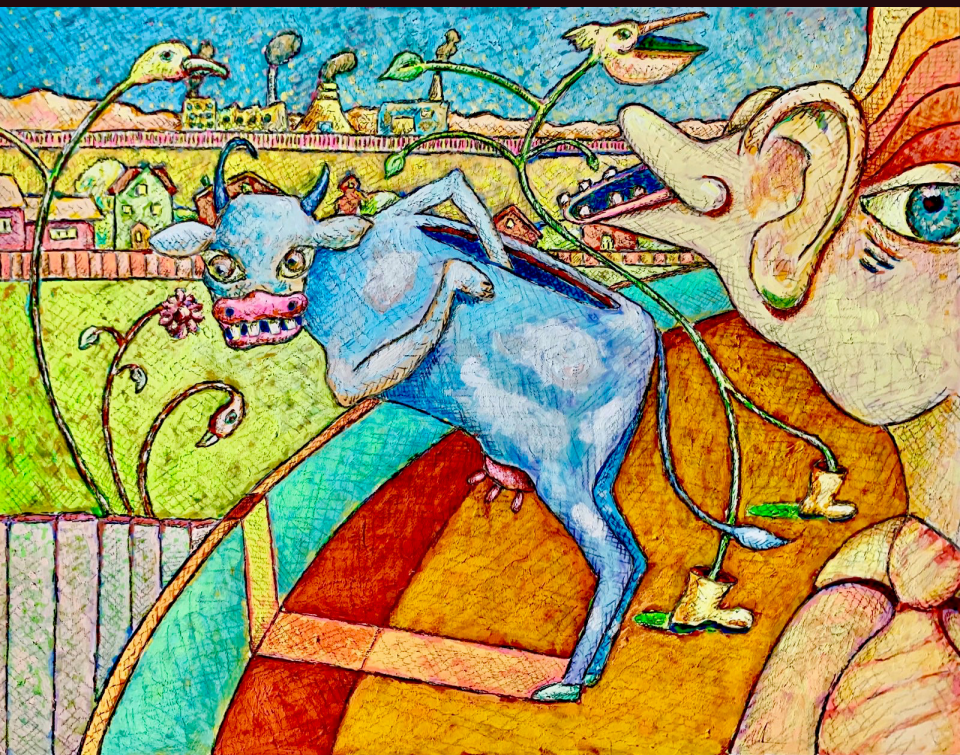


# DEFUNKT MAGAZINE



Vol. VIII



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Volume VIII

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# Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Smelling the Flowers .....   | 5   |
| when lana del rey said "i'm your man" i Felt That, or a non-<br>binary semi-self-love poem ..... | 6   |
| The Naked Cat.....   | 7   |
| Poem for Sharp Objects.....  | 19  |
| A Nap Would Be Nice.....   | 20  |
| Everything Something Nothing .....   | 31  |
| Aglow .....  | 32  |
| Glass Hammers.....   | 33  |
| Triple Magic.....  | 47  |
| The Theme is Velvet .....  | 48  |
| The Feel .....   | 49  |
| Outback .....  | 50  |
| Spring Snake .....   | 64  |
| How I Stay Imaginary .....   | 65  |
| A poet steals the end of the world and hides it inside a cathe-<br>dral.....                     | 67  |
| Immigrant Petition for Alien Workers .....   | 69  |
| RIOTS.....   | 70  |
| Last Stop.....   | 71  |
| Small Talk Backstage at Wheel of Fortune.....  | 72  |
| Cosmic Dreams .....  | 85  |
| Achluophobia.....  | 86  |
| Man Feeds Things to Me .....   | 88  |
| At the Embassy.....  | 89  |
| Hunger Desire .....  | 91  |
| Transfiguration .....  | 92  |
| Trenal Original Beadwork .....   | 94  |
| The Wino & I Know .....  | 95  |
| Vibrant Turmoil.....   | 109 |
| Art Contributors .....   | 110 |
| Poetry Contributors.....   | 112 |
| Prose Contributors .....   | 114 |

COVER ART



**Smelling the Flowers**

Ronald Walker

**when lana del rey said “i’m your man” i  
Felt That, or a nonbinary semi-self-love  
poem**

SG Huerta

i was not assembled  
with the right pieces;  
god had her eyes shut  
tight when compiling  
the mess of emo music  
and rare flashes of  
femininity and – let’s  
be blunt – dysphoria  
that is me. my parents  
prayed for a third child  
and at first didn’t want  
to know my gender.  
it took 21 years to be  
revealed. my body,  
my love, why must i  
vilify you at every turn?  
i am trying every  
day to shape you  
into something i could  
tolerate. could i tolerate  
this? i don’t need a man  
to save me, but if i did,  
i’d choose myself,  
i think.

# The Naked Cat

Meridian Paysneo

People often ask me about my first big painting: a rose and mauve watercolor. At first, it seems abstract, but if you look closely you can see the curled body of a cat. Here's what I tell them: Don't move to New York City and read *The Bell Jar*. Don't take an unpaid internship thinking it will turn into a paying job. And don't, whatever you do, take a sublet that comes with a cat.

Here's what you have to know: A year has passed since graduation and I was fiending for my life to begin. I swear the ink on my diploma was fading. Soon it would just be a blank paper hanging on the wall; My grandma could use it to write grocery lists.

Picture me: deflated from a day as a dressing room attendant, hands dirty from the foundation and deodorant streaked clothes when my phone buzzes with an email. It's JC Gallery Manhattan saying I'd been accepted for a three-month internship. No mention of pay or hours but this golden ticket was all the prompt-

ing I needed to walk out of the store, block my boss's number, and start my new life.

My grandma was excited, in the same nervous way she was when I got into college—proud but wary. She waited until dessert to mention the money.

"It's an expensive city, how much have you saved?" I held a-too-big-bite of ice cream against the roof of my mouth until the edge of brain-freeze, then I made up my mind to lie.

"Don't worry Nana, it pays." She looked relieved and handed me the rest of her sunday. "Because it's hard to make good decisions on an empty bank account." This was her favorite phrase.

Things started out good. A friend of a friend of a friend set me up with a studio in Williamsburg. It was a sublet. Basically, I was paying to care for someone else's cat. But that's the kind of deal you get with



## Fiction

no credit. Besides, at the time I thought I liked cats, but I hadn't met Annabell...

I arrived at JFK on the 10th of September and took my first subway ride to Ella's place. She showed me around the apartment. It was a studio, but huge and drenched in natural light. It was the dream: just off the N line, a forty-minute ride from the gallery. I felt like I won the lotto.

Ella's suitcases were waiting by the door for her semester abroad in Spain. She was 26 and getting her master's in Art History from Columbia. I wondered if this would be me in four years: mermaid hair, boho business blouse, and an apartment of my own. She made me a cup of coffee and walked me through Annabell's care instructions, which she'd printed out and put on the fridge. Seemed simple enough. Food twice a day at 9 am and 7 pm, litter box scooped daily and taken out weekly, a bath once a week, one tablespoon of catnip in the evenings for playtime. I was to pick up Annabell from the vet tomorrow in the cat backpack (she doesn't like the crate).

There was another list

too, the no-no list. I realized reading down the page that she wasn't as free-spirited as her bedside crystal collection had suggested: no guests, no loud music, no using her hairdryer, no touching her books, no cooking spicy or pungent foods, no eating on the couch or in the bed, no opening the wardrobe or dresser... Where was I supposed to put my clothes? I wondered. She'd set out a single towel, top sheet, and blanket for my bare ass to touch. Every other textile was strictly off-limits.

"I'm so sorry, but the wine glasses and ceramic plates are off-limits too," said Ella as I was reading. "Don't worry, I left a plastic cup and plate in the cupboard." I hated her fake apologetic tone, but I agreed to everything.

"I will be a cat-caring ghost," I assured her. "My apartment footprint will be zero." Ella laughed nervously, her eyes darted around as if looking for more things my grubby little paws could destroy. I must have looked as scrappy as I felt standing in her grown-up apartment. Thankfully she



didn't find anything more and 10 minutes later I was helping her load her suitcases into a town car. I ran upstairs and belly-flopped on her bed. Her sheets smelled like Marc Jacobs. This was my life now.

The first night was everything I wanted from New York, a lonely romance. Wine on the fire escape with cheap spaghetti from bodega supplies and a copy of *The Bell Jar* — I was only reading serious books now.

I tried to focus on Esther's problems (overwhelmed by opportunities: Should she be a wife and mother? A professor? A writer?) but mainly I sipped wine and soaked in the vision of myself. For the first time, I felt like I was seeing a picture of me that I actually liked. Before the offer from the Gallery, there had been a year of nothing: no jobs, no fellowships, no boys. Nothing. I liked Esther's problems. I wanted them. I laughed out loud at myself: a desperate dreamer watching the sunset across Brooklyn to the soulful howls of Sharon Van Etten — this was my coming of age indie movie and I was living it!

The next day I set out

early for the vets with the backpack. It was a warm September and the orange leaves glowed in the early morning sunlight.

I arrived smiling. A woman in the waiting room had a literal basket of puppies, she let me pet them while I waited. I held one of the caramel droplets close to my heart and an explosion of endorphins warmed me from head to toe.

"You should see your face right now." The woman told me laughing.

I laughed with her.

"I don't think I've ever been happier, it's weird because normally I'm a cat person!"

"I never understood cats." She said, shaking her head. "Dogs just up your daily love quotient, who doesn't want that?"

The puppy licked my face and I laughed. "Consider me converted!"

"Ella?" Called the receptionist.

