where she carefully placed it the night before. Her mother probably didn't bring any of Breanna's other toys. He should have brought it.

DIANE

Diane sits in her squad car across the street from the city bank. She is

Fiction

towards the end of her shift but knows that in a few minutes, when the bank's employees start rolling in, the station is going to get a call about removing people from the ornate, granite steps of the bank. So she's going to stick around until she gets the call rather than have to turn back and waste the gas.

She hates teaching these people the same lesson over and over. What a pointless waste of everyone's time. She's gotten to be on a first-name basis with the regulars on the steps. Liza usually sleeps on the right side near the handrails. Every day except for Sunday, Diane would show up and shake Liza awake to be greeted with a drowsy smile. Occasionally, Diane would have to take in Thomas and Agatha, a young couple that smoke on the steps every morning, but recently the pair had started taking off right before Diane got there.

There they go. Diane watches as they peel themselves off the steps and saunter away. Just as well. She doesn't want to have company this morning, especially the company of those punks. They're always waxing poetic about the system and the state of the world. Brats, entitled kids that think they deserve everything handed to them on a silver platter. At least Liza is actually working towards something. Or she used to be. Diane doesn't know if Liza is even applying to jobs anymore.

And now she's joined by a new sleeper. Some man decided to sprawl himself across the center of the steps. Diane's very tired of this. She worked hard to get her position, she put in the hours, never took any handouts, why can't more people just be like her?

Soon the bank workers will arrive and she's going to have to step out of the heated interior of her squad car and into the cold morning air. Diane is fed up with looking at those steps. She leans back and closes her eyes. Maybe she can sneak in a moment's rest before she has to fight with Liza again.

AARON

Aaron likes waking up early in the morning. He likes going through each step in his morning routine methodically, especially taking the time

to gel down every curl of his unruly hair. He inherited the curls from his father, who celebrated them as part of their Jewish heritage. Aaron didn't. He relishes in taming them down to his head, making a helmet over his skull.

After the completion of his morning rituals, Aaron pops in headphones and takes his time walking to the bank. He looks forward to unlocking the front door, counting out his till, setting up the complimentary coffee and hot chocolate. He would even give the plants around the office a misting with the bottle he kept next to the letter openers and scissors. He thinks about which customers he would see that morning while he was walking, listening to his true crime podcasts. He has to listen to true crime in the morning because they would make him too nervous after the sun went down.

Aaron carries a briefcase to work and always wears a collared shirt and sweater vest, even in the greatest of heat. He likes the sense of dignity it gives him. People on the street look at him differently if he carries a briefcase.

The one part of his morning that he dreads is climbing the steps to the bank. There is always some riffraff mulling about. Once he got inside he would be able to settle down, and he would always ask the next person to arrive if they would shoo the loiterers away because Aaron was very busy in the morning and had no time for it. But for some reason no matter how many times they were shooed away, or how many "No Loitering" signs they put up, there would be a new crowd the next day.

Aaron approaches the steps and sees people, curled up like grubs on the sidewalk. He doesn't understand why they insist on sleeping here. The steps can't possibly be comfortable, and the bank would open at six and make them move anyway.

He prefers to ignore them, not even register that they are there. So he takes a couple steps up, closing off his peripheral vision. His podcast is talking about the murder of Kitty Genovese and the media uproar over it. He is absolutely fascinated about it, and he knows that Mr. Larson would ask about what he listened to when he came to

Fiction

cash his paycheck, so he wants to make sure that he has a good understanding of the case.

“...briefcase!”

Aaron is confused, and looks both ways. He swears he heard someone call out about his briefcase. Is there something wrong with it? He checks the briefcase in a slight panic. Did he scratch it? He can't see anything. He takes out his earbuds and looks around until he meets someone's eyes.

“What? Is something wrong?” He asks, speaking to the woman who always sleeps on the steps of the bank.

She's kneeling in a pile of crap, a blanket, a random assortment of clothes, a book, a plastic bag of toiletries, and she's bent over a man in a long brown coat who is collapsed on the steps. She's compressing his chest in rhythmic pulses. There's a few people stopped on the street watching her, and they follow her eyeline to Aaron.

“Yes, call 911! This man needs a doctor!”

Aaron glances at the beautiful doors to the bank, and the safety they provide. His desk is in there, with a glass divider between him and anyone who enters those doors after him. He wouldn't have to meet their eyes, everyone just looked at the stacks of bills they passed back and forth.

“Look at me! You, with the briefcase! Please call an ambulance!”

Now every person on the street is looking at him, at his briefcase, and not in the way he liked. A crowd is forming. Everyone is staring at him. Each second that passes calls more eyes to him. He had only wanted to go inside and continue his routine, but a thick fog of panic and urgency had coated the street. The whole crowd is murmuring, and he begins to feel there's nowhere to run.

He looks down at the man. He's shaking with each thump the woman sends into his chest. He has a scratch on his forehead, and his nose is leaking blood. His skin is much darker than Aaron's but his hair calls back to the before image Aaron saw in the mirror that morning. Aaron has a helmet right now, but the man on the steps just let his curls

Fiction

fly. He reminds Aaron of his father.

He can see he isn't breathing.

Aaron uses his headphone cord to yank his phone from his pocket. He doesn't bother unlocking it and just swipes to Emergency Call. Everyone is still looking at him, but he's only looking at the man on the steps.

He dials.

frankenstein was the name of my creator

EJ Schoenborn

frankenstein was the name of my creator
(after Mary Shelley)

i buried my name
under six feet of earth
and all the leftover
bodies that built me

and still somewhere a pair of hands
grips a shovel seeking to unearth
that which is best forgotten

why can't we let sleeping bodies lie?
why must we search for an origin?
if we exhume the name,
can we at least leave the trauma untouched?

i was named in ash
and lung gasps
and the unstoppable spreading

i do not fear the fire,
i fear the light
and the reflection
of a mirror

Out with the Old

Akjemal Toshieva

Our choice of ransacking victim was a man who had thrown himself off the ledge of his second-floor balcony last Sunday. Somebody, perhaps a sibling struck with grief, tasked his grandaunt to pen the obituary. White-haired and wilted, the woman told the world how he died. He watched a movie (*Tokyo Story*). He smoked a cigarette. Then he became whole with the sidewalk, blood creasing alongside the cracks in the concrete. The last thing he heard was that he was born unwanted, made unloveable. But, his grandaunt insisted. He was talented. He was smart. He had a website.

—Writer, I said.

—Please. He was from Brooklyn. Everyone's a fucking writer.

Maynard turned his head and spit out the rolled down window of the faded red Chevy truck we were sitting in. He had nice lips, the perfect bow of Cupid, and I wondered for a moment what it would be like to reach out and touch them. I fished around the pile of crap packed tight in the backseat and found two beers, warm. I pressed one into Maynard's hands and took a swig of mine. A buzz is always good for the going.

—Sun set early today, Atajan.

He tore the cap off his bottle and downed the dark amber in seconds.

—The days are getting shorter, I said. And because I forgot where I was, who I was with, I added, When I was a kid, on nights like this, me and Hally would try to catch fireflies.

To speak my sister's name aloud so easily, acknowledge her in that space that was mine and Maynard's—it unsettled me. Pushing her from my thoughts, I unbuttoned Maynard's oil-stained Carhartt jeans and lowered my mouth to his cock, liquid courage in my veins. He grabbed the back of my shirt and, not ungently, pulled me off of him.

—Not now, he said. Okay? Not now.

I turned away from him, and he must have sensed my sullenness because suddenly he was running his finger along my jaw, grasping my chin. Making me look at him. I felt my resentment receding the moment his eyes bore into mine, although I knew what I wanted to happen would not necessarily happen, not even later. Maynard was twenty-five to my eighteen, and already a man at that, so our time together was usually on his terms.

—I only meant that it's not the right scene for it, you know?

—But I still want to.

—We will, he promised. On a different day, when we're not doing this. Damn. You turning into a girl or something?

It's not always about sex, I wanted to tell him. Sometimes it's the principle of standing your ground. I finished the rest of my beer, yearning for ice. Drinking always made me feel like the best version of myself: ugly and unlikeable but untethered. I forced the empty bottle into the cup-holder already brimming with used cigarettes. He needed to clean out his car. Eventually it'd end up looking like a hoarder's paradise.

—You gone all quiet on me, kid?

—I'm thinking. That's all.

In my mind there was a moment where I asked him how long we were going to keep doing this, keep pretending that I didn't love him or feel something in proximity to love, when I knew, he knew, we both knew that I was nothing more than a good distraction for him, something to play with before we stole from happier people's homes.

Maynard glanced at me.

—We've sat here long enough. Let's head out.

We abandoned the truck for the two-story house all alone on its block, sweating in our black clothes and thick gloves. While Maynard worked on prying open the front window with his crowbar, I kept watch and wondered if there was ever a point in time where our man, our deceased, our Bryan Burke Jr., thought about getting himself a wife and some kids. The place lent itself to the idea of domesticity.

—Go wait by the door, Maynard said, removing several

Fiction

obstacles from the windowsill. I'll let you in through there.

I cast a glance at the items he'd set on the grass. Blackamoor figurine. Tattered notepad. Potted plant, withered.

Wherever ye are, death will find you out, even if ye are in towers built up strong and high, I thought.

—You coming or what, Maynard hissed.

Bryan Burke Jr. came to me in the form of a newspaper page wadded up in the wastebasket. I didn't scope out targets in print, least of all in the obit section, but in the wee hours of the morning, mindlessly sorting out garbage from the recycling in the motel lobby, it seemed like a stroke of brilliance. I tried to choose wisely. Young deaths meant nothing in our operation. In Lancaster, half those twenty, thirty-some-things were drug addicts or alcoholics, and as such, probably already parted with their earthly possessions. Seniors, on the other hand, had no meth habits to fund, and could generally be counted on to collect nice china, high-end jewelry. But it hadn't been in the cards, for those residences were too far away. Bryan Burke Jr., however, had lived within driving distance, sounded clean-cut, and best of all, moved back home from Brooklyn a few months ago. He'd hauled all sorts of shit from the city, I was sure.

The excursions were mostly for Maynard's benefit. He didn't have a formal education to fall back on, no real job to speak of, and while my position as motel janitor kept me fed, I needed an excuse to leave my place. Hally the prodigal sister had shown up on my doorstep with nothing but a duffel bag and a demand, and stupidly, I had allowed her to stay. It was the damn familial obligation. I couldn't say no to her, even though I would've been well within my rights to.

—He didn't keep dishes, Maynard complained from the kitchen. Lookit, he didn't even own the cheap set. He ate off paper plates.

—The monster.

—Plastic utensils, too, Maynard noted.

—So much for city folk caring about the environment, I said.

But I wasn't faring any better in the living room. The furniture

was old, smelling faintly of milk. I found a plastic bin tucked behind an armchair, but inside were only thin, faded magazines and composition notebooks. A snowglobe at the bottom interested me, so I pocketed that. I ripped apart the notebooks, the shreds falling to the carpeted floor.

—Check this out.

Returning from the kitchen, Maynard held out a palmful of tiny powder-filled plastic baggies.

—He hid them in the flour.

Cocaine. It was such a cliché, even for a writer, I almost felt a glimmer of disappointment.

—And to think Junior was raised a good Christian boy.

—Toss me one, I said. I'm going upstairs.

There were two rooms on the second floor. One was for guests, bland, blue, unremarkable, and one belonged to Bryan Burke Jr. It was not so devoid of human habitation. There were more books, but they lay unopened in neat stacks around the room. I gave in to my childish urge to kick them and they went flying, fables and fantasies and fairy tales, all frayed edges and dull covers. I jumped on the bed, sidestepping the laptop lying on the comforter, and took the framed Rembrandt print from its nail. The laptop was password protected, but Maynard probably knew someone who could take care of that. I dumped the contents of the baggie onto the black belly of Rembrandt and took a line right up my nose through a gnawed plastic straw.

The closet didn't hold any treasures but his clothes, and those were obviously thrifted. I could tell. I dragged out a cardboard box that'd been wedged between his boots, thinking he might have some rolled up bills in there, monetary gifts from mommy and daddy, rare coins. A thick photo album greeted me instead. I shook the snowglobe while flipping through the laminated pages, a halo of white encompassing the tall green statue. Cherished were the baby pictures, snapshots of graduation parties and Christmas get-togethers. I'd expected the glazed eyes, the lopsided smiles, the insipid cow look white people tended to sport. What I did not expect was Bryan Burke Jr. at eighteen, jacketed

Fiction

in ratty blue denim, casually hanging in front of a train station entrance, the red letters of Tower Records glowing in the background. The barenaked smugness in his skinny teenage face, even with both lips pressed in an unyielding iron line. I bet he was so proud of himself for this picture. I bet he timed it perfectly, that single arm thrown over the green pole, so casually placed to suggest anything other than that he was elated, that yes, he was here, he had finally made it, small town boy hit it big in New York City. And yes, he had hit it big, for he was young and shiny and willing in a way all those stupid boys are, attending apartment parties where adults clutched wineglasses instead of warm beers from the backseat, talking David Foster Wallace and McSweeney's submissions, because yes, even from backwoods Lancaster, you knew all about those things, you who were so better than the Atajans and Maynards of the world.

Well, guess what. You fucking lost. At the end of the day you're still the same stupid, little boy standing in front of Tower Records, pretending to be someone you're not. You made it to Brooklyn and you returned, tail between your legs, and you realized, with great clarity, for once in your life, that one thing remained true all along, that you were born unwanted and made unloveable, and that was the last thought you had before your threw yourself off the ledge of the balcony and hurtled towards the end of your existence.

—Hey, hey, easy, tiger. Easy there.

The snowglobe lay shattered on the floor, Lady Liberty in a puddle around my knees. Maynard was crouching beside me, wrapping a towel around my right hand. I didn't remember smashing it.

—Are you okay?

—We need to go. Do you have the bag? There's a laptop on the bed, we have to take that.

—I'll carry it. Do you feel pain?

I don't feel much of anything, I wanted to say. There must have been something about my face, because he did not rush us out of the room, but drew me close to him instead, cradling my head against his heaving chest. His heart was a jackhammer inside his ribs.

—Maynard. We have to go.

His heart continued to thud, a twin to my labored breathing.

It was still pitch black when Maynard dropped me off at my apartment. He'd seen to my wounds, declared stitches unnecessary, and peeled off into the night. I walked the short path leading up to the stoop where my sister sat dragging a stick across the dirt.

It had been almost a week since her arrival and I had yet to ask her why she was here. She was the eldest, and still, she was here. Eating at my table, sleeping on my sofa. Never seeking refuge elsewhere because she knew she could afford not to. Turkmen people did not banish their families so easily.

Despite everything, I worried for her welfare. I still remembered how she came to us after the hospital. Crying for hours on end, tearing at her wrists, her hair. Her happiness depending on factors as arbitrary as the tenor of a man's voice to the color of the sky. She was twenty-two now, and thought herself invincible because she'd managed to bounce back without medication, court-ordered therapy. To be fair, she seemed to be surviving. She had food in her fridge, a credit card she paid off on time, a job with the army. And I hadn't felt the need to hide pills from her in a long time, unlike our now dead mother, who'd stow away Tylenol like it was contraband.

—I'm so much happier solo, Hally would say.

—Sure.

Hally stared at my bloodied hand.

—Strange comings and goings, brother.

—I could say the same for you, sister.

She stabbed the stick into an anthill. I couldn't see her clearly under the cover of darkness, but I felt her smiling.

—Do you remember the time I ran away from home?

—Vaguely.

—I think I was fifteen. Mama was yelling at me. I was packing my bag and she was yelling at me. Do you remember what she said on my way out?

Fiction

I could feel her smile growing.

—She told me she hoped I'd kill myself for real this time. And you were there. Pretending not to hear.