She showed me to the back. I bounced into the examination room, ready for my furry little munchkin to be delivered, but the creature in the vet's arms

## Fiction

stopped me in my tracks and sucked the warm-fuzzies right out of me. It must have shown because the vet asked if I was feeling ok.

"Sorry, I just haven't seen one of those before," I said.

"She's a sphinx," said the vet, nuzzling the bald carcass.

"You can pet her."

The vet was looking at me expectantly. I hesitated, Sphinx was too sexy a name for whatever this cat was. It should be called a rumple-gnarl-fart or a puce-loogie-wrinkle. Not 'sphinx,' not a moniker of ancient power and mystery. There was no mystery here, I could practically see through its skin into its intestines.

"Should we call Ella?" The vet asked concerned. She, unlike the receptionist, knew I wasn't the real owner.

"No, no!" I said, maybe too quickly.

Holding my breath, I reached out to stroke Annabell's wrinkled head.

Once, when I was six, I was picking flowers in my backyard. The bluebells were in full bloom. I almost had a full bouquet, I was just pulling one last shoot. Instead of the familiar snap of the stem, there

was a loud rip and my arm shot up with the entire plant, from the end a terrible fist-sized bug dangled in my face. My grandma heard my screams and came running only to find the source of my cries was a dirt-covered root. That's how I felt now as Annabell watched me with her reptilian eyes.

The action of petting was no longer intuitive. I kept thinking I might puncture the thin membrane binding her spiny body.

I lifted her gingerly into the backpack. I tried to disconnect, it's just like the fetal pig in biology class I told myself but I couldn't bear to put on the carrier and have Annbell's pointy teeth next to my throat. I held her out in front of me like a boy at a middle school dance as I made my way through the waiting room.

"Bye sweetie!" The woman with the puppies called to me.

"Bye," I said miserably, letting the door close on all the warm fuzzy things in life.

From then on, it was

survival mode. Annabell slunk around always popping out of nowhere and curdling my blood with a whip of her bony rat tail or a gremlin scream. The first night I locked myself in the bathroom to sleep. Annabell cried at the door. Time went on, I told myself I could get used to her, but I couldn't, I just couldn't. The feeling was mutual, she peed on my laundry and barfed in my shoes. No matter how many times I washed them I could still sense her radioactive urine. They would smell fine out of the washer but then the heat of my body would activate the stench and I could see the people around me recoil.

I started wearing some pieces Ella had left in the forbidden wardrobe. After all, it was her cat who ruined all my clothes.

"How's my precious girl?" Ella texted me.

"She's great!" I texted back. "Look at this queen survey her subjects." I sent a picture of Annabell sitting on the desk and glowering at me. I wanted to tell Ella about the ruined clothes, but I was scared to reveal just how much I hated the creature.

It was a hard few weeks, the gallery was less 'art openings and salon discussions' and more 'six girls typing around a folding table for eight hours in silence.'

JC Gallery Manhattan ran a popular contemporary art blog, which I had read back in university. The schtick was that all the writers were also artists. I liked to click on the author icons to see the well-lit photographs of sleek, half-smiling girls wearing all black. Their bios said things like "Sienna's penchant for surrealist abstraction guides her interpretations of today's portraiture oeuvre."

The intro was brisk on my first day. We were expected to post three times a week, "1,000 words and not shit." Dora had told me (in lieu of any style guide) before taking my photo against the kitchen wall.

Mallory managed the gallery sales and never spoke to us and Dora, her assistant, only criticized. It was thankless and impersonal. A couple of girls just stopped showing up, but they would be replaced soon.

One day Kelly, a

## Fiction

fellow intern, posted an article with an artist's name misspelled. Dora called her into the kitchen and yelled at her for a good ten minutes. We could all hear. Kelly returned to the backroom, nothing amiss but a slight glassiness to her eyes, that said — if I speak I will cry.

I touched her hand half expecting her to pull away. To my surprise, she grabbed it and squeezed. It was the first time in weeks that I had touched someone else (unless you include the lady who accidentally sat in my lap on the subway).

I got home late after a drink with Kelly and stood in the dark next to the sink gulping water. Annabell brushed my leg as I was barfing and I practically kicked her across the room. I felt like a monster. I hated the way I was around her.

I locked her in the crate that night. She meowed and meowed. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't sleep with her there. I began staying away. Once I crashed at Kelly's and didn't feed Annabell for 48 hours.

I tried to push down the guilt. Bury the things I'd done to

her under the other anxieties like money and work. "Worry about real things!" I told myself. "Not this stupid cat." The Bell Jar started making a lot of sense. I did feel removed from the rest of the world. Like there was a wall of glass between me and everyone else, only this glass room had Annabell in it. I was coping, I had some things Esther didn't, namely alcohol and masturbation. So, it wasn't all bad. I got a couple of shifts a week at an Italian restaurant. The place was so cheap they made us waiters bring our own order pads, but money was coming in. I bought (more than) a couple of Xanax from my coworker to help me sleep.

"These little guys will solve all your problems." She told me on a smoke break and at least it was something: an escape hatch.

Then Ella texted me on the 5th of October to ask where the rent was. I was confused. I felt immediately in the wrong, even though I was sure I wasn't. My heart started pounding. I dropped my mug of coffee on the ground, breaking the han-

dle. Fuck, I broke the one thing I was allowed to touch. I took a deep breath, just talk to her—she's reasonable.

"I moved in on the 10th, I thought that's when it was due?" I texted back, hoping this would remind her and she would apologize.

"It's not like an Airbnb, you pay per month." She shot back almost immediately. "I just don't feel like that's fair, bc then there's a third of the month I wasn't here that I'm paying for?"

The typing bubbles popped up. I watched in dread as the little dots danced their evil dance.

"So I guess we didn't talk about it specifically so you can pay on the 10th. But frankly, I think it's weird that a matter of 10 days would be 'make or break for you.' Perhaps you just don't have the funds. Regardless, I can't be chasing you down every time. Next month RENT IS DUE ON THE FIRST. I would also ask that you send me some pics of the apartment so I can ensure it's being properly cared for. XX Ella"

I felt hollow. I didn't know what to do or say. I looked around the room, it was a mess. I would

need to clean before taking any pictures. I was scared she would facetime me right then, but thankfully she wasn't that assertive.

I texted back. "Sounds good, I'm glad we figured this out. I'll snap some pics when I'm home. I started early at the gallery today."

Ella didn't answer. I headed out to work as if to make what I said to her true. I checked my bank account. I had just enough to pay her now. It was only 10 days until my next paycheck I reassured myself, I could survive on \$50 until then.

I got to the gallery early. It was just me and 'the grown-ups' i.e. the two women who were paid to be there: Mallory and Dora. They sat up front in window-worthy desks, we interns worked out of sight in the back room. If Dora needed something she would email. So I was surprised when she smiled at me when I came through the door and said, "coffee?"

"We're really enjoying your work," Dora said as we walked. "Really, that's so great to hear,"

## Fiction

I was genuinely surprised.

"I was thinking you would be someone I could lean on for more essential projects like press releases, things like that."

"I would love to! I've never written anything like that before."

"That's ok, I'll walk you through it when we're back." I was so elated that I bought Dora's coffee and didn't even flinch when she added a muffin.

We got back to the office and I got to sit with the grownups in the window as Dora explained to me the anatomy of a press release and the concept of the upcoming show. The other girls eyed me as they walked in.

"What was that about?" Kelly asked with wide eyes as soon as I came to the back. "Oh nothing," I said, absently stirring my iced latte. "Just helping with some PR stuff."

"Are you kidding!? That's amazing, she's probably thinking of hiring you!"

"You think?" I was secretly hoping the same.

I came home in a glow. It was like a switch had flipped, even

Annabell didn't seem so bad. Armed with half a Xanax, I decided I should give her the bath I'd been putting off for weeks. I wasn't the deadbeat Ella thought I was. I turned on the water and Annabell skittered in, perhaps this is why she'd always tried to attack me in the shower? She thought it was bath time.

I touched her for real for the first time since the vets. She was trembling. She was scared of me. I lifted her into the bath and gently rubbed her with warm water. She meowed appreciatively. I could feel her ribs. I hadn't been feeding her enough.

She was soft and pink, a warm little peach. The dam broke, I cried, genuine sobs. With the bell jar lifted, she was just a cat. Annabell nudged my face with her nose and I laughed. "Hello, beautiful."

I wrapped her in a towel and rocked her. She slept beside me that night. Maybe it was the pills, but New York was beautiful again.

Dora began hinting about a paid future at the

gallery. There were still worries, but they seemed manageable. "Perspective is key!" I told myself. "Trust in destiny." It was just like how miserable I was living at home for the last year, while the rest of my friends scattered across the country for fellowships and jobs. If I had known then, that soon I would be in New York, working at JC Gallery Manhattan, I could have enjoyed that time with my grandma. Instead of being a miserable sad sack.

Things go up and things go down, was my new mantra. Little did I know, things were about to go back down... all the way down.

Mallory popped to the back room out of the blue and suggested "a family lunch." I thought that meant the gallery was treating us. It didn't. I tried to hand over my \$15 like it was no biggie, but I hated to spend it on a pile of flavorless quinoa.

The power bowls were so bland it had to be on purpose. Every bite of sandy grain and unseasoned veggie was a slap in the face. Was I crazy? Everyone else was munching happily. "Are these

a little meh?" I asked the other girls.

"Oh no," said Mallory. "You got my low histamine one, I wondered why this tasted so good."

She looked annoyed so I apologized to her even though she'd handed them out. "It's ok, she said. "Please just be more careful next time."

I returned to my computer in the back room. I could hear Mallory in the kitchen complaining about her eczema already flaring up. My stomach did a nervous flip flop.

The pressure in my gut built through the afternoon and by the time I got to my apartment I was taking the stairs two at a time to get to the bathroom.

It was the first time I was sick without Nana to take care of me. No cool papery hand on my forehead to check my temperature. No clink of knitting needles to lull me to sleep. I could hear my phone buzzing, but the misery was beginning so I assumed the position: ass sideways on the toilet, head in the bathtub. The



## Fiction

cement soft serve started spewing from both ends. My hand slipped from the ledge of the tub into my own vomit. Fuck! I screamed to the empty apartment. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I grabbed one of Ella's lavender guest towels, the ones she told me not to touch, and wiped the sticky bile from my fingers. Fuck her... I bunched it up and threw it into the tub.

I braced myself against the sink as another wave of nausea hit. All I wanted was sleep, I would have laid down on the dirty tiles with the cockroaches at this point. After all, nothing was more disgusting than what my body was ejecting. My phone was buzzing again. Another cramp gripped my stomach, and a final glob of clear goo came up. I spat it out on the bathmat beneath my feet. It landed on the K in NAKED. Deep breaths. This round was over.

\*\*\*

I woke up to a loud knocking on the door. I peeled myself off the bathroom floor and looked at my phone: 5 missed calls from Ella. The knocking continued and I hesitantly approached the door. I could see a girl my age in an emerald peacoat impatiently

banging.

"Hello?" I said through the door. "I'm Emily," she yelled. "Ella sent me."

I thought for a moment, this was New York after all. Was it stupid to open the door for a stranger?

"Sorry," I said meekly. "Ella didn't say anything about someone coming by."

"I have to pick up a book." She said.

I took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Sorry, I'm just not feeling that well," I started to say, but she pushed past me into the apartment.

"What are you doing?" I said, panic marshmallows were expanding in my chest. This 'Emily' chick was marching around flashing her phone. She was taking pictures. The pile of laundry on the couch, the open wardrobe, the wine glass on the counter, me in Ella's Brown University t-shirt.

"What the fuck?" I yelled.

"What are you doing? Who are you?" I grabbed her arm.

"Don't touch me." She cried as if it was I who had barged

into her home and started taking pictures.

I let her go and she glared at me rubbing her arm.

"You're crazy!" She spat at me.

"I'm sending these pictures to Ella, she was right. You're a freak wearing her clothes, ruining her apartment."

I remembered the pictures I was meant to send Ella, I guess I'd forgotten.

"Well?" said Emily, appearing to expect some sort of explanation. "Annabell peed on all my clothes," I said weakly. I was suddenly very aware of how haggard I must look after a night of puking. I wrapped my arms around myself and looked at the floor.

Emily looked at me stone-faced, her arms crossed. She wasn't here, she was already in the future telling her friends how she stood up to the freak — no fear, no mercy. I started to cry. "Why, did she, even, rent-her-apartment-if-she-hates-people!?" The sheer squeakiness of my voice seemed to disarm Emily. I didn't need a mirror to know I was doing my terrible cry smile. I can't control it, but it was not helping my sanity plea. Emily adjusted her purse and looked at

the floor like she wasn't certain anymore if she was on the right side of history.

"Look I know Ella can be particular," she started then, interrupting herself. "Wait, where's Annabell?"

I looked around. "Fuck, the door!" I yelled running barefoot into the hallway. "Annabell! Annabell!" I called. I turned the corner and still no sign of her. A blast of icy air hit me as I opened the door to the stairwell. "Annabell!?" I called. No reply. I decided to go back to the apartment for my shoes. When I returned, Emily was on her hands and knees looking under the bed. "Oh she was just under the bed, thank God." I laughed with relief.

When Emily stood up, her face was almost as green as her coat. I already knew. "She's dead," I said. "Annabell's dead." She nodded and ran out of the apartment.

\*\*\*

I wrapped Annabell in a towel, put her in the fridge, and went for a Xanax but they were gone from the nightstand. That's one mystery solved.

## Fiction

When things got bad like this, I liked to pretend I was on a late-night talk show — telling the story as I would, years from now, when all this was a colorful anecdote instead of festering wounds on my psyche.

I was on set with Jimmy Fallon, telling him how I moved to New York City with a weeks' warning to chase an internship and everyone told me I was crazy.

"You were crazy!" Jimmy would say teasing me. "No, seriously. You came to New York with no savings and no job. How did you survive?"

"I can't take any credit," I would say graciously. "It's like what The Alchemist says about following your true passion 'when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.'"

## Poem for Sharp Objects

Joanna Acevedo

Or, I've always loved you. You have a penchant  
For sharp objects. Say you prefer me undressed.  
You put things in your mouth—not me.  
I told you: I remember everything.  
I keep time for the both of us. Our memories  
Coalesce. There's residual heat.  
I tell you—I can't do this. But you make it impossible  
Not to. I get the timeline confused in my head.  
You kiss me like I'm a means to an end, but when  
I point this out, you say: why do you perceive it  
That way? As if there was some other way out of this room,  
But no. The only way out is through.

## **A Nap Would Be Nice**

Phil Gallos

Sam sits at the deuce in the window at Origin Coffee, facing the door because he doesn't like surprises and he doesn't want to miss the show: the parade of people coming and going, clutching their espressos and lattes and iced teas, maybe a scone or a salad, a frittata, a panini, sitting or standing or taking it out. Elmore Leonard is open on the table.

Beyond the plate glass pane, along the opposite side of Main Street: the Downhill Grill, Small Fortune art gallery, Liz Company hair care, Higher Peaks Glassworks (a head shop by another name), Savvy Boutique, the vision center, the dental office. The curve of the street hides the Hotel Saranac. If you were to ask him, Sam would tell you, "That's where half these people are coming from."

They're lined up, now—a thirty-foot queue from the door to the counter. Some are reading the menu, some staring at their phones because they haven't noticed that there's an enormous

blackboard mounted on the wall telling them everything they need to know in lettering one inch high in a variety of chalky colors.

On the Origin side of Main, Human Power cyclery (a display of bright bicycles on the sidewalk), John Dimon's place, some of his customers straying away in Lycra and awkward footwear to join the Origin crowd. Beyond the bicycles, the awning of T.F. Finnigan men's shop. The buildings following Finnigan's slip out of sight on a leftward arc where Main widens into Berkeley Square, which is not square at all. Then the gap in the street where Broadway splits away, down the hill toward the Saranac River and points north. Across the cut, the triangular park called Berkeley Green, the Village Mercantile, the library, and a pair of houses built the century before last. Then the traffic light at Church Street. After that, pine and spruce and rock maple. After

those, the shaggy slope of Mount Baker. Above it all is the late July sky shimmering like a stew of sunlight and thunder.

Sam does not need to watch every minute: the café, the street, the people. He knows they will be here tomorrow, and so will he. He takes a bite of his muffin, a sip of his iced English breakfast, and goes back to his book. Outside, a pair of cyclists slide a brace of Bianchis (egg yolk yellow and glacial blue) into the rental rack. Sam does not notice. A twenty-something couple sashay past looking like they just walked out of a Helmet Newton photograph, the man smitten more with himself than with his companion, the woman a little too aware of her good looks. Sam does not notice. He is in 1980s South Beach with a noir era movie star, a retired Secret Service agent, a street-smart octogenarian bookie, a Marielito Cuban, and a rude backwoods Florida giant the Cuban calls the swamp creature.

The door to Origin is heavy oak framing a double sheet of glass six and a half feet tall and two and a half wide, its brass latch and handle testifying to 119

years of service. When the latch goes click, Sam looks up. The glass reveals a woman and a man. Sam forgets, momentarily, about Elmore Leonard and his South Beach characters. The woman enters first. Sam thinks, "She leads, he follows"—their type cast in an instant. They take their place in line. Her phone chimes. She excuses herself and steps outside, neglecting to shut the door with its too-discrete sign imploring, "Please keep closed. Air conditioning." Sam gets up and shuts the door. The next person to enter leaves it open. Sam looks at his book. He doesn't bother again with the door. It's a losing game. When the woman rejoins the man in line, she closes the door behind her. She apologizes to the man.

"I'm sorry. I had to take that."

This strikes Sam as strange. They haven't been together long, he concludes. If they had, the man would have known through experience that she wouldn't have taken the call unless it was important, and an apology would not have been necessary...unless

## Fiction

she's someone who compulsively apologizes for herself. Unlikely, Sam thinks. To him, the woman seems to be someone who might apologize for her actions but not for who she is.

The woman says something else to the man, telling him what she wants. Then she leaves the line. She has a rectangular face, a squarish jaw, a wide mouth, aquiline nose, flared nostrils. Her hair is straight, ash blonde, blunt cut. Her eyes are like blue flame. Sam's book is just a prop, now. He's having difficulty not staring at the woman with the fire in her eyes. What does he see there that holds him like an implied invitation? He sees mischief... and confidence that the mischief will go her way.

She takes a seat at the adjacent table. It is close enough to touch, if Sam chose to stretch that far. She pulls a chair out, folds herself into it, draws it back toward the table in one smooth motion. She is not unsure of her body in space—or anywhere else, Sam imagines. She is not petite but trim, firm, agile. She wears a forest green cotton blouse unbuttoned over a white T-shirt,

black hiking slacks, and black, utilitarian sandals. Her back is to the door. If the woman were at Sam's table, they would be sitting face-to-face.