—What are you trying to do right now? I asked. My head hurt. I wanted to lie down. Are you trying to make me mad?

—I'm just asking if you remember.

I wanted to go inside. I wanted to clean my hand and take a shower. Go to sleep.

—Crazy.

—Huh?

—That's what you two said. That I was crazy, she said quietly.

—Hally—

—I know how you feel about me, she interrupted. That I'm forever bringing up old memories.

Because you do, I thought. You can never leave well enough alone. But this was unspoken. I felt that if I, in any way, justified what Hally believed about herself, that she was truly a worthless person, then she would use my words as an excuse to do bad unto herself. And I knew how much she loved doing that.

—I wish we could talk. Like how we used to.

—What do you want to talk about?

—I don't know. Money. Sex. Your hopes and dreams. Whatever.

—I'm eighteen. I was born and raised in Lancaster, and I clean up other people's messes for my supper.

—C'mon, Hally said, and I wondered if I imagined the distress in her tone. What about love?

—Love?

—You're young. There's gotta be a special someone in your life.

I could have unspooled myself to her, told her about Maynard, but I didn't see the point. Some things I deserved to myself.

—There's no one special right now.

I left her sitting on the stoop, the screen door closing behind

me.

The next evening I went to Monty's. They didn't serve elaborate, cleverly named concoctions, just the old and the reliable, which was perfect for me, someone who needed to think but didn't have any desire to. I nodded at the bartender, a short, stolid fellow who didn't pay heed to age restrictions, and got started on my first drink. I was pleasantly drunk by the time Maynard sidled up to my booth.

—'Fraid I started without you, friend, I hiccuped.

—I'll catch up in no time. He puffed out his chest, something proud. I'm celebrating.

—What's the occasion?

—I'm going straight, Atajan.

—Oh, screw off.

—I'm serious, he insisted. I've given it a lot of thought and I'm sick of this. Doing the same shit over and over, it's wearing me down.

—So you're going back to school? I recalled the time he asked me to explain what allegedly meant.

—School? Fuck that. I'm going where the money is. I want what your sister is getting.

Maynard pointed all the way to the other end of the bar, where my sister sat encircled by gray-bearded men. They were talking with gusto, forcing shots of clear-colored liquid upon her. Veterans, I decided, or military buffs who had never served, but wanted her presence to absolve them of it.

—See? Maynard smiled. Free drinks for life. Now that's living.

—You don't know what you're talking about. The army's full of bullshit.

—You get housing, you get food, you get your boo-boos taken care of. Where's the bullshit?

—They give you all that to make up for how little you get paid, May.

He slapped his palm down on the table.

—Why don't we ask her ourselves? And before I could stop him, he was yelling after her. Hey! Soulja girl! Come over here!

Fiction

To my sister's credit, she didn't budge.

—I'm not a creep! he shouted. I just wanted to ask ya a couple of questions.

—She's not in the mood. Let her be.

—Why'd she come here then?

—To drink. Just like us. I pushed my glass towards him. Taste.

—I'm not big on whiskey, Atajan.

—Consider it a premature thanks for your service. But I did buy him his favorite ale and when the drinks came, we clinked glasses and downed them with relish.

—How's your hand?

—Better. I put ointment on it and took some pain relief.

He stroked the gauze tightly wound around my knuckles.

—You scared me back there. You know that?

—I didn't mean to.

Maynard reached out underneath the table and gripped my bouncing knee.

—You're jittery tonight.

—I'm spiraling. There's a difference.

It was a joke, but I saw it again, that familiar flash of concern across his face. It was the same look he'd given me back in Bryan Burke Jr.'s bedroom, busted snowglobe on the floor. He moved his hand up from my knee to my leg, letting it rest against my inner thigh. He rubbed the jean-covered skin and soon I was feeling sick, disgusted. Happy.

—Don't do this here, I said. I found myself stumbling from my seat.

—Where are you going? He grabbed my arm. You can't walk seeing stars.

The patrons stopped swaying on their barstools long enough to watch us. Their eyes were daggers in my back. Maynard followed me as I wobbled out the door.

The cool air sharpened my nose. I breathed it in deeply and at the end of my exhale felt myself buckling. Maynard scooped me up

before I could collide into concrete. He carried me back to his truck and laid me across the backseat, caging me in with his body. Somewhere I could hear the bargoers singing “Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread” and instead of California, I thought of New York and how even boys can mistake the look of worry for warmth.

I mumbled my love into the shoulder of his leather jacket and it was then he shot out into the driver’s seat. The truck bolted from the parking lot. The moon hung steady in the sky.

He fucked me in earnest that night, his rough, calloused fingers threading through mine, linking us close. I felt my senses heightening with each lick of the neck, every grope of the flesh. I did no steering. I didn’t have to, for he was wholly in control of the pulse of his own body. The bed groaned underneath our combined weight until finally, Maynard’s lips crashed against mine and he shuddered inside me. I tasted the whisper of whiskey and ale and sweat and it was there in that bed I believed I could be happy. This is what fools are made of.

On the day of my sister’s departure, I prepared a large Turkmen breakfast, a leftover memory from childhood. She awoke to the smells of oladushki, cuts of kielbasa frying in a pan. She was thrilled. For a while the only sounds were of our silverware scraping against the plates.

—You were always the better cook, she mused.

—Being on your own will do that, I said.

—So there really isn’t anyone?

—Why are you so hung up on my love life, Hally?

I got up from the table and poured two cups of tea. I slid hers across the oak. She caught it and after a pause, pushed it aside.

—I just like knowing someone’s going to take care of you after I’m gone.

—After you’re gone? What does that mean? Are you planning on it anytime soon?

—No! she yelled. No. Fuck. I only meant that we’re on our own, you know? And that’s not normal, to be all alone. It’s not normal.

Fiction

I don't care what anyone says. It's not.

I remembered how small she seemed in the hospital. How she curled in on herself. Like she could disappear.

—Hally... I can't pretend to know what you've been through, but you can't think like that. Not everyone gets a chance to continue on. You have to. You owe it to yourself.

—I know. Her eyes watered. It's just that, sometimes, I feel like everything about me is bad.

She sat there crying quietly while I washed the dishes in the sink, and continued to cry as I plucked her duffel bag and loaded it into the trunk of the rental car. She gathered herself on the ride to the shoebox that was Lancaster's airport, tissues falling into her lap. We exchanged goodbyes at the entrance, without touching, and then she was gone. I understood. She was her old self again. I didn't know what I was.

Maynard graduated basic training that following autumn. He sent me a letter not long after. Fuck Lancaster, he wrote. I should've left a long time ago. The army's where it's at. Guys here aren't afraid to fuck, and that's without the alcohol. It's not what I thought it'd be. We're deploying to Iraq soon. They say it's miserable. Hot weather, full kit. I don't care. I want to go and see it for myself.

He died two weeks before they were supposed to fly out. A semi-truck ran a stop sign and collided into his vehicle, killing him instantly. He felt no pain. That's what I like to believe anyways.

I waited for the last minute of my shift to arrive, then dragged my cart to the supply closet. I moved quickly, dumping out cloudy, black water into the sink and putting the chemicals away in their proper place. I tore off the latex gloves, my hands damp, and swung behind the front desk to clock out. The homely girl who worked as the check-in clerk chewed her pen as she watched me put away my name tag.

—Me and some of the other guys are going to the football game tonight, she said. Want to come along?

—I can't.

Fiction

—Why not? You don't have to stay the entire game.

—Thank you, but. I just can't.

I left the motel drinking from my flask and made for Bryan Burke Jr.'s. For whatever reason, nobody had bothered to move into the house. I didn't know if it was because the family refused to rent it out or if superstitions kept potential boarders at bay. It would be the first time I stepped foot inside since the night Maynard and I were there. I didn't want to go home. I couldn't handle my own brain.

I let myself in through the front window and walked to the upstairs bedroom. They'd cleaned up the mess we'd left behind, covered the furniture in plastic. The bed still had its sheets, the comforter. I tore off the plastic and burrowed beneath the mottled fabric, flask and all. The cold hung in the air, ready to seep into my bones and crack my skin. I closed my eyes and waited for sleep. It didn't come.

sapphic skin

Sarah Grace Goolden

i can't stop talking about my skin the way one would address an unsightly scar. this is to say it is something i am ashamed of but understand has healed. healing does not always mean forgiveness. or maybe it does & i am still reeling from the toxic touch of something ravenous for domination. i have never fucked a man without feeling my skin curdle & separate from my body. maybe i have always known something was wrong but maybe i had just never experienced something be right. it has been years since i've been touched with something with syringes for fingers & my skin is starting to blush from a bruised healed or healing or thinking about healing. have you noticed women have cups for mouths? my girlfriend and i grow plants & kiss when they sprout. i have never been so eager to exist. it comforts me knowing i have created something so green, so small & so needy. in the morning, i water them all while she sleeps. the sun caresses my arm as if to say "it's okay; this is new skin" & i know she is right. i remember reading that skin is replaced every month. then i remember my dermatologist running her fingers over my back, lifting my arms, inspecting every inch of my body & not finding a speck of them anywhere.



The Rat King

Rachel Coyn

The Moss Prophet

Glenn Dungan

The Moss Prophet's congregation is in the ruins of a forgotten church, where vines creep upon ivory facades and wrap around broken glass panes. Long blades of thick grass are sticky with dewdrops that sway in the humidity of the open edifice. Warm water, the runoff from a neighboring swamp to the right and a crystalline stream to the left, engulf the cobblestoned floors with an inch of thick ichor where tiny bugs swim and vibrant bottleflies scuttle. There are no pews in the Moss Prophet's church. Instead, there are stumps and fallen logs that have been hallowed out by years of mass. In the corner of the open church, where the West side was blown apart during the forgotten war with the machines, a surviving wind chime twinkles in the swampy air. A frog croaks from the other side, booming through the slicing orchestra of gnats and flies that swirl along the seats, singing in a language that only they can understand.

The midafternoon sun flutters from the marsh outside, warming the Moss Prophet as he waits, submerged to his stomach in the swamp water. His thick coat of moss and bark floats like limp wings along the murky water, and he feels the hardness of the cobblestones with his long, green toes. The texture is strange to the Moss Prophet, even now, even after all these years. Nothing in this forest is as hard as stone. Even the cement pillars have been reclaimed by the marsh, increasingly constricted by stringing vines, horned roses, and furry moss. An entire ecosystem, complete with its own politics and royalty exists on the pillar of the forgotten church. The Moss Prophet watches a water bug skate by, fanning tiny waves in between two lofty and approaching lily pads.

The windchime sang underneath the wind that shook the bushes and grass. This sound was the Moss Prophet's favorite sound. He watched its rusty fingers clang together and waited for the congregation to start. The first one to arrive was the Mantis Queen,

Fiction

accompanied by her sons. The Mantis Queen stood at eight feet. Her gown kissed the larger stumps as she passed. Her shell was not as immaculate as when she was young; shades of brown splotched along cracks where her biological body armor was beginning to turn brittle. The Mantis Queen was proud, and she held her head and her bladed arms high. She wore her weakness and age with dignity and continued to move with as much grace as a ballet dancer pirouetting and playing with ribbons. Her sons are broad chested, their shells greener than any of the moss in the congregation, and more vibrant than even the Moss Prophet's own skin, which was the color of steamed asparagus. They held their powerful arms to their sides and stood by the Mantis Queen's side as she settled herself into one of the stumps. Her sons are of age to take a wife and give the Mantis Queen a suitable heir. The uncle of the other's children looks forward to watching the Mantis Queen's succession and has begun prematurely mourning for the cannibalization of their brothers.

The dull yellow light shining through the arch of the Moss Prophet's congregation preceded the second guest. The Lord of Lightning, brave leader of the Lightning Bug colony at the North tip of the Marsh, floated along the water. The light from his body and crown illuminated the swampy waters below, showing the tadpoles and fish that traversed at the base of the stumps. The Lord took his seat next to the Mantis Queen, where his glowing body illuminated her left side. The Lord of Lightning did not come into the Moss Prophet's congregation alone; at the edge of the church grounds where the perimeter of the swamp encroached into a dark abyss there were faint orbs of yellow and orange underneath the awnings of trees. The Lord's knights preferred to stay back, making their own formidable perimeter of illumination. In the Moss Prophet's peripheries, the lights dimmed and tossed light into the sky, beating like heart beats.

The final guest to arrive in the Moss Prophet's congregation was the proud and sturdy King Beetle. His purple armor shined as he waded his way through the murky water. A shawl of moss clung to his hardened shoulders. His horn spiked two feet above his fortified skull,

and as typical birthright of the Beetle Kingdom delineation of royalty, his head had grown naturally to resemble a crown. Already his sons and daughters were checking the development of their scalps for any sign that a crown would emerge from their exoskeletons and the kingdom could ascend into a new generation. Yet, King Beetle remains old for he still has not found an heir and thus keeps making more children. There are rumors that perhaps the true heir to the Beetle Kingdom lay in the swamp, born to a fatherless mother in the muggy, humid air. The Moss Prophet hears many things and has seen a mother bring her daughter to the church that has the eyes of King Beetle. The King came alone, as he always does. He sat adjacent to the Mantis Queen and made sure not to brush against her delicate wings.

With all the guests in place, the Moss Prophet could properly begin his congregation. Against the dancing wind chime, the Moss Prophet blinked his red eyes and traced his long, slender fingers along the water. A cloud of gnats passed over them. He stood, revealing feeble and slender legs no thicker than the branches of a tree in winter. His long nose, almost a snout, dripped down his moss cloak and towards his stomach, curving into a hook. He licked lips the color of peas with a tongue the color of blood. Underneath his cloak roses and tulips of yellow, white, and red breathed along his torso and ribs, blooming in and out like a palm opening and closing. They moved with his breath, and even in advanced age the Moss Prophet was proud of the unwilting and unwavering quality of the flowers.

The Moss Prophet spread his arms wide and welcomed the Mantis Queen, the Lord of Lightning, and King Beetle to his broken church. The tribes in the insect kingdom were in constant conflict, as is the nature of territorial beasts. The Moss Prophet's role was not to sedate them, or to make them work together. Just four seasons ago the Mantis Queen and the King Beetle had threatened war with one another, and both had tried to convince the Lord of Lightning to lend a glistening hand. Two weeks prior one of King Beetle's daughters had abandoned the forest with one of the Lord of Lightning's most promising soldiers. No, the Moss Prophet's church was a sanctuary, just as it

Fiction

was for the SOFT ONE's before, just as it is for the insects who now rule the land. The Moss Prophet does not call his congregations summits. He calls them nothing. He does not send word to them, all guarded in their respective territories. They just arrive, unspoken, independent of the Moss Prophet. And he waits, because he knows they will come.

The Moss Prophet warned of a fourth guest, and the Mantis Queen dismissed the possibility with a wave of her bladed arm. How, she said, can there be a fourth personality in the insect kingdom, when already they live in tumultuous, yet terrific balance? King Beetle scoffed and the Lord of Lightning fluttered his wings. King Beetles asked where a fourth kingdom could even fit in their forest land, and the Lord gestured that perhaps it was in the upper reaches where the trees are brittle and made of stone, where the SOFT ONES once had their caves and all the windchimes lived. The Moss Prophet shook his head and gestured to the entrance. The Mantis Queen's sons pivoted as the Lord of Lightning's guards illuminated a bright yellow, casting the entrance of the church in a dim marigold.