Sam does a quick calculation: early 60s masquerading as mid 50s. The lines around the eyes, fine though they are, the creases across the forehead, the texture of the skin all tell him so. But it's the hands that speak most truthfully: the taut skin, large knuckles, prominent veins. Her hands are not feeble, though. Nor are they prissy; nor elegant. They are strong, long fingered, big boned. They've got some gristle in them and more than enough muscle. The thought occurs to Sam, "These are hands that could massage you or murder you equally well."

The man arrives with their drinks: iced coffee for her, black, in a one pint mason jar, and what appears to be a latte for him in a large white cup. He is a burly man, blocky build. Heavy calves emerging from Khaki shorts. Thick arms revealed by a short sleeved Madras shirt. Retired linebacker,



Sam wonders? Ex-Marine? He has thinning, reddish, closely cropped hair; and his eyes are hidden behind sun glasses that he does not need inside the café but never removes. Neither the man nor the woman wear wedding rings. Not proof that they aren't married but another indication to Sam that these people are new to each other. They sit for several minutes without speaking. Sam turns his attention unsuccessfully back to Elmore Leonard. The words stray from the page, run to the edge of the table, and leap from it like lemmings.

Sam begins to invent a narrative for the woman and the man. They're from Saratoga Springs. He's a financial manager in the Capitol District. She's a psychology professor at Skidmore. They met through an internet matching service, have dated several times, but this is their first overnight. They took a room in the Hotel Saranac, sixth floor, lake view.

This line of speculation is severed when the woman slips off her blouse and drapes it over the back of her chair without turning around. Then she slow-

ly—the way one would indulge a luxury—raises her arms up and out to each side, like a pair of bent wings, and arches her spine, accentuating her bust, her head thrown back, her small belly stretched flat, T-shirt riding up not quite far enough to expose flesh above the belt line. It is a gesture obvious in its sensuality—feline, at once seductive and predatory. Sam is openly watching her, now; no longer pretending to be reading a book. She is reveling in it, putting herself on display—see how well-made I am; see how age has spared me—as much for herself as for the man she came in with. It's a good thing, too, Sam concludes, because the man appears unimpressed or perhaps oblivious. He sits across from her like a stone. His gaze seems to be directed at the table.

Sam reappraises their character. She leads, but he does not always follow. Sometimes he's simply immobile. And when he does follow, is it willingly—even enthusiastically (I would follow you anywhere)—or is it doubtfully, reluctantly?

## Fiction

The woman completes her stretch, repositions herself upon the chair (erect, assertive), looks directly at the man, smiles with closed lips and says, "A nap would be nice." Sam silently forgives her for employing the word "nice."

The man moves his latte from one side of the table to the other. Then he returns it to its original position. He rearranges the salt-and-pepper shakers. He fiddles with a fork. He says nothing. Sam wants to punch the man, regardless of his superior size. He wants to shout, "Wake up, listen to me. I know something about naps. They can be sweet. They can be sizzling. Sometimes they're both. Almost never neither. And will you for God's sake say something to her!" The man tilts his head to the right as though trying to hear what is not quite audible. Sam turns his thoughts away from the man and toward the past.

Who was it who liked naps so much? Was it Britt? Yes. Britt. She was only twenty-five. Sam was thirty. How long ago was that? Better not do the math. They were young, but not too young to appreciate the possibilities inherent in a siesta, possibilities

that always began with a slice of quiet communion and did not necessarily include sleep. They napped after walks and showers and dips in the lake, before dinner and after lunch, on beds and couches, carpets and beaches, and on more than a few mountaintops.

And then there was that time at Rainbow Lake. Friends who owned a camp there had said, "Come out any time. The place is yours. We don't have to be here. If you want to spend the night, just use one of the guest cabins." So on a hot day—hotter than today, even—they went. They swam in the lake; they dried in the sun; and Britt said, "Let's go up to the cabins and take a nap." The guest cabins: they were barely bigger than shacks. The one they chose was mostly windows, but closed up and stuffy. Britt opened them all, admitting the sounds of the forest and an uncertain breeze. The space was too small for a set of twin beds; room enough for only a single. They lay naked on their backs and slipped into sleep on the narrow mattress

he'd stripped to the sheeting. They awoke to a rumbling sky and a fresh wind from the lake. They did not move. They listened and waited—shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, hand in hand, surrendering to a slow arousal. They waited for the storm to break and made love in languorous counterpoint, the air crackling, booming blue and white through the hissing rain.

The woman leans forward over the table, pulling Sam back to the present. The man continues to look down. Sam wonders if the man is afraid. Afraid of what? He's tackled opponents. He's slain the enemy. But now he is confronted by a power that is neither enemy nor opponent, and he doesn't know what to do.

"Don't attack," Sam wants to say. "Don't defend. Engage." Looking from the side, he can see the man's eyes behind the dark glasses, eyes aimed away from the woman, out the window. Like hers, they are blue; but they're less intense, paler, powder blue. The woman looks directly at them...or where they should be. Can she see aversion behind tinted lenses? The woman says, "Let's take a

nap."

Finally, the man looks at her. Finally, he says something. He says, "Why?"

It's like a bomb going off in Sam's brain, the words exploding behind his closed lips. "Why? Why! Are you crazy? Don't say 'Why.' Say 'Yes!'"

But the woman is indulgent, more forgiving than Sam thinks she should be. Or maybe she's stubborn, not ready to concede. She explains to the man in a matter-of-fact nonjudgmental tone that naps are healthy...and pleasurable. The man raises his latte to his mouth. The latte goes in.

Nothing comes out. The woman sits back, watches the man. She is patient, but she cannot be patient enough. The man responds by not responding. No one can outwait absence. She is watching the man, waiting, appraising; and Sam is watching her. He wants to tell her—with his eyes, if with nothing else—that if he were the one at her table, she would not have to suggest anything twice. The woman smiles, but not at the man. It's a private, inward

## Fiction

smile, barely visible, amused but ironic. She is smiling at herself, Sam surmises...and perhaps, just incidentally, at him.

The woman reaches for her coffee, raises the jar from the table, right arm bending as she brings its rim to her lips, bicep flexing. It startles Sam. He's impressed at the size and the definition. Sculptural is the right word for it, he believes. She must spend time in the gym. There is a slight sag beneath the bicep. It's a smaller price, Sam reckons, than most have had to pay for sixty years of gravity.

The street outside fades, the walls of the café recede, the people inside dissolve—all but the woman with the raised jar—until Sam is miles and years away. He stares at the woman's arm, but it is no longer her arm. He is seeing another woman, another arm... one he had known as well as he knew his own.

They sat in Sam's car at the mouth of a dirt track near the end of a dirt road in the deepening evening. Marnie was saying, "Well, I guess I'll see you later," her right hand on the door latch.

"I hope so," Sam replied,

both hands on the steering wheel. He wanted to turn to her and hug her; but she'd been giving half-hugs, lately, which made the separateness that defined their relationship even less deniable and even more painful. They'd go hiking or canoeing. They'd go to the movies or to a concert or to dinner, as they had this night. They'd paddle or walk or sit together; but they were together as two, not as one.

Sam gripped the wheel as though he were passing a heavy truck in a hard rain. "I'm not happy with this. I'm not happy with this friendship we've built between us, like it's a wall."

He wanted to tell her the friendship was killing him, that it was like being starved to death after the feast they'd shared. Didn't she miss what they'd had? Didn't she want more? But he knew if he began to say these things, he would not be able to hold back the tears, so instead he said, "Well, you already know that. I don't want to make a scene. (Which was not true. He wanted to make a

scene, but he also wanted to spare her the pain of it.) We had a nice time. No point in ruining it."

"Nice." It was really Marnie's word, one she habitually used to neutralize the emphatic; and he hated it, sucking the juice out of joy, a verbal burqa hiding what should be celebrated; and he despised himself for using it. It went to the core of their attraction and their conflict. He was volatile, outwardly intense, openly demonstrative. She was soft-spoken, understated, privately passionate. And here they were saying a chaste good-night when they should have been devouring each other with bottomless kisses, endless caresses—at least as Sam would have had it. He had no idea how Marnie would have it. It was a secret, behind the veil.

She thanked him for dinner. He thanked her for going with him. She stepped out of the car which he could not drive to her house because the road was too rough and too muddy. She said goodnight again, and walked into the shadows. Sam watched the glow of her headlamp until it diminished to a dot and disappeared around a curve. He sat

alone in the silence, stunned at his impotence. Then he began pounding the steering wheel, screaming, "No! No! No!" until his throat hurt. It was an exorcism, and the force of it drove him out of the car and down the half mile of rutted road in the dark, guided only by the strip of starlit sky between the trees, to the tiny house Marnie had built for herself in the deep woods.

Sam knocked on the door. Marnie opened it.

"Oh."

"Hi."

They stood facing each other, and they waited: she for him to say something else, he for the words to surface that would break the spell.

"I'm here because I couldn't stay out there. I'm here because you need to know.... I want you to know."

He stopped. He was scared. He feared she would turn away if he said the words, and he felt he could not bear that rejection. Seized by the sensation of disappearing on the threshold, of becoming a ghost, he forced himself back,

## Fiction

remembering himself in the car, remembering the frustration and the pain that had beaten itself out on the steering wheel and why he had walked lightless through the dark to stand now in this place.

"I love you, Marnie. That's all there is. There's nothing else." "I'd begun to wonder if I'd ever hear you say that again." She drew him in, drew his face toward hers.

Later, they lay on the old, hooked rug on the floor, Sam on his side propped on his elbow looking down at Marnie on her back, drinking the vision of her, her hand behind her head, the arm crooked—the right arm—a strong arm, her face and the swell of her bicep bathed in the glow from the window of the woodstove. That arm, that muscle, not built by barbells but by cutting and splitting every stick of wood that had heated her house. There was a poetry to the symmetry of that, Sam thought—the fire illuminating the arm that provided the fuel that made the fire that illuminated the arm.... Sam knew in that moment, knew by the purity of it, that he was in the midst of a beauty that would defy decades and would follow

him long after it had faded.

And here he is, now, at a small black table in the middle of town nearly thirty years later; yet it is all in front of him, the road and the pain and the darkness, the fire and the flesh and the warm light, all in the space behind his eyes, all of it at once, shorn of the strictures of linear time. The woman and the man, sitting to his left barely a meter away, might as well be in Kalamazoo.

Something jolts Sam—the man's voice, animated and enthusiastic. How long has he been gone, he wonders? Thirty seconds? Thirty minutes? A thirtieth of a second? He realizes he's still staring at the woman. She no longer holds the jar. It rests on the table, nearly empty. She leans back in her chair, legs out straight under the table, ankles crossed, hands folded in her lap. Sam cuts his eyes away, looks out the window at the street and tries to reconstruct what his brain had registered while his mind was elsewhere. The woman changed tactics. That's what happened, he reckons. Maybe she asked a

question about a team. A baseball team? It doesn't matter. There must be a line, he decides, in the unwritten manual for women about men: "If you want to get a man's attention, say something about sports."

Sam sneaks a quick glance back at the woman. Her eyes are fixed on the man. Her expression is attentive but relaxed. She appears satisfied. Sam wonders, can she really be that interested, or is she just humoring the man, making the best she can of what is less than what she'd hoped for? Or is there something else? What's in it for her?

He shifts his gaze to the man. The man's shirt and shorts are understated and pristine. Vintage Abercrombie & Fitch, Sam guesses. He wears topsiders, no socks. Sam decides the man has made a bundle in hedge funds. He owns one of the "great camps" in Wawbeek, a summer house of rustic elegance built by old money and bought by new. They've just been sailing on the Upper Lake. The man has a wife. She is in Saratoga, devoting more time to the Performing Arts Center than to him. The woman does not have

a husband. She has the man, and she pulls the strings. With each tug, the man slides closer to divorce.

Sam finds this scenario considerably more intriguing than the man's monologue of names and statistics and performance evaluations; but he can only maintain it for so long, and he returns his attention to

Elmore Leonard. He summons the words back from the floor, and they stay on the page, now, where they belong. The man's voice becomes a mere drone, like a piece of equipment. The woman speaks, now and then, but Sam does not listen. If this is what she wants, he concludes—and even if it is not—who is he to interfere?

Sam turns the page. The woman and the man stand up. He watches them as they leave the café. They shut the door behind them and follow the arc of Main toward Broadway, away from the Hotel Saranac. He feels a twinge of regret at the woman's departure, wondering, "Who is she, really? What would it be like to



## Fiction

be with her?”

In South Beach, the movie star has shot the swamp creature four times in the chest and made off with 600 Gs of the octogenarian's money. The swamp creature had thought they were partners, but she wanted it all for herself. He shoulda been more careful.

## **Everything Something Nothing**

Alix Perry

My memories are lately refusing  
their flimsy nightmare costumes.

Visions arrive as often in waking  
as in sleep, naked either way.

I want to drape them under the cloak  
of reality to make them decent, but  
even in this new place, everything's  
a reminder of something.

My subconscious protests with absurd gusto, today  
delivering a crayon masterpiece of its divorced parents  
holding hands. Left brain and right brain both love you  
very much, but, honey, you've gotta learn how to lose hope.

Though, by now, we should all know  
better than to victim blame. Poor tired  
mind, it's not your fault. Here, have  
some camomile, an emergency blanket.

My dentist notes the impact of my regular teeth-  
gnashing, and I think it's best not to explain  
how I nibble on the culprit's phantom ear.  
It's the only way I ever got him to listen.

Art



**Aglow**

Jennifer Weigel

## Glass Hammers

Joe Baumann

When my mother called to tell me my uncle Rex had died, I first remembered something he used to say when we would watch *Wheel of Fortune*: “Why are Black people always so bad at this?” He said it any time an African American guessed a letter incorrectly or bought the wrong vowel. It didn’t matter if the other players had made the same kinds of mistakes, or if the Black person was winning. He also questioned their names—“Never heard the name LaShonda before”—and had things to say about their hairstyles. Whenever he spoke, my mother would glance my way from her spot on the couch—my uncle sat in my dead father’s recliner, clutching the remote in one hand and a beer in the other—and sip from a can of diet coke that was probably half whiskey. I sat on the love seat, legs tucked up under my feet, and only allowed my jaw to unclench when I solved a puzzle, always figuring out the solution before my mom or Rex, who would shake his head and say, “We gotta get you

on this show,” as if I would share my winnings with him.

“What happened?” I asked my mother. My boyfriend Berk stared at me from the couch of our shared apartment. “Same as Dad?”

“His heart gave out, yes,” my mom said, but I could hear it in her voice: No, not like your father.

“Do you want me to come to the funeral? Will there be a funeral?”

Berk raised an eyebrow and shook his head to push his hair out of his face, which he’d let grow long. I couldn’t decide if I liked it or not, and I had finally decided it didn’t matter what I felt about it. When I’d said so, Berk thumped my sternum with the heel of his hand as if he was trying to restart my heart.

My mother sighed. “Of course, Danny.”

“Of course what?”

“What do you mean?”

“Of course there will be a funeral, or of course you want

## Fiction

me to come?"

Berk, with a dramatic flair, threw his head back, tongue sticking out the side of his mouth.

"Do you really need to ask me that?" my mother said.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't think I needed to."

"The funeral is this Saturday. You and Berkeley can stay here."

"Generous."

"Please, Danny," she said, her voice finally cracking. "Please do not make this difficult."

I told her we'd be there. When I hung up, Berk shook his head. He didn't need to say anything else.

\*

My uncle was a big man, six-three and over two hundred and fifty pounds, a diabetic like my father. Like my dad, he didn't take his medication or his diet seriously. My mother didn't either, making him heaping plates of biscuits and gravy for breakfast and giving him a double-portion of whatever entrée she made for dinner: twice the heap of beef stroganoff, a second cheeseburger on a flaky white bun, an extra slab of meatloaf or breaded chicken cutlet. His mashed potatoes towered higher, his ranch-drenched salad—really

just iceberg lettuce and shredded cheese—took up extra space on his plate. The only things he didn't expect more of were baby carrots or bowls of raspberries. After Wheel of Fortune, he liked to turn on Fox News, which was always my cue to leave the room. When I brought my first boyfriend around, Rex looked bewildered by Tommy, as if he was some kind of extraterrestrial and not the striker for our varsity soccer team, already committed to playing at TCU. Rex asked him, pointing at me, "Has he ever tried to turn you into glass?"

"I'm sure I've told you all of this," I said as Berk drove us across Missouri. The drive from our Overland Park apartment to my mother's home in St. Peters was a straight shot down I-70, interrupted only by Columbia, the roadside dotted with gun show adverts and billboards for Mizzou and Birthright. We left after lunch on Friday, Berk taking a half-day at his engineering job. I burned a sick day at the high school where I taught English, leaving a handful of writing exercises for

the substitute to walk the students through.

"No, you haven't," Berk said, shaking his head. "But I'm not surprised."

"I really thought I'd brought it up before."

"You? Bring up your uncle?"

The weather was nice, and Berk had the windows cracked so air whistled through the car. He didn't like listening to the radio while he drove; he preferred to talk. I preferred not to. Yet somehow he managed to make me talk while he listened. Berk had those kinds of skills.

He flexed his hands on the steering wheel, knuckles popping. His lips were pursed, teeth clenched.

"Just say it."

"Say what?"

"Whatever it is you want to say."

Berk shook his head and laughed. "You English majors. Too observant." He looked at me. The road was clear ahead of him, aside from a semi on the horizon. We were rolling past gold fields of grain. "Except, maybe, about yourselves."

"Please don't," I said.

"Gonna turn me into glass if I do?"

"Only if you want."

"We'd probably crash."

In high school, people knew what I could do, thanks to the time I accidentally turned my biology textbook into a block of glass, dropping it as I was pulling it from my locker so that it shattered, spreading across the hall. I'd been angry, as I had to be for it to happen, pissed that I'd forgotten about a math quiz. Plenty of people saw. Some said I was a freak, others that I was a real life X-men character. But most people ignored me, still, which just proved that once the world decides where you belong in it, there's nothing you can do to change things.

Mom met us at the door. She hugged Berk, tapping him on the back and telling him how jealous she was of his tan, then kissed me on the cheek.

I expected the house to feel different in Rex's absence, but mostly the air felt unchanged. Rex had always loomed so large, stuffing himself into my father's armchair, rattling the walls with his heavy gait when

## Fiction

he came stomping down the hallway after a bathroom break, his breath and groans loud, wet, sickening. He carried a certain smell, a funk, not exactly bad but somewhere between sweet and sour, like he waited one day too many between showers but still changed his clothes and put on deodorant.