The unexpected guest walked in with an unsteady gait, favoring its right side. When it moved the sounds of metal scraping against rust filled the church. It wore a cloak of moss not unlike the Moss Prophet's, but this cloak was strung together with vines and petals and was attached to the guest's overwhelmingly scarlet exterior just as how moss grows upon pillars. Its face had no pincers, no sharp teeth but a perfect circle with a tiny and reflective cracked surface. It had no claws or bladed arms and instead had three pronged fingers that looked like gnarled roots but were geometrically perfect. The guest waded through the water and it gave the impression of a log floating down the stream. It walked past the log pews and sat at the other end of the congregation, deliberate and alone. It moved with such lackluster intention that holistically it made the Queen, the Lord, and the King uncomfortable. This is no bug, the Mantis Queen said as her sons braced themselves with curiosity. She clicked her pincers and asked the Moss Prophet to explain itself. The Lord of Lightning scoffed and dismissed the creature

with a wave of his hand. His body flashed yellow in disgust. What creature is this, anyhow, the Lord said, where are its claws and its many eyes? Why is its shell so flat and cold?

King Beetle looked at the guest with reservation. He looked for a crown upon its head and found none. He said, it is royalty. It looks weak. Why did you bring the shiny monster here, Moss Prophet? Are the SOFT ONES rising from their mud to claim the Earth again?

The Moss Prophet shook his head. He sat back down, feeling the tickle of the warm water rise to his stomach, feeling the weight of his cloak lift and suspend on the surface. He gestured to the metal creature. This is a robot, he said, a remnant of the SOFT ONES and the wars they used to kill each other. He was sleeping for over six hundred years, so much so that the forest has taken him in. Look! See the forest has grown upon his hard shell.

King Beetle braced himself, puffed out his chest. The sons of the Mantis Queen followed. You've cursed us, the King said, you've brought a weapon of war into our holy church, Prophet!

The Lord of Lightning shook his head. Silence, he said, curb your enthusiasm for battle, King Beetle.

The Mantis Queen folded in her arms and rubbed the blades together. It sounded very much like the sound the robot makes when it moves. She said, let us see what it desires. What do you desire, robot?

The robot turned, and the entire ecosystem living on its torso, arms, and legs, moved with it. DOES NOT COMPUTE, the robot said in a voice not full of little clicks or lapping tongues. WHERE ARE THE OTHERS IN MY UNIT? HAS THE OBJECTIVE BEEN COMPLETED?

The Mantis Queen shook her head. It still thinks it's at war, she said.

Tell us of the SOFT ONES, the Lord asked.
SOFT ONES?

Tell us of humans, the Moss Prophet said. Tell us of the humans before they disappeared.

THERE ARE NO HUMANS IN THESE COORDINATES.

Fiction

HIGH LEVELS OF RADIATION DEEMED UNFIT FOR HUMAN SURVIVAL. GLOBAL TEMPERATURE HAS INCREASED BY FOUR THOUSAND PERCENT SINCE DEPLOYMENT. FOLIAGE INEDIBLE.

King Beetle asked if there were more robots. Perhaps hidden under logs or mud. ACTION UNAVAILABLE. CANNOT CONNECT TO CENTRAL COMMAND. It was a scout, the Lord of Lightning said, the robot was a scout. I have them in my army, too. We know, the Mantis Queen said, they are not very good.

The Moss Prophet turned to the rulers of the forest. He spoke underneath the singing of the windchime. He said, do not fear the robot scout. It has awoken out of time. It is lost.

The Lord of Lightning's body illuminated in thought. Outside the perimeter of the church and past the open façade of its stonewall his guards communicated with one another using their electrified bodies. The Lord asked the Moss Prophet what should become of this robot, and if it does not get destroyed, should he be gifted with it as a memento of the SOFT ONES.

King Beetle scoffed. The robot is a scout, not a gift. It should be in my kingdom. Its colors more closely match my shell anyway. It's destiny.

Ah, the Lord said, you've ought to find a crown in its tiny, metal head.

And besides, chirped the Mantis Queen, its shell is red, and you are purple. I vote, she said, that it remains with me, where it will be given a new purpose as one of my knights.

King Beetle growled and when he did so the Mantis Queen's sons put a hand on the hilts of their swords. He ignored them and asked if she planned for the robot to be eaten by the daughters of her kingdom, too.

The Mantis Queen stood, trailing her elegant cloak off the pool of water. The Lord of Lightning stood and flew up to the Queen's massive eight feet height. King Beetle joined them, and when he did both the Queen's sons and the Lord's guard surrounded them with their

chests puffed. The Moss Prophet's church became invaded with aggressive clicks and clatters. It became enveloped in a ghastly yellow gloss. The Moss Prophet watched and waited. It was not his place to settle disputes. Although his congregation was a palace of upheld peace amongst the rulers of the forest, if they were to break this unspoken pact that the Moss Prophet's existence will adapt to the new way of things.

The robot turned. A spider crawled along its arm and disappeared underneath the large capped fungi developing on its shoulder. It said, THIS UNIT CANNOT REGISTER THE LIFEFORMS OF THIS ECOSYSTEM. Then it paused, and the three rulers and the Moss Prophet waited underneath another tickle of windchime. After a second, the robot continued. THIS UNIT CANNOT CONNECT TO CENTRAL COMMAND. THIS UNIT CANNOT PERFORM AUTONOMOUSLY. THIS UNIT SHALL PERFORM COMMAND: REST.

Rest? The Mantis Queen said. No rest, metal creature. Not when your fate is being pulled in three ways.

King Beetle waded through the water and poked the robot in its circular eye. It did not recoil, and the lack of response made the King feel uneasy. He tapped it on its chest with a gauntleted finger.

THIS UNIT HAS ENTERED COMMAND: HIBERNATION & ERUPTION. THIS UNIT SHALL PERFORM COMMAND: ERUPT UPON CONDITION OF DEPARTING CURRENT LOCATION.

You've angered it, the Lord of Lightning said. King Beetle, the robot said it'll explode. Look at what you have done.

The King shook his head. No, he said, it has entered a sleep.

And what if we move it, said the Mantis Queen, will it explode if it leaves the Moss Prophet's church?

It appears so, said the Moss Prophet. This robot is a creature lost to time, purposeless, and afraid. The Lord of Lightning asked if a creature such this even feels fear.

The Moss Prophet blinked. A tadpole bounced off his

Fiction

shrunk rib cage. Yes, he said, all creatures feel fear when they lose their purpose. He looked to the robot, which had sat looking forward, ignoring the three rulers of the forest who intended to claim it as an object. The Moss Prophet was unsure of his commanding voice, of how definitive he sounded when he made such efforts over these years to be a pacifist among the bickering rulers. He said, the robot shall remain with me, for it is as old as the church, the last relic of the SOFT ONES that we have broken so far from. Let the robot be a reminder of how far we have come.

There was a silence amongst the three of the rulers, each who had not suspected the sudden decision-making from the Moss Prophet. Finally, the Lord of Lightning asked if the robot was their friend of all the forest.

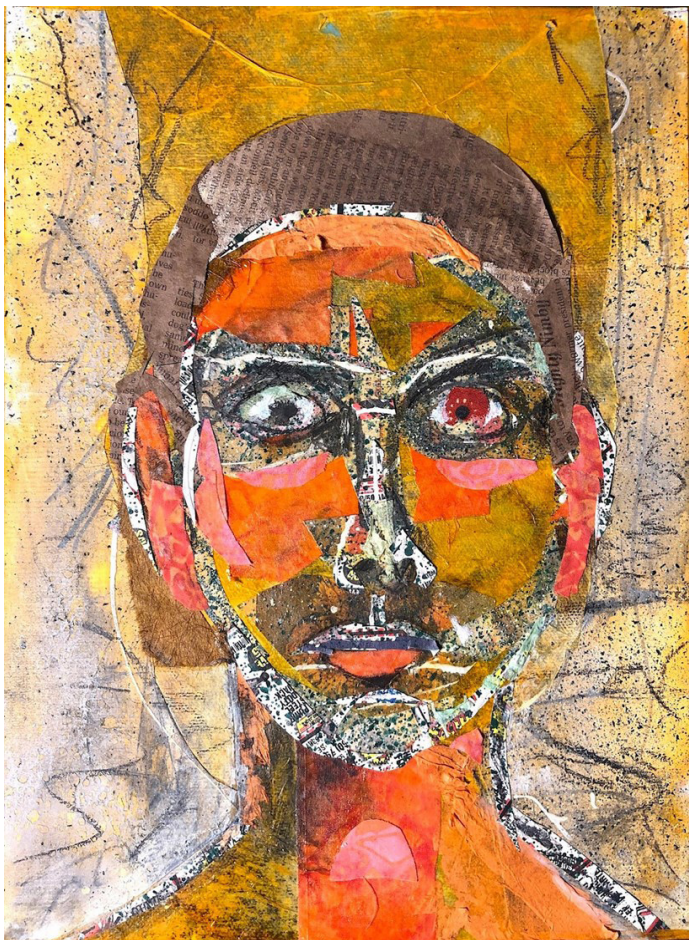
Yes, the Moss Prophet said. He leaned back and skated his fingertips across the water. I am tired now, my children of the forest. This congregation is over.

And all three rulers, the Mantis Queen, the Lord of Lightning, and King Beetle all stood and made their way out of the entrance. They each gave the robot one fleeting glance before setting off into their respective colonies. The yellow glaze upon the church faded with the Lord.

And the Moss Prophet stared at the robot, who had since taken another long sleep. It shall remain on this pew for eternity, for it will destroy the forest if it leaves. In a way, the Moss Prophet looked at the robot as a god of sorts, a deity forever tied to the forest and the church. The Moss Prophet will always have an audience of one, even after the Mantis Queen dies and her sons are cannibalized, long after King Beetle's bastard daughter rises to her throne, long after the Lord of Lightning's kingdom fades like the stars touching sunrise. And eventually, the Moss Prophet will die, leaving the flowers on his chest and stomach to wilt and crumble into the muggy waters.

Now, decades past, the robot remains sleeping, its moss cloak completely enveloping it, the mushrooms gripping its exterior now brown with rust. The robot, so foreign to the ways of life from the

creatures who created its world and destroyed it, now becomes a part of the forest.



Lucky Man

GJ Gillespie

Poetry

?

a f carbajal

I'm shaped like a
question mark— my back
bent on the task of spoiling
my physical ambitions —if there
were any to begin with—.
I am forever curled up in the
shape of a foetus,
unwilling to leave the
safety of my
mother's womb;
too petrified
to snap that
umbilical cord.
And yet there
are days when
I wonder whether
the rather queer
form of my body
isn't actually
perfect to fulfil
everything I am,
so I can pore over
books without
having to lean.
I can even fill
my lungs and
hold a note for
longer due to
the shape
that I am.
So perhaps
I have a writer's,
a scholar's,
a singer's body
and there is a
primal purpose
in being bent as fuck...



Desire Gregory Allison

From the artist, on “Desire”

“Desire” is the second piece from Allison’s debut album Portal. Each track on the album represents an energy center in the body, a Chakra in Yogic philosophy, in which is held certain energies that we’re either aware of or are in the dark about. The work of the album was to create music that represented the transmutation of those energies from the lower forms of the material plane, through the portal of the heart, and into the astral realm. Desire represents the second chakra, located at the sacrum. It is a cosmic dance in the heat of the sun and works with the energetic transmutation of desire into devotion.

www.GregoryAllison.net

<https://youtube.com/c/GregAllisonmusic>

Instagram: @gregallisonmusic

Sober In A Drunk Country

Rowan MacDonald

‘Well here’s to the last ten years.’

‘You look a lot healthier than this time ten years ago’ one of them noted.

‘Yeah, thanks.’

‘Do you ever miss it?’

‘Not really. You know me – never do anything by halves.’

‘I couldn’t do what you did. I struggle just staying home on a Saturday night.’

The irony suddenly hits. Those closest to me are commemorating my ten years sobriety with wine and spirits.

I realise how reliant on alcohol we are as a society. Australia’s culture revolves around it. A celebration scarcely takes place without alcohol being front and centre.

I think back to my alcoholic uncle’s funeral months earlier. Everyone was “having a beer for him”.

I ponder if people pull out syringes and smack at the funerals of heroin addicts. Maybe somewhere there is a granny shooting up in tribute of her junkie grandson? I doubt it.

A waiter interrupts my dazed reflection.

‘Care to have a look at the wine list, sir?’

‘Nah, I’m all good, mate.’

I was the drunkest one in the room. I was also their bartender. Drunk patrons hardly feared this guy cutting them off. After all, who would listen to rules implemented by someone that reeked of alcohol more than they did?

My colleagues didn’t care as long as I did my job. This was Australia. It was often more acceptable to be drunk than it was sober.

I would learn this harsh reality when I inevitably said goodbye to alcohol.

“Un-Australian”, “weak”, “pussy”, “boring”, “dull”, “no-fun”.

I quickly accumulated a variety of criticism for my decision to live a sober life. The criticism was arguably greater than any I received for being a blackout drunk.

Confessing the inability to remember “the night before” to friends would be met with laughter or a knowing smile. There was a type of toxic comradery among Australians who had no recollection of what happened after a few drinks.

Oh, but this was “living life!” and supposedly “having fun!” It was rare for someone to care if a person was averaging 3-4 alcohol-fuelled blackout nights per week – like I was.

My days and nights revolved around alcohol. I would wake up hungover each day and struggle through. While dealing with said hangover, I’d inevitably be organising when the next “session” with friends would take place. If I was working, I was pouring drinks for others. If I wasn’t working, I was pouring drinks down my throat. Sometimes it overlapped.

I would occasionally witness the vulnerability of intoxicated people in the bar I worked. I feared for their safety. At the same time, I failed to acknowledge my own vulnerability – whether it involved being found disorientated in bushland, losing all my clothes on a night out, or simply turning yellow with jaundice.

Mornings featured waking up beside pools of vomit, or someone I didn’t know. The near-death experiences started adding up. If I were a cat with nine lives, I would’ve used them up.

Some weren’t so lucky.

Derek was a man who came to stay with our family occasionally. An alcoholic, he lived with his Mum throughout life. This same Mum packed him a six-pack of beer for lunch each day.

Derek was found washed up on a beach by people walking their dog. Dead, drunk, defeated.

That was a future that could all too easily be mine.

The brother of my friend was found hanging in a garage. The garage was overflowing with beer cans. He supposedly spent every night

Non-Fiction

in that garage drinking by himself. I wondered how many of those discarded beer cans had been consumed the night he died.

During my school days, a music teacher took me aside to give what could be described as alcohol counselling.

I felt it stemmed more from his concern about equipment having beer spilt on it – than it did about my welfare. Nevertheless, he spoke in frank terms about the role alcohol played in my life. Maybe he did care? At least he wasn't actively encouraging my alcoholism or drunken shenanigans like most others.

Perhaps that teacher was more in touch with the destructive power of alcohol? His music subject was littered with more victims of alcoholism than most.

John Bonham, Bon Scott, Keith Moon. Some of my favourite musicians and idols had succumbed to the insidious disease. I didn't want to join them – but I also couldn't stop.

When Amy Winehouse passed away in 2011, I was at rock bottom. I never particularly liked her brand of music, but saw her as a kindred spirit. I saw someone fighting the same disease I was.

I unexpectedly found myself crying over her death – though crying had become a regular part of my life.

I didn't drink the week after Amy died, but then fell off the wagon even more spectacularly.

It was the day I woke up beside blood-streaked vomit. It no longer felt like a hangover. It had progressed into something else. I felt like I was dying.

I sat on the couch, half-choking down my own saliva. I felt faint. My heart palpitations were out of control. The waves of nausea swept over my body with the force of a freight-train. My head pounded.

I was alone. I was scared. I was shaking.

I sat on that couch for what seemed like eternity. I gazed out the window and slowly felt something change. Something clicked.

Some people probably refer to this as their “found Jesus” moment. I’m not a religious person, but I’m not sure how else to explain what took place as I stared out the window on that August night in 2011.

I felt an intense comfort out of nowhere, like someone wrapping an arm around me.