Mom had laid out some afternoon snacks on a cutting board: soda crackers, a soft yellow cheese, hard sausage still in its vacuum-sealed pack. As we walked through the living room toward the kitchen, I glanced at the recliner, which was still in surprisingly good shape for having carried two overweight men through to the end of their lives. I could still see, in the green fabric, the slightest outline of my uncle's rotund ass, as well as the depression where his head lolled when he was drinking and watching tv.

We sat down, but not before my mom offered us beers, wine, and water. Berk asked for the last of these, and I nodded in agreement. She had already opened a can of soda for herself, which she would have spiked prior to our arrival.

"So what happened?" I said when she sat, passing a glass to each of us.

"What do you mean?"

"To Rex."

"I told you."

"But what happened, exactly?"

"Danny," Berk said.

"What?" I looked from him to my mom. "He was my uncle. I want to know."

My mother sipped from her drink, and the tart, wooden smell of expensive bourbon floated across the room. "You don't need to pretend to care more than you do."

"I'm not pretending."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure. But maybe I'm more curious than anything else."

"English major," Berk said in a stage whisper, but my mom didn't laugh.

"He was sitting in his chair," my mom said. She pointed into the living room.

"Dad's chair."

"It's been his chair for a while, Danny."

"It's Dad's chair."

"Fine. Whatever." She drank



again, this time long, hard. The can was practically empty when she set it down. "He said his arm felt weird, and then he started breathing, I don't know how to describe it. Hard and shallow at the same time? I called 911." She paused. "But it was too late."

"Sounds like you did what you could," Berk said, but he was looking at me. I reached out and held my mother's wrist. She, along with Berk, was one of the only people who, knowing what I could do and had done before, let me touch her without flinching or hesitation. Her skin was hot, as if she'd just been laying in the sun.

"Sorry you had to see it," I said.

"You should be sorry your uncle is dead."

I had nothing to say to that.

\*

After my dad died, Tommy had preferred talking on the phone. He didn't say so, but I knew it was because that way I couldn't turn him to glass. Before the incident with my father, he liked me to tap his fingertips and give them the slightest blue sheen; he would make little jokes about me being gangly and thin in order to juice me up just enough that I

could pour that little bit of cool freeze into his body. Once, when we were making out on his bed, he said, "I hate that I have to make you mad. If only there were other ways to make you change things." His fingers were tickling at my waist.

"You'd be glass by now," I'd said. He'd laughed. Later on, we stopped joking about it.

Berk was less concerned, less interested.

"That's cool," he said, like he didn't believe me. I told him to say something mean about me. He told me that my haircut wasn't good for my face.

"Meaner," I said.

"Your shoulders could use some work. They're not proportional to the size of your biceps."

I felt a flush, but it was embarrassment, not anger.

"You're not good at this," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "Pardon me for not wanting to make my boyfriend angry."

"I won't stay mad," I said. "I promise."

"But Danny," he said. "You're always mad."

"No I'm not."

## Fiction

We were sitting on my couch.  
We didn't live together yet.

"It's hilarious you think that."

I felt a small pulse, the tiniest shiver, starting in my hip.

"What do you mean?" I said.

Berk shook his head; he'd just cut his hair, and being able to see his wide open face and forehead all at once was discombobulating.

"You don't see it?"

"See what?"

I could feel it spreading, cresting across my belly button and heading toward my crotch. It was just enough. I grabbed Berk's wrist and could feel it pour through, calcifying the ends of his ulna and radius, the skin there going a hard, almost-clear blue.

"Whoa," he said, staring down. We looked for a minute, and then I pulled it back, his skin returning to its rich tan, the little hairs at his wrist wiry and gold again.

"Did you really mean that?" I said. "About me being angry?"

"Did me saying it make you angry?"

"You saw."

"Well, then." Berk shrugged. I expected him to say more, but he just stared at me.

\*

The funeral home was situated on the northern frontage road off I-70, the building long and low and looking more like a country club than a place of mourning, all cream paint and golden sconces, green shutters pinned against exterior walls. The portico gave relief against the heat of the day, which was swampy and harsh for mid-April. My uncle had already been cremated, in accord with his will—"Rex had a will?" I asked over breakfast; Berk slapped my shoulder and my mom ignored me—and the service would be brief: a visitation and a short eulogy from my mother. I had no idea how many people to expect. To my knowledge, my uncle's only friends, if one could call them that, were a group of guys like him with whom he'd played poker every third Wednesday of the month.

The room where the service was held—all white, just like the building's exterior, almost blinding in its snowy consistency (even the chairs had white upholstery on the backs and seats)—was jammed when we

arrived, even though my mom had insisted that the three of us leave the house forty minutes early.

"What the hell?" I said.

Berk grabbed my wrist.

"I'm just surprised."

"You could express your surprise in a whisper," Berk said. People nearby had glanced our way.

The confusing thing for me wasn't necessarily the size of the mourning crowd—of course, somehow, Rex would have a far-reaching net—so much as its composition: not just single, overweight men with unkempt beards and bad haircuts like I'd expected but families, trim couples with two or three kids in matching funerary garb. A surprising number of aloof, single women my age or even younger. I whispered this to Berk as we slid into seats in the front row.

"Maybe," he said, adjusting the knot of his tie, "they're here for your mom."

"Oh. Right. Maybe. I bet you're right."

"Not that it really matters. Maybe people liked your uncle."

"I can't imagine," I said. "I can't imagine why."

"We don't all see everyone the same way, Danny," Berk said. Before I could respond, he laid his hand on my right thigh and pressed a finger to his lips.

The memorial was, as expected, brief. My mother said a few words, none of which I really absorbed. She wasn't shaky or slurry, nor did she shed any tears. Her voice reminded me of the hardness I felt whenever I was angry, whenever I could turn something—or someone—into glass.

My dad died three months after I accidentally transformed him. The service, like Rex's, was brief, non-religious. That day, the sky was annoyingly bright and cheerful, thick braids of light shafting through all of the windows in our house. My mother hadn't wanted a reception, but Rex insisted. People came armed with casseroles and beer. When they left, they told her not to worry about getting the Bakelite dishes back to them any time soon. Months later, when my mom finally did return them, she hadn't bothered washing a single one.

I thought my uncle had left

## Fiction

with some of my father's buddies to go drown their grief in Miller Lite and pool at a smoky bar, but when I headed toward the hall bath to pee the door opened and suddenly he was standing in front of me. I backed up against the wall, banging my head against a family photo. He and I had not spoken at the service, and I'd spent every moment we were in close proximity since my dad's death avoiding him.

He glowered at me. "What's the matter?"

I swallowed but couldn't speak. I looked away from him, adjusting the photo I'd bumped into even though it was already level.

"Look at me," he said. When I didn't, his hand shot out and grabbed my jaw, his thumb and forefinger gripping me tight, sending shocks of pain up through my gums and teeth. "I said, look at me."

I stared at my uncle. He and my father had the same bone structure: prominent cheeks, a hard, wide nose with nostrils that were perpetually flared, giving them both a dragon-like look. My uncle had thicker eyebrows that gave him a caveman vibe, though

where my dad's were green, his eyes were the color of ice. Or glass.

"You may have everyone else fooled, but not me."

"What?" I said, but it came out garbled, my jaw trapped by my uncle's hand. He let go.

"You say it was an accident. I know better."

"It was an accident," I said. "And I didn't kill him."

My uncle huffed. "Whatever you have to tell yourself."

I felt it then. The iciness slithered up my body like a snake was chuffing through my bones. Rex must have seen something shift in my eyes because he softened and leaned back. I didn't dart out a hand to grab his wrist or to push my palms against his chest or shoulders, but I did cantilever forward just so. Just enough for him to wince and step back. He let out a growl of noise but then shoved past me, careful not to touch me as he went.

I told Tommy about it, and he offered to come over, having skipped the funeral because he needed to take the ACT. I tried to turn him down but he

showed up anyway. My mom, caved up in her bedroom, didn't notice the caul of the doorbell or our footsteps as we shuffled into my room. Tommy said nothing, and instead, as soon as the door was closed, he started kissing me. I was still wearing my shirt and tie, the latter of which he started to unknot.

"What are we doing?" I mumbled, his lips still mashed against mine.

"Quiet," he said, tugging the tie away from my collar. "You need this."

"Need what?"

He pushed me onto the bed and straddled me. This was new. He was wearing athletic shorts and a plain white t-shirt, as if he'd been on a basketball court instead of hunched over scantron sheets for the last four hours. I could see the outline of his erection through the mesh of his shorts.

"Now?"

"Stop talking," he said and unbuttoned my shirt. His hands, when they found the plane of my stomach, were hot. Or maybe, I thought, I was just very, very cold.

\*

Berk and I waited while my

mother accepted condolences. We stood in the funeral home's lobby, which looked like some kind of LA mansion, a pair of staircases swooping down from a second floor on either side, crowning another viewing room straight back from the building's entrance. Bouquets of chrysanthemums and gladioli stood on half-columns.

"I guess you can tell who's who now," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Rex's friends all left without saying a word."

"Maybe they already said what they had to say."

I raised an eyebrow. Berk shrugged.

"Maybe they wrote. Or called."

I scoffed. "Not Rex's type."

Finally, my mother freed herself from her friends. She was still clear-eyed, and she huffed up to us, letting out a tired breath. "I could use a drink, yeah?"

We drove to a non-descript pub: oak bar top, heavy chairs that offered no lumbar support, too many beers on tap to choose from. My mother ordered a whiskey and diet soda,

## Fiction

Berk a sour ale, me a hefeweizen.

"To Rex," my mom said, holding up her glass. She blinked at me. Berk's foot poked my ankle.

"To Rex," I said.