Everything will be okay.

A strong feeling of love and support washed over me. I didn’t know where it was coming from. Perhaps it was a deceased grandparent checking in on me, or was something unexplainable that came from within? Maybe it was both?

Either way, I vowed not to punish my body anymore. I didn’t deserve it. I wanted to live.

I had 15 birthdays before I drank an alcoholic beverage. I assume I enjoyed the vast majority of those birthday parties. Maybe I had a fun time at all of them? None of them involved a friend or I getting drunk.

Somewhere along the way, that child-like ability to have fun without substances had disappeared. Was it just part of growing up? Or was this part of a larger cultural problem?

At some point, birthday celebrations ceased to exist without alcohol. Whereas once the strongest thing I consumed at parties was red cordial, it had seemingly been replaced with varieties of alcohol.

Australian culture had inevitably decided that no fun was to be had without alcohol, entirely forgetting a child’s ability to be high on life or enjoy themselves sober.

As I cut into this cake before me, I’m not consuming any alcohol. It’s not my actual birthday, but it’s the ten-year anniversary of a day I started a new life. I guess it’s like a second birthday. A day I

Non-Fiction

remind myself (and others) that it's always possible to change.

I think of the many who weren't as lucky with this illness.

I look over at the old man sitting at the bar by himself, nursing
a glass of bourbon.

I'm happy to be me.



Oceanic
Peter J. King

A List of Minor Trans Gods

EJ Schoenborn

a list of minor trans gods

(after Owen Glendower)

the god of hair dye

the god of lip gloss and clear nail polish

and makeup wipes in Katrina's glove compartment

before we go in her house

the god of clippers, razors,

scissors, and kitchen shears

the god of everything we have lost

the god of hand-me-downs from family

the god of hand-me-downs from friends

yes, they are two different gods

because one affirms the gender

the god of whiskey and wine

and the god of glue and duct tape

and the god of Ace bandages and plastic wrap

are all the same god,

they are the god of a self-violence

they are the god of what we did to survive

the god of tucking

and the god of binding

are different gods,

but they are each other's favorite siblings

the god of violets

and the god of yellowjackets

and bees and hornets
the god of honey
the god of vinegar
the god of not being palatable
or easy to swallow

the god of opossums
and the god of possums
are different gods
but cis people still get them mixed up

the god of raccoons
and the god of chipmunks
and the god of squirrels
and the god of all the love we have buried in this good earth

the god of names is one god
because god can give a name
and god can take it away
to replace it with something more fitting

the god of a newly planted family
the god of growth and leaves
the god of bloom

the god of love
and the god of love
and the god of love
and this is the holy trinity
of all the different loves
that have kept me alive.

The Names for Caterpillars

Corinna Shulenburg

He walks me into a seduction of violin,
of fountain, of Queer laughter, of lit
lamps. Desire makes a jumble of gut,
of heart, of lung, makes them one clutch,
one cauldron, the way they say the bang
at the start of things made all the energies
a single force, before the symmetries
broke, and break, and break.

He walks,
parting the seas of cishet, and I let myself
follow, let myself be led. Permission
swings on her hinges and I have never
wanted a him before. The park is a hymn
of angles, of legs coming uncrossed,
of the sounds his tattoos make when
my fingers etch them again.

The whole time,
we feel the jaws of the brute world flex
around us, its hunger for hes like him,
for shes like me. I ask him for the right
words, the right to say the right words,
the vowels that will paint him in purple
and gold, the consonants to shield him,
the words to make us fuck like matches,
like candles with the long wicks. He asks
about utopia, I answer with deep time.
All the time we slip into and out of bodies
that they've laid for us like traps: boy,
girl, you know the ones.

We trade names
like spit, we fashion our own symmetries
and break them, for we have our own trains,
our own lives and heaps of distance between.
Later, he gives me the name of his caterpillar,
the one on his arm that singed my finger,
and I feel again the softness of the hair
on his neck's nape; right there at the hinge
where your mind swings open into body,
and oh, I walk through, tender as a flutter
of moths that must break against the light.



Blooms

Stephanie Torres

Music

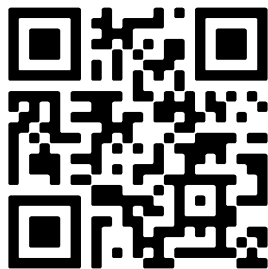
Manchester Under Water burmaunder- ground

From the artist, on
“Manchester Under
Water”

As burmaunderground,
I have been writing
and recording songs for
several years. A depart-
ure, Manchester Under
Water came out of a
recent foray for me into
experimental digital mu-

sic. The piece has a number of reverse guitar tracks which
I sampled and used to punctuate a drum
beat which was modeled on Joy Divi-
sion (hence, Manchester), an important
touchstone for my work. The compo-
sition came out of a search for aural
patterns that were purely appealing to me.
I see this piece, and the selection it came
from, as an exciting point of departure for
my music.

[https://soundcloud.com/burmaunder-
groundmusic](https://soundcloud.com/burmaundergroundmusic)
www.robertmdetman.com



Maria Del Rio

Anthony Alas

Dinosaur Books was the West Village's coziest bookshop. The high shelves were stocked with used and new books. There was everything from a two dollar copy of "Grapes of Wrath" to newly released (and expensive) hardcovers. Gideon typically wore a cardigan, bright red tie, and always had a coffee cup in his hand. He curated the fiction display case, which illuminated his literary tastes, from Amy Tan to James Baldwin to Zadie Smith. Gideon opened up the West Village shop every weekend morning.

Stanley owned the shop. He dressed similarly to Gideon, but wore a red fisherman's cap, his signature look. That particular morning, Stanley was setting up chairs for a reading. Gideon walked in with full drag makeup and held a Century 21 bag.

"Wow, Gideon, you look a little different, don't know why," Stanley said with a heavy New York accent.

"It's just a little paint on the face," Gideon said, giggling.

Gideon walked past the disheveled bookshelf rows. He took in the intoxicating old bookshelf. Regardless of how long he worked at the bookshop, Gideon loved the dusty and musty smell. He walked toward the back of the store and turned on the light. The lights revealed a makeshift dressing room with more stacked books. Unlike the world outside Dinosaur Books, Gideon could find escapism. He could find stories, which helped understand and fantasize about far off worlds. As a drag queen, Gideon found the bookstore as a refuge of acceptance. In the most flamboyant dress and wig, nobody laughed at him. In fact, Gideon was embraced and welcomed. His face was finally revealed against an illuminated mirror. He revealed a female face with full makeup.

"Hola, Maria Del Rio," Gideon said.

From his tote bag, Gideon took out black and white photos of the Mexican actresses, Maria Felix and Dolores Del Rio. Gideon placed them next to the mirror. As a Mexican-American youngster growing up

in Southern California's boonies, he didn't have many role models. Nobody in TV and film looked like him. Even literature in school didn't expose him to Latin American literature. Instead, he escaped the fringes by watching Maria Felix and Dolores Del Rio films. His abuela introduced him to these films during movie marathons on Telemundo. Through these Mexican actresses, Gideon saw a part of himself, culturally. They were strong willed, elegant, and shared his heritage. This made him embrace his feminine side and rebel against Anglo beauty standards.

"My inspiration! I hope to honor you today, my fellow Mexican amigas." Gideon said.

Gideon slipped on a red, polka dot dress, touched up his lipstick, and placed fake boobs on his chest. Then came a lavish brunette wig, this completed her transformation from Gideon to Maria Del Rio. The bookshop opened. The pitter patter of snow boots and sneakers hit the floor. Families arrived at the shop. Some kids misbehaved. Some kids took a seat. Some parents popped pills.

"The little shits have arrived," Maria said to herself.

"Maria, are you ready for your grand performance?" Stanley asked.

"Sí, let's get this show over with," Maria replied with a gulp.

"Okay, folks, if you can please take a seat. Dinosaur Books is proud to present, Drag Queen Story Time," Stanley proclaimed as families cheered.

"Please welcome our very own drag queen, Maria Del Rio," Stanley announced.

The crowd applauded. Maria walked out. Zero traces of Gideon could be seen, just his big brown eyes. Maria sat in front of the audience. The children were fascinated by Maria's bigger-than-life presence. Maria smiled. She took out a book.

"Hi, folks, today, we will be reading, 'The Caterpillar' by Eric Carle."

Everybody cheered. Maria read from the book, and displayed the pictures, simultaneously. The door opened. A handsome man

Fiction

dressed in a black peacoat, full beard, and jet-black hair walked in. He sat next to his blond, rosy cheeked hubby (who dressed preppy). Their chestnut-haired daughter resembled her dads. The dads held hands. Maria became fixated on the man dressed in black. There was something strangely familiar about the bearded father. Maria tried not to lose focus on the story. The more Maria analyzed the man's face, the more he looked familiar.

Is that Alejandro from my hometown of Riverside? It looks just like him. That guy was such a classic, homophobic jock. There's no way he's gay and living in New York City. Maria thought to herself.

Storytime continued. Maria's high-pitched voice and mannerisms entertained the wide-eyed audiences. With the possibility of Alejandro in the crowd, Maria couldn't enjoy the adulation. The jitters crept up on her. She began retreating to teenage trauma from high school. Alejandro and his crew of teenage homophobes made Maria's life miserable. Flashbacks of seeing the word, "fag," written across his locker and kids yelling, "hey, homo," terrorized him.

Then a skittle flew at her face, followed by several more. Maria looked toward the back. The reading ended abruptly. Maria stood up. Skittles were continuously thrown from the Mohawked-haired daughter. Her parents looked on with embarrassment.

"Who wants me to taste the rainbow?" Maria asked, as the crowd roared in laughter and applause.

"Skittles," yelled the little girl, as the parents continued with an embarrassed glaze.

Maria strolled over. She grabbed the bag of Skittles from the little girl. The little girl cried.

"Out of Drag Queen Story Time!" Maria demanded.

The crowd cheered. Maria looked into the dark-haired father's eyes. At that moment, Gideon and Alejandro realized that they grew up together. It really was Alejandro.

"We're sorry, but she's just a kid," Alejandro said.

"I don't tolerate disrespectful behavior, Alejandro," Gideon said.

Alejandro's eyes grew wide with awkwardness, signaling he most likely recognized Gideon from years ago. The family left.

Maria returned to ending her reading of "Caterpillar." The kids clapped, happy to have been a part of Storytime. . Maria escaped to take off her makeup. The families left; Storytime was over. She went from Maria back to Gideon. The cardigan, tie, and glasses made a comeback.

Gideon returned to his life as a bookseller. Happily, he stocked books and curated the window display. But, the thought of Alejandro stuck with him. Stanley approached him as he stocked up the Young Adult's shelf.

"Gideon, are you okay after what happened today?" Stanley asked.

"I know one of the dads. That guy, Alejandro, was my high school bully. Talk about self-hatred, he's gay. It's so weird seeing him again," Gideon said.

"Geez, from California? That's so random," Stanley said.

"Yes, and he recognized me," Gideon replied.

"Why don't you take a breather. I'll stock up the YA section," Stanley insisted.

Gideon nodded his head in agreement. Stanley gave him a hug. Gideon walked onto the West Village pavement. The trees were bare from winter. However, he saw the beauty in his surroundings--West Village brownstones, cobblestone streets, and jazz music that played from local bars. Gideon realized he escaped his childhood trauma, physically, but mentally it was still with him. The struggle would continue. With books and Maria Del Rio, he could at least escape into a world of imagination.

These Are the Very Bad Things

E Ní Shuileabháin

*These are the very bad things
that hurt you.*

When they walk in my door, clutching their phones,
I already know I must deliver bad news.
I am sick of seeing their hope drain away.

After, I direct them to the cemetery, to the graves which say
"Migrante non identificato. Qui reposa."
There is nothing else I can do.

I don't want to look at their photographs.
I have handled so many dead
I cannot remember them all.

But they always make me look
and I see some young smiling face
which looks nothing like the faces

on the bodies we pull from the sea,
on the bodies we take out of the holds of the boats,
on the bodies we remove from the bags the Coast Guard bring us.

One photograph I particularly didn't want to see.
This girl I recognized immediately
though here she was beautiful and happy,
holding her belly and smiling,
smiling as if God was beside her.

*People tell me "You're used to it."
But that's not true, you don't get used to it.*

These are the very bad things that hurt you.

I remembered her.

She had gone into labor on the boat
but neither she nor her baby survived.

They were found with the umbilical cord still attached.

They are with me still,
two years later.

They will
always
be with me.

Every night,
I feel her soft cold skin,
the rubbery strength of cord,
the almost weightless infant.
I see the way they curled into each other
in every birth, in every labor ward.

*I put them in the same coffin,
I didn't even cut the umbilical cord.*

* Based on a true event described in an article in Amnesty International's 2015 summer issue of "Wire: Ireland." The lines in italics in the poem are direct quotes from Dr. Pietro Bartolo, director of the small hospital on the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea 2014-2020

Published by Simona Varrella, Nov 27, 2020

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in->

Poetry

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-sea/>

In 2020, it was estimated that 979 migrants died while crossings the Mediterranean Sea. In 2019, the number of deaths amounted to 1.9 thousand. However, the accurate number of deaths recorded in the Mediterranean Sea cannot be ascertained. Between 2014 and 2018, for instance, about 12 thousand people who drowned were never found.



Test

Nazrene Alsiro

Strings

Adrien Kade Sdao

I struggled to get the knots out of Gabe's shoelace as he hammered the seat in front of us with his feet, one clad only in a little white sock. His small, fat hands clutched my phone, and he slouched low as he watched *The Octonauts*. The train began to slow down.

"Don't kick, sweetie," I said absently, bracing the shoe between my knees as I tugged at a particularly stubborn tangle. "How did you get your shoes like this, anyway?" Not expecting an answer from the 3-year-old, I kept at my task. If there's one thing I'd learned since the day after I turned fourteen, the day I told my mom I was pregnant, it was the absolute importance of patience and perseverance.

"NOW ARRIVING, HOLLYWOOD AND WESTERN STATION," said the automated voice over the loudspeaker. A muffled announcement from the conductor followed, something about an elevator being out at the next stop.

The seats around us filled up. I shifted the folded-up stroller out of the way, scooting closer to Gabe. I just couldn't get the knots to come out. I was getting frustrated with them, though not with my son. Never with him. He'd been through enough in his short life, with all the drama his daddy caused. I wasn't about to let anyone hurt or scare my baby—not even myself.

The handle of the stroller hit my shoulder, hard. I glared up at the guy who had knocked it askew, a tall, wide young man who held up a hand in apology as he settled down across the aisle. He took a folded-up newspaper from under his arm and started reading the Korean characters intently, brushing a strand of dark hair behind his ear.

"PLEASE STAND CLEAR. THE DOORS ARE CLOSING."

Gabe giggled as the train began to move again, then began mumble-singing along to the closing theme song of his show. The laces would not yield. Someone yelled at the other end of the car, and Gabe

Fiction

looked up, frowning, his worried eyes seeking the source of the shout.

"It's ok, baby," I said. "That man's just trying to sell something. Why don't you listen to Spotify?" The service would cut out soon as the train dove deeper underground, but we had a few songs saved on our playlist. Gabe loved—and needed—music so much, I scraped to pay the ten bucks a month to keep Spotify going, commercial-free and downloadable.

He nodded and expertly navigated to the music player, choosing our "Alt-Rock/Fun Songs" playlist.

"NOW ARRIVING, HOLLYWOOD AND VINE STATION."

The train lurched to a stop and people shuffled on and off.

"PLEASE STAND CLEAR. THE DOORS ARE CLOSING."