The bar was mostly empty, a few men slumped over shots of gin or whiskey at the other end. The bartender, a thick-necked guy with tattooed knuckles in a black t-shirt a size too small, leaned against a cooler, rubbing at a spot on the bar.

"Funeral?" he said.

"My uncle."

He nodded. "Sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," Berk said. His shoe was still digging against my foot. I felt a small flare in my chest, but I made sure to touch only my glass, because what else could I do to it but let it be what it already was?

We drank too much, our bodies matching the slump of the men at the far end of the bar as the hours dragged on and the seats around us filled. When my mother asked the bartender if they served food, he offered us a platter of onion rings and toasted raviolis on the house, which we ate with reckless abandon, fried dough and spiced meat mingling with the

beer and booze sloughing in our stomachs. My mom shouldn't have driven us home, probably, but it was still light out when we strode out of the bar, the early-evening sunlight playing tricks on our drunken vision. The trek was only a few miles, and my mother held her hands tight around the wheel at ten and two, her head pitched forward, eyes squinting.

"I need a nap," she said as we walked in through the garage. She tossed her purse on the recliner and then stood staring at it for a long moment, Berk and I flanking her like sentinels.

"It's so empty," my mom said. Berk put his arm around her before I could. He looked at me. I looked down at my fingers, then threaded them through my mom's. She gripped mine tight, gouging her fingernails into the backs of my hands. Her skin was warm, her cheeks flush. I wanted to cool her down, but I had nothing inside me that could do anything but make her feel way too cold.

"This is where I did it," I said.

Berk was sitting on the edge

of the bed, the old twin I'd slept on throughout high school replaced by a queen. The bureau and writing desk were still in their respective corners, the latter still home to the trinkets and toys I'd collected as a child—crappy things, like an inflatable baseball bat I won during a trip to Six Flags—and the walls were still their same cerulean blue. Berk was pulling his socks off, one leg beveled over the other.

"Where you did what?"

"Ruined my dad."

Berk patted the bed beside him. When I sat, he rubbed my shoulders.

"Tell me."

"I've told you before."

"So what? Tell me again."

We fought in the living room. I asked my dad if I could get a job bussing tables at a restaurant or working at a department store or something. He'd been sitting in the recliner at the time, and he shook his head and said he wanted me to focus on school. I begged and pleaded. I had some money but not much, just whatever I'd managed to save up keeping score at basketball games at the middle school where he taught sixth grade. My parents were hard-

ly rich, but they didn't worry about paying their next bill. My dad took pride in this.

"If you need something, we can buy it for you."

"But what if I want something?" I said, which yielded only a shake of his head and a demand that I get my history grade up—his favorite subject; I had an eighty-nine average.

He turned his attention to the television, where some terrible action movie we'd seen a million times was reaching its climax. He rocked back and forth, unaware of the hardening happening under my skin, the familiar built-up calcification of my innards blooming far and wide, stunting my ears and filling my fingers and toes. I felt like I was made of stones too heavy to move, but I did move, stomping past him and huffing out teenage anger in a miasma of meaningless sound. I slammed my bedroom door, which I knew would make him angry.

"You have a way about that," Berk said, fingers digging into my shoulder blades. "You know how to make people

## Fiction

mad.”

“Is it that I make people mad or that I’m mad?”

“Little bit of A.” He tapped my side. “Go on.”

“Do I have to?”

“This will be cathartic.”

“For who?”

Berk cleared his throat.

My father had let me stew for a while, probably thinking that this would ease my temper. Instead, I spent twenty minutes staring at the popcorn ceiling and then at the posters lining my bedroom walls—Albert Pujols; the cover of *The Great Gatsby*; Ryan Adams’ *Heartbreaker*—and then the ceiling again, blank and white and giving me nowhere for the chilling, heavy anger to go. When he knocked and called my name, his voice gruff and flat, I threw myself off the bed. He opened the door without me saying anything, which only made me more upset, and he was halfway in the room when I grabbed him by the shoulder and let it all pour out. The release was swift and painful, like I’d been punched in the stomach. When I let go, he teetered and nearly fell, but I managed to hang on, my breathing hard and labored. I

concentrated, the anger sucking back up my arm and out of his body, which returned to its cool peach color, my dad’s arm hair and mustache freed to waver. He blinked at me and gasped, eyes wide. That night, I dreamt that I hadn’t caught him in time, that instead he had shattered into millions of pieces, his clothing a limp dressing covering a wound that would never heal.

I could never sleep after drinking craft beers, their fruit flavors, bourbon infusions, and various floral notes burbling in my stomach. I woke at three in the morning, mouth dry. My fists were pressed against Berk’s back, which was slick with sweat in the rivet of his spine. He was snoring, his breathing wet and liquid. I slipped out from beneath the sheets, which stuck against my waist and tried to knot up against my ankles. Berk snarled and rolled over onto his back but didn’t wake.

On my way to the kitchen I stopped at the door of my uncle’s room. When I pushed it open I expected my mother to be inside, but it was empty. You’d think I’d have felt



his presence among the mess—clothes dripped from the bureau's drawers, old sports magazines and Playboys slid from its top; the nightstand was cluttered with a bottle of men's Vaseline lotion, an old alarm clock blinking the time in hard red light, a darkened metal lamp with adjustable, snaky bulb—but I just smelled the must of unwashed skin and heard the tinkling settle of things that haven't been touched. My mom hadn't mentioned what she would do about his stuff, and I hadn't asked.

The living room was sliced with moonlight that cut through the window blinds. At some point, my mom had moved her purse from the recliner, which seemed gargantuan in the dark, a throne.

I sat.

The material was warm, like bread just baked. I put my forearms on the plush side cushions, dug my elbows into the fabric. When my dad died, I had refused to sit there, though sometimes I would stand behind the empty chair and rock it forward and back, wishing that it was my dad and not me moving it. I tried, several times, to turn it to glass, but

whenever I looked at it all I felt was sorrow.

But that night, sitting there, starlight flickering off the black of the television, the walls kaleidoscoped with moonglow, I felt a well break inside me. My father was long gone, and my uncle was too, and that meant it was my turn in the chair. I dug my fingers into the polyester, feeling the threads against my nails.

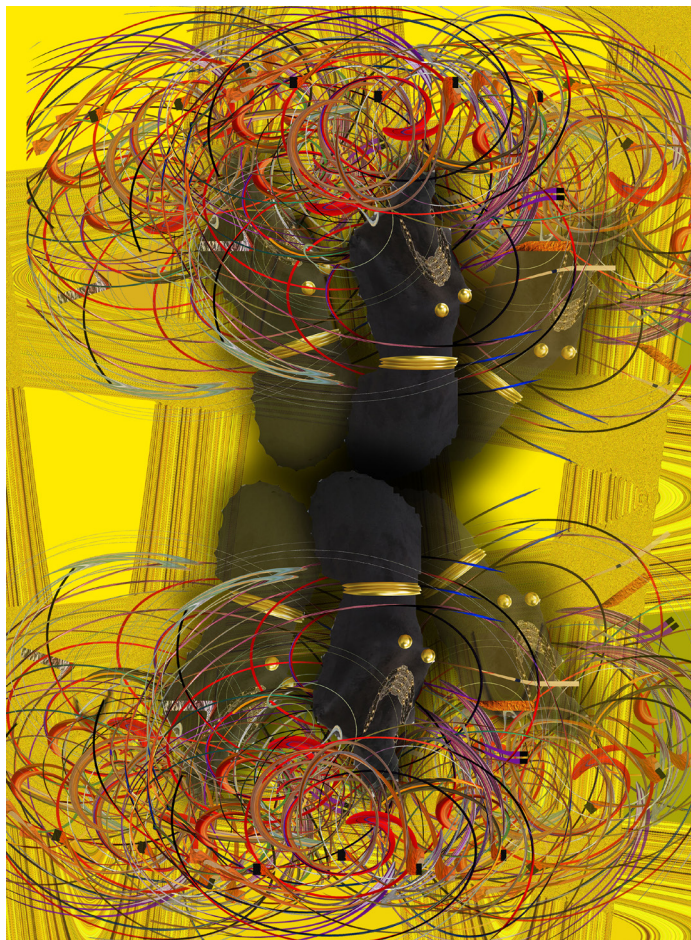
I was full of poison. My lips were chapped. My head throbbed. It took nothing to spool it out, let it snake out of me like water from a hose. In no time the chair changed; I felt it underneath me, the glassiness spreading like a fast-moving frost over the surface of a pond. Beneath my thighs the material went cold and slick, slippery and smooth. I stopped rocking for fear of breaking it.

Because I didn't want to break it. It would have been easy—so easy—to lean back and crush the chair with my hips, my shoulder blades, the strength of my triceps. I could have used gravity to tip it, send the chair falling over, let it shatter

## Fiction

beneath me, pierce my skin, cut me to ribbons, embed into my spine and bones and muscle, dig into all of the tight, sprung parts of me. But instead I stood and turned around, stared down at it like I was looking at the glossy, unmoving surface of a lake. I saw my dad, I saw my uncle, I saw me. I saw the sorrow of my mother. I saw Berk. I saw all the things I'd fractured. How easy it would have been to leave it that way, to turn away and walk into the kitchen for the glass of water I was desperate for and then to slip back into bed, to leave with Berk in the morning, to leave my mother.

I leaned forward, one hand on each arm of the chair, and drew it all back up. I felt bloated, like a cow in need of milking. Like Santa's sack as he headed out on Christmas Eve. Like I might finally be able to hold onto something without letting all of it crack out of me, edges bursting, bristling. I might sink, but I would at least take no one else down with me.