"Hey, do you need help?" The big guy across the aisle gestured to the shoe in my hands, his newspaper forgotten on the empty seat beside him. I'd been trying to get this knot for four stops now. I handed the problem over. I couldn't help but wonder if he was a pedophile who was going to steal my son's shoe for his own gross purposes.

"I'm a good untangler," the guy said. His bulky hands matched the rest of him, but his fingertips moved deftly. Before the next stop, he handed the shoe back to me, laces waving straight and free.

"Thanks." I sniffled, forcing down the tears that came to my eyes. Gabe's daddy had been good at knots too. It still hurt sometimes that he wasn't around anymore, but it was getting easier as time passed. It was better now, living with my mom. Safer. No more bruises covered up by flimsy lies. No more late-night 911 calls made by the neighbors. No more constant fear.

"No problem," the guy replied.

"NOW ARRIVING, HOLLYWOOD AND HIGHLAND STATION."

He got up and exited the train without a backward glance. A part of me wanted him to look my way, to acknowledge the moments we'd spent in commiseration over the knots. Unable to articulate this

to myself or my son, I grabbed Gabe's ankle and began putting his shoe back on. He ignored me, eyes focused on the screen as he scrolled through songs. He couldn't read yet, but somehow he always knew how to find his favorite tunes.

"PLEASE STAND CLEAR. THE DOORS ARE CLOSING."

Someone started talking loudly behind us. I ignored it, used to people being belligerent on the Red Line. I finished with Gabe's shoe and started gathering our stuff. We were getting off at the next stop.

Suddenly, the sweet sound of a violin cut across the low chatter. Within a few notes, most riders had gone silent. I tapped Gabe and took the headphones off his ears. "Listen," I said. I steadied him as he stood up on the plastic seat and turned around to watch.

Three young Black men stood at the center of the car. The one on the violin focused on his balance and his instrument, while the other two accompanied him on guitars. They played a song we'd heard on the radio, one we'd downloaded to our playlist.

"... Won't you give yourself a try..." they harmonized.

We'd seen other performances on the train, but nothing like this. Usually it was a couple dudes with blaring hip-hop tracks, popping their limbs out of their sockets (grotesque) or flipping a baseball cap from their head to their elbow to their foot (cool the first time, not so much the hundredth). These three men swayed together, lost in the sounds of their voices and strings, and all heads were turned their way.

Gabe danced his baby dance, bouncing on bended knees, bobbing his curly head, waving one hand in the air. He sang along, loudly. I didn't shush him. One of the guitarists looked our way, smiled, and pointed at us during the chorus.

The train began to slow, and the song came to an end. The car rang with applause, and people took dollar bills out of their wallets, counted change in their palms. I gave Gabe two dollar bills. "Put it in their hat," I said.

The guitarist walked by and held a Santa hat out to my son. Gabe slam-dunked the two bucks into it, and the young man grinned.

Fiction

“You’re gonna be a singer, bro!” He said, holding up a hand. Gabe high-fived him, and I laughed, my chest light.

“NOW ARRIVING, UNIVERSAL CITY STATION.”

I gathered my son and the stroller and my backpack. We slid out of our spot and stepped off the train. I glanced back through the doors as they closed, where the three performers had begun another song. Struggling to unfold the stroller, I held Gabe firmly by one arm, keeping him well away from the departing train. A bolt of fear shot through me as I felt his chubby flesh beneath my bony fingers. I snatched my hand away. Had I squeezed too hard? Would there be a bruise?

Gabe reached out and grabbed my skirt, clinging to me as I forced the stroller open. He smiled up at me and giggled. “That was fun, Mama.”

Lifting him up, I kissed his nose before settling him into the stroller. “It sure was, baby.”

Poetry

set free

Chyna Vazquez

within//concrete box
enjaulado con otros niños

like prisoners/
cuál es la razón.

Durante COVID-19,
many of us were infected

ninguna atención médica//
encerrados, sin nuestros padres

obligación de alimentar,
otros niños pequeños

infantes//indefenso de 6 meses
con unwashed baby bottles

es el infierno aquí
LIBERANOS!

cómo es posible,
in losing over
1,500 de nosotros..

we are the future!
LIBERANOS!



Breath of God Eric Chamberlain

From the artist, on “Breath of God”

“Breath of God” is the opening track on Chamberlain’s gargantuan quadruple album *Quadratura Cinetectura*. The video features recreations of the surreal visions the composer, artist and filmmaker has experienced his entire life and has been interpreted as a deeply personal piece, a cinematic representation of another world, spiritually symbolic of the light and darkness within us and a warning against humankind’s impact on the environment, all accurate given the title.

<http://www.angelicengineering.com/>

<http://www.ericchamberlain.com/>

<https://ericchamberlain.bandcamp.com/album/quadratura-cinetectura>

Shale Creek Canyon

Terry Sanville

Scott tramped through knee-high brush to the end of the abandoned ranch road. A corroded cattle trough backed up against a rusted barbed wire fence. An Aermotor windmill spun freely in the October Santa Anas, pumping nothing. He stared at the buckshot-sprayed “No Trespassing” sign hanging on the fence’s top wire. He’d been hiking for two hours, pushing hard into the mountain range along the Central California Coast with its hidden valleys and shale and mudstone outcrops.

Sliding carefully between the fence wires, he straightened and scanned the way ahead. A dry arroyo ran along the canyon floor and seemed to dead end in a ridge of hills covered with thick chaparral. Following the creek bed, he pushed upward until it petered out. He studied the slopes. *Now the fun really begins*, he thought. Scott unclipped the water bottle from his belt and took a long draft, leaving hardly anything.

The surrounding hills seemed to block the offshore winds. Sage and coyote brush baked in the heat, their pungent smell filling his head. He breathed in deep and remembered the times he and Sylvia camped in their tiny tent on the slopes high above Big Sur, watched the evening fog roll in and engulf the rugged coastline and silent Pacific.

“So how soon is soon?” Harry asked.

“When I’m done I’ll let you know,” Scott shot back.

“Come on, Scott. That’s not good enough.”

“It’ll have to be.”

“But you’ve had the contracts for three weeks,” Harry whined.

“I emailed them to you myself. Pandemic or no, you’ve got to give me your edits by Friday.”

“I’ll try, Harry. Really, I will. I won’t let you down.”

“Okay then, I’ll hear from you by Friday?”

Fiction

“Yes, by Friday.”

“So . . . so how are you doing?”

“I’m okay, Harry.”

“Good . . . good. So we’ll talk later.”

Scott set the cell phone down and stared at his laptop, at the jumble of legalese that filled its screen. His eyes glazed over and he leaned back in his chair, searching the walls of his home office for something to focus on, to clear his mind. A twenty-year-old headshot of his wife, Sylvia, smiled back at him, her young face seamless, smile perfect, long pigtails framing wire-rimmed glasses.

He closed the laptop, moved to the kitchen, and poured himself a double shot of bourbon. Sitting at the counter, he stared at his hands. *I should have never let her go. I should have kept her here and taken care of her myself.*

The words of their doctor tumbled through his brain.

“Look, we don’t know much about this virus, it’s still early.”

“But why the hospital?” Scott asked.

“She’s having trouble breathing. Her oxygen use has dropped below 85-percent and continues to fall. They can help her at the hospital.”

“But will I be able to see her?”

“No. You’re quarantined at home for a couple of weeks and should be tested before you go anywhere after that.”

“It’s only a virus,” Scott complained.

“So are HIV and Ebola. And Covid is easily spread.”

“She’ll be all alone . . . ”

“We’ll set up a Skype connection for you. You can talk with her when she has the strength.”

Scott did talk with Sylvia every other day for two weeks. Her fifth-grade students and their parents sent her get-well cards. But the hospital wouldn’t allow them to be delivered to the ward. The couple talked about their shared history until Sylvia ran out of breath and the nurses cut him off. After a month, the doctors moved her to the ICU and put her on the vent. She slipped away eight days later. Six months

Fiction

passed and Scott sat in his kitchen and drank bourbon, fingered Sylvia's undelivered get-well cards, thought about his work, and tried to focus, but decided on something else.

It took him another hour of breaking trail to reach the ridgeline, following game tracks when he could find them in the dense brush. A branch raked his face and neck and they stung and itched. But once on top, the wind dried his sweat. The new valley before him showed no signs of human intrusion, its floor dotted with coast live oaks, its slopes nothing but thick chaparral.

Sylvia would have a field day here. She'd want to key out every plant in the entire valley.

Scott remembered the times he and his wife hiked the foothills surrounding San Luis Obispo. She couldn't walk a hundred feet without stopping to check out the vegetation, the tracks of animals, the twittering birds, the creepy crawly things, the fungi and lichens. The naturalist in her never slept and her love for it had imperfectly rubbed off on Scott.

We could camp under the oaks and she'd sketch and explore.

Across the valley, just down from the ridgeline, a huge shelf of shale glowed golden in the afternoon light. Scott studied the terrain but couldn't spot any kind of trail leading to it. Sucking in a deep breath he dropped downslope, crashing through shoulder-high brush until reaching the valley floor. A tiny creek trickled, probably from a spring somewhere upslope. In a grove of ancient oaks, he dropped to his knees and stuck his face in the stream's miniscule flow. The water tasted of minerals. Deer tracks studded its muddy bed, along with other prints with four teardrop impressions that Scott couldn't identify.

It took him another hour to climb to the shelf. At places, he scrambled on his stomach, pulling himself upslope, his bleeding fingers frantically grasping at old roots and bushes. Nearing his destination, the distinctive buzz of a rattlesnake mixed with his heaving breaths. Scott

Fiction

froze. A movement just off his right arm, the serpent's rattle disappearing into the underbrush.

Yes, Sylvia would love this place, especially its remoteness. I can almost hear her babbling on and on about the genus and species of that snake, its intricate markings and coloring. She'd want to pull out her sketchbook and do a pencil drawing of the damn thing right here. She'd laugh at my fear . . . just like she joked about her own passing, trying to ease my sorrow.

He lay still until his breathing recovered, pushed upslope, and slid onto the massive shelf of sedimentary rock, almost pool-table flat and maybe five feet wide. The drop from its edge looked near vertical, the oaks and streambed a fuzzy texture hundreds of feet below.

Scott sat cross-legged and watched the shadows deepen on the valley floor. The offshore winds had quieted. To the west, the blue-green Pacific stretched outward until it disappeared into a shore-bound fog bank. The air turned cool and Scott wrapped his arms around his sweat-soaked shirt.

He remembered Sylvia's last days sequestered at home before she got sick, their arguments, the sniping at each other. The isolation had dragged at them both, especially at her, away from fellow teachers and her kids. They had joked that they'd probably die quickly if ever stranded on a desert island. But the bitterness and frustration grew until their days filled with mere grunts and nods, with little conversation. Then she got sick and everything changed. *Now, I'll never be able to fix it.*

Off to his right a low gargling growl sounded followed by a sharp yowl. Scott pushed his stiffening body up and turned to face the mountain lion, a beautiful animal with a tawny-colored coat, pink nose and frost-white cheeks and chin.

It must have followed me here, unless it's a she and has a den nearby. No reason to be this far from water.

The cat slid from the undergrowth, placing each paw deliberately but never taking its green-gold eyes off Scott. It stopped maybe twenty feet away, crouched and stared, a low rumble coming from its throat, its thick tail sweeping back and forth. Scott stood his ground, knowing any retreat would make him look like prey.

Fiction

The cat crept forward, its rear haunches quivering, its tail held steady. Scott raised his arms and shouted as loud as he could, waving his hands and stamping the ground. The mountain lion twisted around and sprinted for cover, but stopped at the brush line and turned.

Damn, it's not going to scare easily. He continued to stamp his feet and shout. But the puma advanced, hissing. *It sounds really pissed.* When it got to within a few feet, Scott removed his baseball cap and threw it at the cat along with his empty water bottle. The puma flinched but didn't retreat. *It knows I can't escape, it has—*

Before Scott could finish his thought, the big cat attacked. It reached up and grabbed his head and began biting with its large fangs. Scott brought his arms up to protect himself. The animal's weight threw him off balance and he fell backward onto the hard shale. The puma continued mauling him. He screamed in pain and fear, but it had no effect on the predator. A river of energy flowed through him, something he hadn't felt in months, and he punched and kicked at the killer that now straddled his body, growling.

Scott managed to get his feet and legs under the cat's belly, like a wrestler trying to avoid a frontal pin. He cut loose with a roar and pushed outward with all his might. The puma flew backward, raking Scott's face and neck with its claws as it went. It landed across the edge of the shelf, struggled to gain purchase, then dropped. A scream like that from a woman followed it into the deep canyon. Scott made it to the edge just in time to see the puma glance off a rock outcropping far below and tumble into brush at the base of the slope. The chaparral closed in over the body. The silence returned.

Scott pushed himself to his feet. He stared into the distance at the varnished Pacific. His breath boomed in his ears and his heart beat out of control. Blood spattered the shelf's golden stone, lots of it. He raised a hand to his neck, felt the thick warm fluid pumping out through a mangled carotid artery. His breathing increased. He moved to the edge of the shelf, took out the snub-nosed pistol from his side pocket and heaved it into the abyss.

What a shame. If that beautiful cat had just waited, been patient.

Fiction

With his last breaths, Scott gazed across the valley at the green and golden hills, the precious light fading, faster and faster into nothingness. His body folded and pitched forward, following the flight of his departed brethren into the warm perfumed arms of the chaparral below.

Lorena's Legacy: My Vengeful Inner Child

Rose Menyon Heflin

Whenever men
hit on me
or tell me to smile
or try to “get to know me better,”
I casually,
if abruptly,
inform them that
Lorena Bobbitt was my childhood hero.

Once in a while,
they need to Google,
and I wait,
outwardly patient
but inwardly
expectant and excited,
giddy,
like a child
the night before Christmas,
as they busy themselves
with their phones,
occasionally even repressing a grin.

Regardless of how well
they remember the nineties,
when I see
the looks on their faces,
my inner child does cartwheels
through the spring grass,
reveling in
the turned tables
of their newfound discomfort.



Gravity
Peter J. King

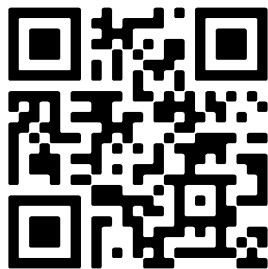
Music

Only in My Sleep Divine Joab

From the artist, on “Only in My Sleep”
“Only in My Sleep” was a song written to reflect the troubled state people find themselves in today, and some in secret. Sometimes the only moment of relief one has is when one lays in bed to sleep, thus the title.

I wrote this song out of a deep depressed state, which had been going on for quite some time but that day seemed to be the climax of it, thinking about my life and the sorry condition I found myself in, when out of nowhere this song’s chorus came out of my lips.

Instagram: [@threaldivinejoab](https://www.instagram.com/threaldivinejoab)



From This Day

B.R. Lewis

LeAnn didn't need an alarm clock. Achilles woke her at exactly five every morning with his shrill whining. He paced back and forth at the foot of the brass bed, nails clicking on the wood floor. If she didn't respond immediately, he'd paw the door, deepening the grooves he'd already created. Or worse, Achilles would grab the sheets with his slobbering mouth, pulling them back from her side of the bed.

But this Saturday morning, LeAnn was already awake, long before the pawing or the whining. Lying in bed, she listened to the rain pat the window above the headboard. The languid rhythm imposed a dull hum on the flaps of the vents. Her eyes drifted in and out of focus, mapping the shadowy bumps across the plastered ceiling, when they weren't fixed on Megan.

Megan was still asleep, of course, sprawled on her stomach, occupying more than her side of the bed. Her legs poised to drape across LeAnn. Chestnut hair tousled just above the collar of her Timbers' jersey. Achilles wouldn't pester her. Walking him was LeAnn's job. Megan looked peaceful, oblivious to the hurt she had caused, or the confusion and doubts that crowded LeAnn's thoughts.

Let her walk the dog for once, LeAnn thought, as Achilles stretched to begin his morning routine. Achilles slept at the foot of their bed, but favored Megan's side. LeAnn supposed he recognized that her partner was the only reason he was with them. LeAnn never claimed to be a dog person and an aging greyhound with a bladder problem was not her idea of a good pet.

She was, however, a Megan person. And Megan had her heart set on rescuing a greyhound the first time she volunteered at the Humane Society. She told LeAnn how greyhounds had the sweetest temperament of any dog breed. And how the poor things were worthless to racetracks once they hit three years old. With these facts alone, she agreed to adopt Achilles, sight unseen, and LeAnn had gone along,

Fiction

assumptions unchallenged.

Despite her irritation, LeAnn got up before their tan greyhound could start his complaints to take him for his morning walk and piss. She stumbled through her daily routine, getting dressed in the darkened bedroom, trying her best not to wake Megan. She threw on track pants, a sweatshirt from her dresser, and grabbed her purple rain jacket. All the while Achilles pawed at the door, occasionally yipping or snapping his teeth in disapproval when she opened a drawer, or made another trip to the bathroom for ChapStick or a headband.

In the pocket of her jacket, LeAnn felt the slight mass of the ring box on her hip. *That's right*, she thought, *today we were supposed to be celebrating*. She glared at Megan, who rolled over. She felt the smooth, soft black velvet upholstery of the box with her fingertips and sighed.

Last night, they'd finished the leftover take-out Thai food from two days before. LeAnn cleaned up the kitchen after cooking dinner for Achilles. Megan was watching the evening news. Same sex marriage licenses would be offered at the county courthouse for the first time at midnight. Couples had already started lining up to get one. LeAnn put the last of the dishes away and went to their bedroom. On the screen as she passed, she recognized Stephan and Ryan, the Clark County organizers, grinning in matching tuxedos.

She'd stashed the ring in her sock drawer. She slipped into a simple red dress, Megan's favorite color on her. At the full-length mirror on the closet door she combed her short blonde hair and smoothed her dress. Satisfied, she looked good enough to be potentially caught by news cameras. She put on her rain jacket and slipped the ring box into her pocket.

When she returned to the living room, Achilles had curled up with Megan commandeering most of the couch. LeAnn forced a space for herself on Megan's left side. As they shifted their bodies, Achilles bared his teeth and made a low growl. But he forgot his agitation once he was able to settle his head back in Megan's lap.

Megan looked at her jacket. "Going somewhere?"

"Let's go to the courthouse," LeAnn said.

“What for?”

She could feel the ring box resting on her upper thigh. “I thought we could get a marriage license.”

Megan laughed. “Are you asking me to elope?”

“We don’t have to use it right away. We have 60 days to decide when to use it.” Megan’s amused expression didn’t change. “Or we could wait. Spring or maybe August would be nice.”

“You’re serious.”

LeAnn smiled and nodded.

Megan placed her hand on LeAnn’s leg. “I don’t want to get married.” And then she turned back to the news.

For a moment, they sat in silence. Megan studied the ten-day forecast, as her hand absently held LeAnn’s leg. LeAnn studied the side of her partner’s face, expectant of something more. She noticed the dog smugly starting up from Megan’s lap.

She brushed the hand off her thigh, onto the dog’s muzzle. Rising slowly, she stood between Megan and the screen. Achilles curled his lip and showed his yellow teeth. “Then why get so worked up about marriage equality?”

Megan stroked Achilles’s head until he relaxed again. She shrugged. “Just because I don’t believe in something, doesn’t mean I can’t support the rights of others.”

LeAnn was dumbstruck. She and Megan had been together for nearly eight years. When they moved into this apartment together six years ago, they took turns carrying each other over the threshold. Megan had been quick to volunteer to help the initiative coalition. Week after week, they’d gone door-to-door gathering signatures. Competing to see who could get the most, Megan exhilarated whenever she came out on top. As the election approached, she worked the phones every evening.

LeAnn assumed they had never discussed marriage before because it wasn’t an option. She never dreamed they wouldn’t be on the same page.

She narrowed her eyes at Megan. Studied her expression.

Fiction

Wondered if this could be some kind of joke. “That’s stupid. Since when don’t you believe in marriage?”

Megan let the insult pass. She pulled her hair back and reached for LeAnn’s hand. “I don’t need the state to validate what we have.”

“The hell with the state. Do it for us...for me.”

“It won’t change our relationship. You’ll still be overly organized and sensitive. I’ll still be scattered and work strange hours.” Megan stood and pulled LeAnn into an embrace she didn’t return. “I don’t need a piece of paper to remind me to make this work.” She ran her fingers through LeAnn’s hair. “Besides, we both know the majority of marriages end in divorce.”

LeAnn pushed back and held Megan at arm’s length. “But we aren’t them.”

A silence fell over the room. Megan returned to the couch with Achilles, while LeAnn continued to stand in front of the muted TV.

“I’m sorry. It’s nothing personal.” Megan finally offered.

LeAnn had retreated to the bedroom and changed into pajama pants and a t-shirt. She hung her jacket back in the closet. She sat on the bed and stared at the wall. In the living room, she heard the sound come back on the TV. They didn’t speak the rest of the night. LeAnn grabbed her keys and stepped into the rubber boots with pink anchors Megan had given her for her birthday. Megan rolled and moaned in response to the chime of the keys.

LeAnn grabbed Achilles’s front legs and strapped on his faux coyote fur coat. Personally, she found greyhounds homely with their gangly bodies. There was a stretch of fur that ran across Achilles’s ribs, patchy and scarred, from the time he tried to leave the track midrace. The pattern left by the railing gave him the appearance of wearing grotesque racing stripes painted across his flesh.

He snapped at her hands as she slid the matching snood over his head. In the coat he looked a good five pounds heavier, bushy and rotund. Megan had purchased the coat and snood to celebrate Achilles’s first anniversary in their home. LeAnn had just barely managed to

talk her out of buying the matching galoshes at the doggie boutique. In her mind, the only positive of the coat was that it concealed his scars. She muzzled and leashed Achilles, who was suddenly reluctant to leave Megan. As she dragged him out of the bedroom he pulled against the leash, snarling, his nails scratching the wood floor.

Finally outside, LeAnn and Achilles followed a short gravel walk to the bike path that ran along the Columbia just south of their building. Achilles sniffed his way along, stopping regularly at large rocks and clumps of decorative grass. If a site were deemed worthy, he would linger to lift a scrawny leg. The morning was cold and wet, like most this time of year in Vancouver. If the dog noticed, he didn't mind, as he was in no hurry. Honestly, LeAnn wondered, how many times do you have to mark the same rock before the world knows it belongs to you?

A steady drizzle drummed against the hood of her rain jacket as she waited for him. In the distance only a handful of cars crossed the I-5 Bridge into Portland in the early morning light. Achilles lifted his leg by a piece of bleached driftwood, placed next to the path for decoration. The white branch bore multiple yellow stains from his rivals. But at this point in the walk he was out of piss, and his action was more for show, in case other dogs were watching. After a few minutes, LeAnn nudged his hindquarters with the toe of her boot. He looked back at her with unconcealed contempt and continued down the path.

LeAnn shivered and held the lead tight, since at this point in the walk the temperamental dog often decided to run. Her knuckles were white and rough, the fleshy parts of her hands perpetually bandaged. After the adoption papers were signed, she learned that Achilles had demonstrated consistent antisocial behavior since he was a puppy. He would growl and lunge at other dogs like a surly ex-boxer, always trying to pick a fight at the bar. His aggression wasn't reserved for the other dogs in the kennel. Achilles lashed out at his handlers and trainers, baring his teeth at anything on two legs, except Megan.

The dog nips, LeAnn told her coworkers, the first time they questioned her bandaged hands. They shook their heads and told her that bites, not nips, drew blood. But LeAnn continued to put on a

Fiction

brave face, trying to convince them the dog was playful, that it was all done out of affection. *Yeah*, she thought, *the dog bites me because he likes me*. Consequently, none of their friends or coworkers had been to their apartment in two years.

Megan rescued Achilles three years ago from the Multnomah Greyhound Park when his racing career ended abruptly. Achilles was retired early, after he failed his initial trials. He lacked interest in chasing the lure. LeAnn couldn't blame him, who would want that moldy stuffed rabbit?

Megan became obsessed with making his life meaningful, as she did with all of her causes. Whether it was a girl's school in Afghanistan, or winter coats for foster kids, no injustice was too great or small for Megan. If Achilles had issues, that just made him all the more appealing. That sense of righteousness, of commitment, despite the virtue signaling that accompanied it, was one of the things that first attracted LeAnn to her. The thought of Megan and last night made her tear up.

To distract herself, LeAnn contemplated what would need to be done once they returned from their walk. First, she would have to cook Achilles breakfast. His poor disposition was compounded with severe allergies. He couldn't eat regular dog food without getting sick. No matter the brand or quality they tried, he puked all over the apartment, staining and matting the beige carpets. After multiple visits and numerous tests, the vet instructed Megan to cook him a simple starch and lean meat for his meals. But Megan didn't know how to cook, so the task fell to LeAnn.

This time-consuming chore was also the ultimate joke. She cooked for the dog more than she'd ever cooked for them as a couple. Megan would rather eat out or order in. And if cooking for Achilles wasn't enough, his diet had to be varied. After a month of eating a particular meat just fine, he'd develop a new allergy and the retching would begin again.

That month, LeAnn had spent her evenings riding the light rail out to several butchers in Beaverton and Hillsboro to get cuts of kangaroo. If anyone else had told her they put out that kind of effort

for a dog, she would've told them they were crazy. But Megan loved Achilles, so LeAnn boiled his potatoes, grounded his pills, and rounded up as many different types of meat as she could find.

Near the base of the bridge, Achilles and LeAnn came to the end of the path. He nosed around the chain link fence that kept them from going under the bridge. She wondered if Megan would be up by now and hoped she was still sleeping. If LeAnn could just get dressed for the day and Achilles fed, she could avoid the scene simmering inside. LeAnn clicked her tongue and tugged on his leash. They began the walk back home, stopping to sniff and check the bits of territory already marked on their walk. Every once in a while, Achilles dug deep, found a little piss in the recesses of his bladder, perhaps freshly generated from a drink in a puddle, and managed to mark a stone or log of particular importance to him.

In her pocket, LeAnn stroked the ring box. The ring had one decent sized diamond, set in white gold. The Rhodium-plated band was sculpted into a rope pattern, with four smaller diamonds placed in the entwined sections, two on either side of the main stone. It had belonged to her grandmother.

When LeAnn first came out, she was unsure how her grandparents would react. Her grandfather was a stern conservative, a retired merchant marine and longshoreman. To say that lesbian and gay were pejorative terms in Longview would be an understatement. Most people there would use different, coarser words to describe her. When she finally told them, her grandfather remained silent. After a few minutes, he made an excuse about needing to pick up salt for the water softener before walking out of the house. Her grandmother held her, stroked her hair, and told LeAnn that it didn't matter.

For years after that day, the two of them had never mentioned her sexuality again. Her grandfather didn't treat LeAnn any differently, except he stopped asking when she was going to get married.

LeAnn had visited him two weeks prior, after the initiative had passed. She never talked politics with her grandfather. They sat in his living room, Gram's empty chair between them. He showed her a

Fiction

clipping from the *Columbian* that featured a picture of her standing with Megan on a street corner in Vancouver, holding up signs in favor of the initiative. He seemed hurt that she hadn't told him about their involvement.

Then he rose from his chair, just as he had the day she told them. Walked toward the door, but didn't leave this time. Instead he opened a small drawer in the roll top desk and produced the ring box. With quivering hands he gave it to her. "Your Gram would've wanted you to have it," he said. He released her hand and returned to his chair.

LeAnn didn't know what to say and told him as much. He smiled and told her, "Just make sure you give it to someone who deserves you."

Achilles paused at yet another rock, and she nearly tripped as her shin bumped against his side. He yelped as she jerked back to the present and kept herself from falling. The morning fog was beginning to lift in patches. She could see a marina across the river. The boats were clustered together, tucked away from the open water by the arms of the dock.

Back at the apartment, once the door was closed behind them, she removed Achilles's muzzle and leash. He trotted off toward the bedroom, where Megan was thankfully still asleep. LeAnn approached with caution, hoping to pick out her clothes for the day without startling them. As she entered the room, Achilles turned, crouching low to the ground and baring his teeth. LeAnn wanted to scream: *Just five minutes ago I was your pal. Remember, I helped you out, you bastard.* She inched along the wall, not getting too close. Atop her dresser she found his rope toy. She wanted to grab the coarse knot and smack him across the face and hear him yelp as his slight frame collapsed to the floor. But she didn't.

She should pack her clothes. Feed Achilles a scoop of *Purina* and leave the puke for Megan to clean up. But where would she go? And she had no other reason to doubt Megan's commitment. If nothing else had changed, was a piece of paper really worth leaving over? Achilles grabbed the rope in his mouth and began to tussle the toy with vigor. The force jerked her arm back and forth. She pulled back, trying

to yank the rope from his mouth. LeAnn and Achilles engaged in their tug of war, both straining to release their frustration, while Megan slept.

My Body Is Under Constant Attack

Matthew Hose

I carry my fingernail clippers in the small front pocket of my backpack. They go wherever I go.

I destroy my body and they clean it up. I pick, pick, pick, and once my fingernails are barren I pick and bite the skin around them, down to the edges of the nailbed before pain forces me to stop, leaving hangnails winging out. I do this all the time but particularly when I am stressed: when I am glued to the wall in a room full of strangers, or when I sit at home reading a book counting every individual page and wondering if I should be doing something else.

I am saved by my silver fingernail clippers, which I chose hastily in the Beauty aisle at CVS. They are a wonderful piece of engineering; they free me from the hangnail.

One day, before I had my nail clippers, I had to teach a class at 3:30 but had a hangnail that I tried to yank off at 3:27 but instead ripped the skin halfway down my knuckle and felt stupid, fucking stupid. I clenched my bleeding hand, hiding it from the students.

With my fingernail clippers, I can just snip at the base of the hangnail and wait for the swelling to go away. No blood, no mess.

Early in high school, on days when I came home from class and my mother was already at work or sick in bed, I used a different pair of nail clippers, a pair that was large and gold, to destroy (now I only use them for good). I sat at my desk chair with my feet up and savored the metal clink as I opened them. Like mowing a lawn I guillotined the skin from the tips of my fingers. I clipped and clipped, working my way down, only stopping when my nerve endings became upset with me near the middle spiral of my fingerprint. The path of destruction was as satisfying as a napalmed field.

One day in science class, where we sat across from each other at big lab tables, a student named Grant passed me a sheet of paper. I made the mistake of taking it from him.

“What’s up with your hand?”

“Oh. Nothing.” I retreated into my lap. He said nothing and turned away.

I stopped using my fingernail clippers to destroy myself. They left no scars. Maybe it never happened. Regardless, now I only use them for good.

Today, inside my mouth, my gums are retreating — receding. This is a result of brushing my teeth too hard. I use my toothbrush like I would use a grout brush to scrub a bathtub. I vaporize plaque. But in solving one problem I am creating another.

A periodontist named Dr. Hu told me two years ago I’d need to get a gum graft around six of my teeth to build up my line of defense. He drew me a crude picture of my teeth, roots exposed and soon to be eaten away by bacteria.

“You should do the surgery while you’re young, or it’ll get worse when you get older.” I liked that he drew me a diagram. I trusted him because he wasn’t a very good artist and drew it anyway.

My insurance would only cover two out of six teeth. On my surgery day, Dr. Hu injected three shots of Novocaine into my jaw and one into the roof of my mouth, where he would take the graft. Then I closed my eyes as he ripped me apart. I felt nothing but a vague tugging on my head, as if someone had their finger behind my front teeth and was pulling. When I opened my eyes, I witnessed him holding a pink piece of my body in a set of silver metal pincers. I nearly vomited.

Days later, I removed the bandage and looked at the new gum, sewn on top of the old. It bulged out, patchy white. I thought it would fall off. But eventually it blended to the same color as everything around it. It became a part of me again. I still haven’t had the surgery on my

Non-Fiction

on my other four teeth.

I often chew the skin off the inside of my cheek, around to my top and bottom lip. Within hours it grows back in a filmy delicacy, and I chew it away again. I have done this for years.

One weekend in college, I went with my friends on a trip to the dusty golden rocks at Joshua Tree. We climbed and drank and laughed. When the weekend was over, I tongued around the inside of my mouth and found it intact. None of the skin was raw. It didn't burn when I brushed my teeth. It felt foreign. Then I bit and bit and bit, and it all came off in one satisfying layer. There we go.

Fertile Soil

Rachel Antrobus

He found them in an alleyway
giggles echoing as they held each other up
but Sarah sobered when she saw him,
Fiona still a beat behind.
Here in lies the very thing you search for
He didn't say the words as much
as they manifested in the air between them
along with a caramel envelope;
he was already gone.

Their arms twined as they sped for home
but a viscous silence cocooned them.
Sarah poured herself a glass of wine
followed by a second as her wife stole the first
before she shook the small envelope onto her palm, a
single seed lying in the centre.
"We have to try"

They had met on a hen do
bars closing around them as they drank each other in;
hours went by, days turned to weeks
until Sarah proposed one lazy Sunday
and of course, Fiona said yes.
The years racked up behind them as
they failed to reach the next milestone,
putting their bodies through hell to fill
the nursery they'd long since shut the door on.

"We have to try" Fiona repeated. Sarah left,
only to return a moment later:

Poetry

an empty plant pot in one hand
a dripping bag of compost in the other.
Fiona sat, waiting cross-legged
as she cradled the seed to her bosom.
She set the pot between them, tipped
the compost in and sat, leg's
mirroring Fiona's.
They tipped the seed into a small hole in
The soil and tucked it in with shaking fingers
before dousing the thing in water.
Fiona shuffled round to lean into her wife as they watched;

night and day they watched,
Fiona singing to the seed as she washed up
Sarah inching it closer to the heat of the radiator
both in turn waking from sleep
to check, every night the same
till months had passed, the
pot hidden behind a curtain
after Sarah found her counterpart staring,
tears pooling atop the soil.

That year was their tenth anniversary
and they reserved a table in the village;
a corner booth in a Spanish place they'd grown fond of.
They ate good food, their fill in fact
and just like that first time
the restaurant closed around them, as
they drank from each other.
They stole kisses on the walk home
air charged. Once through the door
they were lost, until

Fiona registered the smell in the
air, reminding her of summers passed
in her Grandma's greenhouse,
collecting strawberries from the vine.
She followed the scent to the kitchen
Sarah trailing behind – breathless

The forgotten plant pot lay
beneath the table - smashed.
"Fi, get the dustpan"
"But how?" Fiona murmured, kneeling to
look beneath. She gasped, pulling
at Sarah's hand till she
dropped beside her.
There, under the kitchen table a
baby swaddled in bottle-green leaves
skin smeared with dirt.
Sarah avoided the shards of
pottery as she retrieved the child.
"How?" Fiona mouthed, no sound accompanying it.
She took their baby and Sarah wrapped
an arm around the two of them unable
to answer as she
held her family close.

Trash

Fabiana Elisa Martínez

The slimy rectangle of laminated paper stuck to her middle finger when she tried to untuck the sheets in the guest room. Before the parade of relatives and friends visiting the Cape started muffling the silence in her marriage with the smell of oysters, beer, and sand, Rita did not have to wash the sheets every time they opened the cottage for the summer. Rita's annual ceremonies at the Cape, however, tended to be more irrational than her perception of perfectly clean linens. Washing the sheets gave her something useful to do after unpacking, while Henry unearthed a rusty dart board from all the garage rubble he wished to turn into folksy art.

Rita's hand sprinted out instinctively from the grip of the mattress at the side of the bed, disgusted at the idea she may have stumbled upon the sticky, plastic wrap of an undesirable piece of evidence forgotten in the cottage since last fall, when Maggie and two other girls from college celebrated a best friend's weekend at the Cape. Shaking her hand, she let out a deep sigh of relief when she realized that the sticky piece of paper was not a condom wrapper idly forgotten for months but one of those coded labels that magazines put on their covers with the subscriber's information.

It surely must have come from the pile on the bedside table, from either Maggie's *Vogue*, Henry's *Golfweek*, or her own *Garden Gate*. She grimaced while turning the label over at the thought that it might have fallen from an old magazine when Henry had started snoring during one of their separate nights. The multiple hot nights when he prefers to snore in peace and puts himself to sleep reading trashy *Vogue* articles about subaquatic sex instead of the latest compared statistics between Webb Simpson and Tiger Woods.

Rita wondered if the numbers, symbols, and letters on the label were too small, or whether her ability to read without help had sadly declined. She walked toward the window to bathe the inane piece

Fiction

of paper under the cape's afternoon light and lowered her plastic glasses from the top of her head with her free hand as if she was discarding a tiara that looked too infantile for her mature role of queen of the house. After a long string of codes, she was able to read:

“Read more at www.thenewyorker.com
Andréia. Abad Vill.,
Calçada do Forte 50-6B, Sao Vicente, 1100-256
Lisbon, Portugal
May 03, 2013.”

Rita grabbed the minute piece of paper with both hands, pushing it far from her body in a gesture of solemn respect and reverence, as the old heralds did in front of kings before rehearsing royal edicts with bad news to be read in town. Rita recognized that name, a name too powerful, silenced in her memory for a decade since the family had returned from Europe. She sat on the bed, weak and trembling, next to the crumpled pillow cases, and read the rest of the cruel sentence brought upon her by the bad glue that couldn't keep a label attached to a magazine nobody read at her house. Rita's eyes narrowed at the fog in her brain. How did this label get in our guest room? How did it land on this bed? In the cottage?

Rita's neck tensed in a desperate search for an impossible explanation. Had Henry borrowed this magazine from Andréia? Henry had not been outside the country in more than a year, except when they all went to spend Christmas in Cozumel with Ben, Jennifer, and the Reynolds. He had not been anywhere close to Portugal in almost ten years, after the family had returned home after too many years in Europe. Their daughter with an accent to discard, and Rita and Henry with a loud secret they both silently had promised to burn, a love affair buried like the dregs of a shipwreck or an amputated gangrene limb.

And yet, nobody buys a subscription for ten years. There is no slimy glue that remains stubbornly efficient for such a long time. Rita knew very well that Miss Abad had been back in Boston many times,

always stumbling upon Henry with her innocent eyes, her sugary intonation of trivial words, and her convenient ability to never encounter Rita's husband when he is next to his wife. Suddenly, out of the blue, Henry would say: "You know who is in town? Andréia! Remember, from the bank in Lisbon? She is studying something here now. We went for a drink at the Fairmont at Copley Plaza for old times' sake."

And Rita would listen to those words with dread while a lead pendulum of sorrow and impotence started swaying behind her heart, counting the seconds until Henry stopped his charade and the shadow of her competitor disappeared from the room.

Rita put up her glasses and breathed in the ray of light shadowing the bed. She stood up, crumpled the sheets, and hugged the knot of blue fabric all the way to the laundry room with the urgency of someone trying to save a drowning child from the rabid sea.

The rectangular label survived and continued its odyssey of equivocal fate. It arrived in a house in Concord at the end of the summer. It was tenderly rolled and became a little vial of misery nested in Rita's medicine cabinet, inside an orange tube that contained three baby teeth and a sharp kidney stone that Henry had passed in Portugal, more than a decade ago, probably as a detritus of his tumultuous life lullabied by fado songs.

Lately, every time Rita opens her bathroom cabinet, far from the cape, far from that summer, she has the same oozy, rancid thought: that glue surely felt like slime. The discarded substance that made the snail attach to the surface, that protects its slippery body from the punctures of debris, that keeps away filth and enemies. The same magic the wrong subscription label could operate on the soul of a silent wife who would only throw in the trash a tube with three rotten baby teeth, a yellow kidney stone, and a magazine sticker the day the vicious traces of her slow revenge are over.



Monochromatic

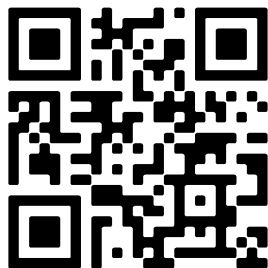
Patricia I. Vargas

Music

Devil Called Love Chi Temu

From the artist, on
“Devil Called Love”
“Devil Called Love” is
an ode to Billie Holiday’s
“That Ole Devil Called
love.” Being chased and
pulled towards a person
who only attracts grief.
There’s a realism that
we can’t help who we fall
in love with but at least
there’s understanding the truth of them and acknowledging
your helpless downfall into their spiral.

<https://chi-temu.co.tz/>
<https://www.facebook.com/ChiTemu-Music>
Instagram: @chi.temu
Twitter: @chi_temu



An Angel Called Nemesis

Edward Avern

The lime-green Vauxhall Corsa that pulled up onto the driveway was definitely Keira's car. The engine had that tell-tale grumble that Matt had never been able to eliminate, but the man who got out of it was not Keira. Matt sipped his beer and watched from the kitchen window as the man looked up and down the street, evaluating, and then walked up to the front door. The doorbell rang, but Matt finished his beer before answering it.

"Matt?" said the man, as the door opened. He didn't look nervous. If anything, he seemed curious.

"You'll be Simon then," said Matt. Simon shrugged, as though his being Simon or not was a matter of no significance. Matt waited for him to extend a hand, so that he could refuse to shake it, but Simon just stood there, and after a few seconds Matt felt so awkward that he extended his own hand, which Simon shook. He had a firm, confident handshake. There was an old-school Casio wristwatch on his wrist, the sort Matt used to wear when he was a child.

"I was expecting Keira to come," said Matt, as their hands broke apart. Simon shrugged again. He seemed to be a man who shrugged a lot. Matt hated him for that, and for his strong handshake, and even for the Casio watch.

"She didn't feel comfortable," said Simon.

"So she sent you." *The man she's been fucking behind my back for a year.*

"Yeah."

"You could have refused."

Simon shrugged. "I don't mind."

"No," said Matt. "I never did either." He intended that to sound jovial, to sound like the sort of thing one man would say to another man who was his equal, but instead it just sounded bitter. Simon didn't reply. After another pause Matt stepped back into the hallway.

Fiction

“You’d better come in then.”

“Thanks,” said Simon, stepping inside and closing the door. Matt was about to offer him a beer, out of habit, but then he remembered that Simon was driving, and then he remembered Simon was fucking his wife, so he didn’t offer him anything.

Simon was less good-looking than he’d imagined. In Matt’s head Keira had left him for a Tom Hardy lookalike in a sharp suit and expensive sunglasses. Simon was just a guy. He was clean-shaven and wearing old jeans and a polo shirt, and the Casio watch on his wrist. He had a spot on his cheek, and his hair was starting to grey. He was at least two inches shorter than Matt was.

“Are you taking everything?” asked Matt, leading Simon through to the living room, with its blue walls and its red sofa and its ornate ceiling light. “The Corsa’s likely to fall apart if you try to cram too much into it.”

“Not everything,” said Simon. “Keira gave me a list.”

It was strange hearing him say her name. Matt wondered if he should object. He could say something like “Don’t you dare say her name,” or “You’ve got a lot of fucking nerve, you know.” That was the sort of thing people said in these circumstances, he was sure, but he couldn’t seem to summon the will to do it.

“Let me see the list,” he said. Simon produced a folded piece of notepaper from his back pocket and handed it to Matt. Matt recognized Keira’s neat, girlish handwriting. He read down the list. There was nothing on it that he hadn’t expected, nothing on it that was unreasonable, but he decided he couldn’t just hand everything over. What sort of man would he be if he just handed everything over? He had to refuse something.

He pointed to the last item on the list. “You can’t take this.”

Simon looked. “What is a ‘Mathurin’?” He asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Matt. “You can’t have it.”

“Keira said I should get everything on the list.”

Don’t say her name, thought Matt, and then tried not to think about all the times and all the places and all the ways in which this short

man in a polo shirt would have said Keira's name. "I don't care," he said. "It's staying here."

"It belongs to her, though, right?"

"I don't care," said Matt again.

"She'll be cross if I don't go back with everything on the list," said Simon. "You know how Keira is."

Lés, thought Matt, and then, *No, not really*. "You don't even know what it is," he said. "If I don't give it to you, there's nothing you can do." He was being petty, he knew, but he was going to stand firm. He was going to be a man about this.

"Alright," said Simon. He went back out to the car and brought in some foldable plastic boxes. Matt started hunting around the house, digging out the items on Keira's list for Simon to pack up. He thought about not doing that, about not helping, but he suspected Simon would have started trying to find things by himself, or – even worse – that he would have just stood there until Matt felt so awkward that he helped anyway. Besides, he told himself, he didn't care about any of the stuff on the list. He didn't even care about Mathurin.

Mathurin was the name that Keira had given to the ceramic angel that sat on the top of the toilet in their bathroom. His bathroom, now, he supposed. Keira had bought it in Seville. Matt had got a job driving an old E-type he'd fixed up to some millionaire's summer residence, and he'd taken Keira with him. It had been a good trip. He remembered that. The angel had been in the window of one of those religious tat shops you find in Catholic countries, displayed alongside luminous Jesuses, sequin-encrusted crucifixes, and a three-foot sculpture of the Virgin Mary wearing a Cordovan hat. The angel was somehow worse than all of those. It was the creepiest thing Matt had ever seen. Its badly painted face wore an expression of utter malice, and it had one clawed hand outstretched as though grasping for someone's soul.

Keira had loved it. She just had to have it, and Matt was powerless to stop her buying it. It had been all he could do to stop her from putting it in their bedroom. His bedroom, now. So instead, it lived in the bathroom, where it glowered at Matt every time he took a piss.

Fiction

Keira had named it Mathurin after Googling for an appropriate patron saint for something that lived on a toilet. Matt had called it Nemesis, because it was.

Matt and Simon loaded the boxes in silence. Every now and then Matt saw Simon glance at one of the photos of himself and Keira that lined the bookshelves: the wedding photos, the holiday snaps, the ironic selfies. Matt hadn't taken them down. He kept waiting for Simon to say something so that he could shout at him, or throw something at him, or throw him out on the street. But Simon said nothing, and the silence built like water behind a dam. *How dare he*, thought Matt. *How dare he be here. How dare he exist*. He should say that to him. That's what a man would say.

"I'm going to step outside and have a cigarette," he said.

Simon looked surprised.

"You can smoke in here," he said. "This is your home."

"I know," said Matt. He hadn't known, really; Keira had never let him smoke in the house, and he'd got into the habit of sitting on the wall at the end of the driveway to smoke. "I prefer to smoke outside," he said. "Don't take anything that isn't on Keira's list."

"I'm not a thief," said Simon.

You stole my wife, thought Matt. But he didn't say anything, and went outside, and lit up a cigarette.

He sat on the low wall at the end of the driveway and stared at the lime-green Vauxhall Corsa while he smoked. Keira didn't know anything about cars; she'd bought the Corsa second-hand and run-down and hadn't realised that a car that cost so little was never going to work properly. Trying to keep it running had cost Matt hundreds of hours, and it still broke down all the time. Once, when it had broken down on a country road in Devon, he and Keira had had sex on the back seat waiting for the AA to come and tow them back to town.

He wondered whether she'd fucked Simon on the back seat too. It would be easier for him. He was at least two inches shorter than Matt.

Looking at the car, he couldn't help but consider how easy it

would be to sabotage it. There were a dozen ways to sabotage a car, if you knew what you were doing. He could loosen the wheel nuts, for example. He could loosen them enough so that the wheel might come off at any moment, without warning. It would be very easy. Simon wouldn't notice the loosened nuts. Nobody checks their wheels before they get into a car. Maybe the wheel would come off when Simon was on the motorway, and he would be killed, and Keira would come back to Matt, although he wasn't sure if he wanted that. Or maybe she'd be the one who was killed, and Matt would see Simon crying at her funeral. He wasn't sure if he wanted that either. He took another drag of his cigarette. How long, he wondered, would it take to unscrew the nuts? *Ten minutes*, he thought. *I could do it in ten minutes*. Would Simon notice if he was gone for ten minutes? Probably. He was wearing a watch.

It was only then that Matt realised he was contemplating murder. He was sitting on the wall with a cigarette, thinking about a way to kill Simon or Keira. It was a disturbing realisation; and what was most disturbing, he decided, was that he wasn't very disturbed by it. Why shouldn't he think it? What else was a man supposed to think in this situation?

He wondered when Keira had stopped loving him. There had been a point, he was certain, when she had loved him. Maybe not by the time they got married, but before that for sure. She used to have this way of looking at him that told him that she loved him. He could remember that look, although he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen it. Then he wondered when he'd stopped loving her, because clearly he couldn't be in love with a woman and thinking about killing her at the same time. When had he stopped loving her? Was it before or after she told him about Simon? Was it before or after she started fucking Simon? He didn't know, but he did know that he didn't love her anymore. You couldn't think about killing someone if you loved them. He was certain of that.

He finished his cigarette.

"You done?" He asked Simon, when he went back inside.

"Yeah."

Fiction

Matt nodded. "You think it's a bit shit that Keira made you come and do this?" He asked. Simon shrugged, but Matt didn't hate him for it this time.

"She didn't feel comfortable," Simon said. "I was happy to do it."

You're a sucker, thought Matt. He should tell Simon that. You're a sucker, just like me. She's got you scrabbling around doing her favours, just because you love her and you want her to keep loving you. I wonder how you'll feel in five years' time when the next guy is clearing out this same stuff from your apartment, looking around at the pictures of you on the bookshelves. Will you be like me?

Will you think about killing that guy?

"Is that everything, then?" he asked.

"What about this Mathurin thing?"

Nemesis, corrected Matt, in his head. "Trust me," he said. "You don't want it. I'm doing you a favor."

"Keira won't see it that way."

"I don't care," said Matt, and he realized that he didn't.

"Alright," said Simon, shrugging. "I'll load the car." Matt nodded, but didn't offer to help. He stood and watched as Simon carried each box out to the car, and then followed him to the door.

"Well, thanks," said Simon, and he held out a hand. Matt shook it.

"Say hi for me," he said. Then he winced. "No. Don't do that."

Simon shook his head. "I wasn't going to," he said. He turned and got into the lime-green Vauxhall Corsa. He didn't check the wheels before he did. Nobody checks the wheels before they get into a car. Matt watched him drive away until the car turned the corner at the end of the street, and then he went back into the house. He walked into the bathroom, and picked up the ceramic angel he had refused to hand over. It glared at him.

It smashed as he dropped it into the toilet bowl. He watched the pieces swirl around as he flushed the toilet, and then he went in search of another beer.

CONTRIBUTORS

Contributors

Art Contributors

Rachel Coyne is a writer and painter

As a couple in art and life **Delta N.A.** work together on each artwork creating a shared language that speaks straight to the heart. Their emotional journey into soft and enchanting colors brings to life timeless dreams, unique key to everlasting harmony. Their art is present in many private and public collections and has been exhibited in solo and group shows all around Europe, USA and Asia. Website: Www.dnartists.com Instagram: [delta_na](https://www.instagram.com/delta_na)

GJ Gillespie is a collage artist living in a 1928 Tutor farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island (north of Seattle). In addition to natural beauty, he is inspired by art history -- especially mid century the abstract expressionism. The "Northwest Mystics" who produced haunting images from this region 60 years ago are favorites.

Peter J. King was born and brought up in Boston, Lincolnshire. Active on the London poetry scene in the 1970s as writer, performer, publisher, and editor, he returned to poetry in 2013 after a long absence, and has since been widely published in magazines and anthologies. He also translates poetry, mainly from modern Greek (with Andrea Christofidou) and German, writes short prose, and paints. His currently available collections are *Adding Colours to the Chameleon* (Wisdom's Bottom Press) and *All What Larkin* (Albion Beatnik Press). <https://wisdomsbottompress.wordpress.com/>

Nazrene is an interdisciplinary work is rooted in her studies of Photography, Video and Sculpture at Florida State University. Much of her work is drawn to the gaps between mental health and societal normalcy. Personal in nature, her work is also reflective of both her mixed-race, as well as addressing the turmoil in the West Bank. Her studies in sculp-

ture inform both her use of photography to build narratives from emotions, as well as her canvases of acrylic built up with layers of paint dipped paper. Nazrene continues her search for the unidentifiable through exploration, observation, and experience.

Stephanie Torres is a first generation American who lives in Alvin, TX. She received her BFA from the University of Houston- Clear Lake 2021. She has been focusing on Ceramics and Painting and also enjoys Printmaking and Sculpture. Stephanie takes inspiration from everyday things that bring her joy, like the clouds in the sky highlighted by the sun set warmth or the elegantly delicate petals of a rose. Her art reflects an artist with many interests but a main focus of self-expression, although its subtle and somewhat inconsistent, it's also genuine.

Patricia I. Vargas is a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) educator of 10 years Los Angeles, CA, keen on the visual and music arts. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Sociology “with great distinction” from Oregon State University where she conducted and published quantitative research. She has also conducted qualitative research at her transfer institution, the University of California, Los Angeles. Her written works have been published by the Center for Open Science, Environmental Systems Research Institute, and ScholarsArchive@OSU. Most currently, she is a member of the American Statistical Association, National Education Association, and Pacific Sociological Association.

Poetry Contributors

Rachel Antrobus is a writer living in the North-West of England. Her poems “A Winter Romance” and “Silenced Epiphanies” have appeared in Stonewall’s Legacy: A Poetry Anthology. Her short story “Lim-erence” is due to be published in *Queer as Hell*, an anthology coming out later this year. Her debut poetry collection, *Slamming Doors and Empty Drawers* is also due to be published later this year by BookLeaf Press. She currently works as a Library Manager at a secondary school and is waiting to marry her beautiful fiancée.

Dr. Melinda González, a native of Newark, New Jersey with ancestral home in Moca, Puerto Rico, is an Afro-Indigenous scholar-activist-poet of Puerto Rican descent. She has performed poetry internationally under the name Poeta Guerrera. Melinda is from Newark, NJ and Moca, PR. Her poetry ranges in style and depth. At moments it rages in political fire – angry at the injustices that plague the world. Other pieces are deep and personal – commenting on a painful childhood that has fueled her love for artistic expression.

Sarah Grace Goolden is a recent graduate of University of North Carolina at Greensboro and is now attending American University for her Creative Writing MFA. Sarah Grace has worked as high school teacher as well as an newspaper editor for *The Carolinian*, where she focused on social justice. Her work has been published in *Inside the Bell Jar*, the *Coraddi* and the *Dillydoun Review*. In the future, Sarah Grace wants to be an educator for journalism and creative writing.

a f carbajal (he/they) is a non-binary writer and lecturer from Spain living in England. They teach English and Creative Writing at the University of Roehampton, in London, where they research intersecting issues of race, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, migration, and faith. Their creative writing has been published by the likes of *The*

View from Here, the Gay Flash Fiction e-zine, and Litro. They live in the border between Yorkshire and Lancashire with their civil partner, their son, three cats, around two dozen fish, and a whippet. Their lockdown addiction is Amarena cherries in syrup.

Rose Menyon Heflin is a writer from Madison, Wisconsin. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies spanning four continents, and her poetry won a 2021 Merit Award from Arts for All Wisconsin. One of her poems will be performed by a local dance troupe, and she has a creative nonfiction piece featured in the exhibit “Companion Species” at the Chazen Museum of Art. Among other venues, her recent and forthcoming publications include Deep South Magazine, The Ekphrastic Review, Fauxmoir, Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art, MacQueen’s Quinterly, sPARKLE & bLINK, Tangled Locks Journal’s MoonBites, and Visual Verse.

E.J. Schoenborn (they/them/their) is a queer & nonbinary transgender poet & puzzlemaker from rural Wisconsin, currently residing in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They’ve represented Macalester College and Minnesota repeatedly at the National Poetry Slam, College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational, and the Rustbelt Poetry Slam. Their poetry can be found on Button Poetry, Voicemail Poems, FreezeRay Poetry, Runestone Literary Journal, Rising Phoenix Review, Fearsome Critters, and many more. E.J. can also be found and followed on Instagram (@ejschoenborn) and Facebook under the same name.

Corinna Schulenburg (she/her) is a queer trans artist/activist committed to ensemble practice and social justice. She’s a mother, a playwright, a poet, and a Creative Partner of Flux Theatre Ensemble. Poems in: Arachne Press, Capsule Stories, Eclectica Magazine, Lost Pilots, Long Con, LUPERCALIA Press, miniskirt magazine, Moist, Moonflake Press, Moss Puppy, Oroboro, Pastel Pastoral, Poet Lore, SHIFT, The Shore, The Westchester Review, and more. <https://corinnaschulenburg.com/writer/poet/>

Eabhan Ní Shuilleabháin, with an Irish mother and an American father, recognized early on the advantages of being an outsider. She has been published in a wide range of journals in the United States, Europe and Australia, most recently in *The Atlanta Review* in the US and *The Places of Poetry* anthology in Britain.

Chyna Vazquez is a first-generation Mexican American. She is a 20-year-old, undergraduate student at New York City College of Technology. She is currently majoring in radiology. Chyna was born in Queens, NY but was raised in Brooklyn, NY. She loves to spend time in the city. Some of her favorite hobbies include writing poems, reading books, and making beaded jewelry.

Prose Contributors

Adrien Kade Sdao earned their MFA in Creative Writing (Writing for Young People) from Antioch University Los Angeles, and they are currently a candidate for the MA in Children's Literature at Kansas State University. They are a reader and guest editor for *Voyage*, a young adult literary journal. Their work has appeared in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Olit*, *Fterota Logia*, and more. They live in Kansas with their cat, Shelly. Find out more at aksdao.com.

Akjemal Toshieva is a native of Brooklyn, New York. She graduated with a BA in English from Brooklyn College. She has previously been published in *The Junction* and *The Offing*. She currently lives in Fort Drum.

Anthony Alas is a nine-times published author. His works have appeared in the *Pacific Review*, *In Parentheses*, *Scribble Lit*, *Inlandia*, *Azahares Magazine*, and *Sandstorm*. After many years in New York City, Mr. Alas now calls California's Inland Empire home again. He holds a Master's degree in English literature from CSU San Bernardino.

B. R. Lewis earned his MFA at Eastern Washington University. He served as an editor for both *Willow Springs* and *Sundog Lit*. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tribute to Orpheus 2*, *Gold Man Review*, *Cagibi*, *HASH*, *In Parentheses*, and *Drunk Monkeys*. He currently lives in Roseburg, OR, where he teaches at Umpqua Community College.

Clio Thayer grew up with both parents entrenched in the arts and her mother always said she was fated to enter a creative career. She loves theatre, film, and television and has a passion for writing all media. Currently she is entering production on a fictional true-crime audio

drama with a goal to have it completed by May of 2022.

Ed Avern lives in London, England, where he has worked in the world of documentary television for a little over ten years. He began writing at a very young age with some “Darkwing Duck” fan-fiction he scrawled into an exercise book, and everything else has followed from there. In the last few years his short stories have previously been published in Brittle Star and STORGY Magazine, with another soon to appear in BFS Horizons. He can be found on Twitter at @edwardavern, where he tweets about books, nerdery, and Arsenal football club.

Fabiana Elisa Martínez is a linguist, a language teacher, and a writer. She speaks English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian. She is the author of the short story collection 12 Random Words, the short story Stupidity, published as an independent book by Pierre Turcotte Editor, and the podcast series and grammar book Spanish 360 with Fabiana. Other short stories of hers have been published in Rigorous Magazine, The Closed Eye Open, Ponder Review, Hindsight Magazine, The Good Life Review, The Halcyone, Rhodora Magazine, Mediterranean Poetry, The Writers and Readers Magazine, Automatic Pilot, Lusitania, Heartland Society of Women Writers, and the anthology Writers of Tomorrow. She is currently working on her first novel.

Glenn Dungan is currently based in Brooklyn, NYC. He exists within a Venn-diagram of urban design, sociology, and good stories. When not obsessing about one of those three, he can be found at a park drinking black coffee and listening to podcasts about murder. For more of his work, see his website: whereisglennnow.com.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His short stories have been accepted more than 450 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including The Potomac Review, The Bryant Literary

Review, and Shenandoah. He was nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Creative Non-Fiction Contributors

Matthew Hose is a writer, journalist and teacher based in San Francisco. He co-wrote and edited the 2020 memoir *Killer Graces*, and his nonfiction work has appeared in the *Alcala Review*. He previously worked as a government and crime reporter at *The Ark Newspaper* and is currently an MFA student at the University of San Francisco.

Rowan MacDonald lives in Tasmania with his dog, Rosie. His writing has previously appeared in *Sheepshead Review*, *Stereo Stories*, *STACK* and *Buzz Magazine*. His work has also been adapted into film by California-based, *New Form Digital*.

Music Contributors

Gregory Allison is a violinist and composer based in Los Angeles. He has recorded violin, viola, mandolin and string arrangements on dozens of records. In 2021 he started his own record label, Holy Volcano. The first release on the label was his debut solo album *Portal*, a collection of six instrumental compositions for string ensemble, performed by him on violin and viola. His album collaboration with composer/producer Tristan de Liege, *A Light For Dark Moments*, was released on October 1, 2021 and the sophomore album from his acoustic trio *RAQIA*, titled *Sanctuary*, will be released in 2022. Both albums will be released by Holy Volcano.

Robert Detman produces acoustic and electronic experimental music under the band name, *burmaunderground*. He is also a writer and building designer.

Eric Chamberlain was badly burned as an infant and has spent his life experiencing otherworldly visions and unusual combinations of emotion. Harnessing this trauma, Chamberlain has turned what would otherwise be a dark experience in life into constructive, creative energy in music, art and film. Motivated by exploring the forbidden, the unknown and the divine, Eric's work is as much a self-portrait as an observation of the world around him. Using his visual and sonic aesthetic he calls *Cinetecture*, Chamberlain reaches beyond genre conventions, often combining beauty and terror with elements of electronic, ambient, modern classical, industrial, metal, fusion and avant-garde.

Divine Joab is a 25 year old singer and songwriter from Adamawa State, Nigeria. He currently studies computer science at Abia State Polytechnic Aba. He enjoys writing new songs and singing them to his classmates but when he isn't busy writing songs or studying at school he writes his own fictional stories hoping to be an accomplished novel and comic book writer one day too. Divine's other hobbies are playing

games and reading novels, but he hopes to add chess and dancing also.

Chi Temu is a singer/songwriter hailing from Tanzania. Spurned on by her colorful upbringing, she began writing music at the age of 13 on the piano before moving onto the guitar, expanding her musical horizons and perfecting her soulful sound. Chi seamlessly blends her lyrical styling with R&B, blues and rock, fearlessly expressing her equally multi-faceted soul.