## **Triple Magic**

Monique Renee Harris

## **The Theme is Velvet**

Lindsay Phillips

The theme is velvet, she tells me as we talk about her boyfriend's Funeral (ex-boyfriend?) We are eighteen and I have never been In love but she has, she tells me, and now he's gone. She says she Worries that he's lonely because they did everything together but he Has to (had to?) do this alone. She is sitting right next to me on the Bed but she won't look at me and I wonder what it feels like to share Everything with another person. I am eighteen and I hope fiercely for Love, the kind of fierceness that makes me want to clench my fists hard.

But I am scared, too. Because I am looking at her face and I see the Carnage that can come from loving someone, I watch the collapse in Eyes that won't look at me and I don't know what to do because I have

Played with dolls on the floor of this bedroom and now we are talking

About funerals and dress codes and I didn't know when I left school For Thanksgiving break that I would be attending a funeral so I didn't

Pack any black clothes. I am eighteen and I want to be older but now

I think to myself, I don't want to be older if this is what older feels like. But I already know that I cannot go back.

The theme is velvet and I cannot go back.



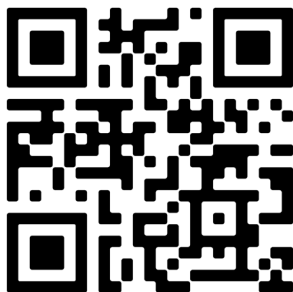
## **The Feel**

### **The Black Rifles**

This Hertfordshire UK three-piece band is truly hard-hitting with the heavy grunge sound, bullet-like drums, and sonic ejaculations from their two guitarists. The vocals are powerful and the lyrics paint a picture you can really see.

From the artist, on *The Feel*

This song was inspired by the religious paradox in which many find themselves.



## Outback

L. A. Clark

A hive of morning activity swarmed the overland trucks parked across several rows of sites at the campground in Etosha National Park where I had spent the night. Looking like a cross between a school bus and a Land Rover, each vehicle was designed to take at least a dozen people on the quintessential, multi-month African adventure from Nairobi to Capetown. Visits to the Serengeti and Victoria Falls, nightly bonfires, a guide who can also fix mechanical problems, picnic lunches, dinner barbeques, wildlife viewing, and bush camping were all part of the package.

I was on a seven-month, independent journey from Johannesburg to Addis Ababa, mostly depending on public transportation. My route and plans changed constantly thanks to chance encounters and unforeseen complications. In Namibia (I learned on arriving in Windhoek), public transportation does not reliably serve the country's most iconic sights. So with three other inde-

pendent travelers, I had gone in on a rental car for a week of manic touring. Now, we rushed to pack our tents, food, and backpacks into our tiny sedan so we could go looking for elephants and rhinos before the sun got too high. But my curiosity kept me stealing glances at the overland truck tourists.

"You've got a flat tire, mate."

One of the overlanders, an Australian making his way to the bathrooms, nodded toward our driver's side rear tire without breaking his stride. The four of us scrambled to lay eyes on it and quickly reversed our efforts, unpacking the trunk to liberate the spare. Our entire day would have to be restructured to get ourselves to a town with a garage capable of repairing a tire puncture. Until then, the threat of a second flat in this spiny, thorny terrain would have us all on edge.

As we rolled out of the campground I took one

last, longing glance toward the overland trucks. Part of me knew I would hate being trapped in close-quarters with loud, alcohol-fueled revelers for weeks at a time on a set schedule across wild Africa. I barely drink, I tend toward introversion, and though I was still a relatively youthful twenty-nine years old, many in that sun-kissed, Bohemian crowd were a decade younger. Yet I entertained a fantasy that climbing aboard a dusty overland truck in Africa might magically transform me into someone who drinks around a campfire until the wee hours under a dark sky of a trillion stars, wears a skimpy tank top sans bra, turns my hopeless pale into a deep bronze tan, and has an intense, ill-advised affair with a beautiful, reckless man. Fantasies aside, it sure would be nice not to ever worry about finding meals, locating lodging, or being responsible for the inevitable flat tires along the way.

Eight years later, in a living room in Colorado, I find myself trying to convince my 45-year-old boyfriend that we should join an overland trip traversing the out-

back of Australia. I have to admit, even to Michael, that part of my motivation is a warped nostalgia for an experience I never quite had and someone I never quite was. Michael is reasonably skeptical, arguing that we are too old and he is too shy and grouchy to enjoy such an experience even a little bit. But as we come to grips with the vast distances, dearth of public transportation, expense and liability of vehicle rental, lack of facilities (much less water), and threatening wildlife (albeit venomous snakes and spiders rather than hippos and lions) of the Australian Outback, overlanding begins to look like the lesser of many evils. Plus, the five-night overland trip from Alice Springs to Adelaide is a very different thing than three months from Kenya to South Africa. Sitting on Michael's comfy couch, we go online, find a company that limits group size to sixteen, and book it before either of us can change our minds.

Eight months after that, we stand groggily with our backpacks on the sidewalk

## Non-Fiction

outside an Alice Springs hostel before dawn on a brisk June morning. Three equally sleepy young women join us at the roadside. The 5:45 a.m. pick-up time for our tour comes and goes. Michael sighs and shifts his weight impatiently. I can feel him trying to catch my eye with a wordless message: I told you this was a terrible idea. We are in the second half of our four-month journey Down Under, and the rot in the foundation of our five-year relationship is an issue neither of us knows how to address, remedy, or even discuss. So here we stand, waiting in silence.

The deep violet of the sky begins lightening into a soft pink. It is 6:15 before a white passenger van bearing the logo of the tour company finally careens down the empty street and lurches to a halt in front of us. The tall, tanned man who swings open the driver's side door sports dark stubble and walks with a distinct swagger around the van to the sidewalk. "Don't be scared by the deep voice and the grumpy face," he says, by way of an icebreaker. "I'm not a prick. I just look like one." Checking our names against a list on a clipboard, he introduces

himself as Nolan, our guide and driver for the next six days. Nolan looks to be in his early thirties and would be distractingly handsome were it not for one diseased, gray front tooth, a laugh too impish for a man his age, and a small potbelly that (on his otherwise lanky frame) makes him look four or five months into a pregnancy. His smile is a mischievous grin complemented by a twinkle in the eye, even at this hour of the morning. Pure Aussie. Refusing our attempts to help, he tosses our bags into the van's trailer while directing us to climb aboard.

As the five of us stake out seats on the temporarily pristine van, Nolan settles back into the driver's seat and informs us that luck is already on our side. After one more stop to pick up two other travelers, our group will be complete: including him, only eight of us in this van built for seventeen. He promises a very relaxed, spacious week together on the road. I glance at Michael, relieved to see him looking pleased at the news. Then we



are off, Nolan barreling down the quiet streets of Alice Springs, squinting into the rising sun.

A full morning on the road—red and yellow desert, endless scrub, and a few wild camels—brings us to King's Canyon, known to the Aboriginals as the sacred site of Watarrka. Taking the rim hike along its steep sandstone walls, I get to know the others in our group: aside from Michael and me, there is one other American and three Germans (all female university students) plus a Brit in her late twenties called Natalie. I can tell immediately that she and I will get along well. Michael sticks close to Nolan as we walk, seeking solidarity with the only other man in the group. Occasionally, Nolan points out various medicinal plants, and we stop at striking viewpoints over the palm-filled chasm, watching its walls change to ever-more-brilliant shades of orange and red in the late afternoon light. The sun is hot but a perfect breeze surfs the canyon rim.

At one such vista toward the end of the hike, I look to Michael and find him watching

me. I smile at him, and he smiles back. When we met we were both living and working in Denver. But last year, not long after he surprised me with his decision to buy a house in the suburbs, I finally followed through with my long-term plan of quitting my office job to pursue a life of travel and contract work. Given that our relationship was already plagued by poor communication and my inability to understand or accommodate his frequent dark moods, I assumed we would break up when I left Colorado. But he wanted to try long-distance, even taking a leave of absence from his job to go on this trip with me. Now, that enormous compromise of his, my unwillingness to make an equally large compromise for him, and our inability to talk about any of it are combining to poison this trip. Despite the profound beauty we have experienced in the past couple months, I have often felt intensely lonely. I think he has, too. But not right now. Jointly appreciating this moment, everything is okay. Wonderful, even.

## Non-Fiction

Then one of the German students asks me to take her picture. After I do, she offers to take one of me and Michael. And just like that, things fall apart. Michael detests having his photo taken. If I ask him to pose with me, he will do so but be angry with me for not respecting his wishes. If I decline the photo, he will convince himself I do not really love or want to be with him. If I verbalize the predicament and ask what he prefers, he will be embarrassed. Every scenario ends with him stalking away and giving me the silent treatment for hours while he fights his mental demons. This is exactly what happens. And so I discover a benefit to overlanding aside from having someone else to plan the meals and change flat tires: there are other people around to distract from the growing, gut-level sense of relationship dread that has followed me into the dry remoteness of the Australian bush. Nolan, in particular, is a striking distraction. As we sit down to dinner at the campsite that night, he asks if any of us have done any driving while touring his country. But before anyone can answer he continues: "People say, oh, I can't drive a car in Australia

because it's on the left side of the road. And I say, then good, then you really shouldn't. If you can't drive on the left side on a totally straight, empty road in Australia, then you're a fucking retard and you shouldn't be renting a car."

He does not seem to notice the collective cringe that seizes the other native English speakers in the group at his use of the R word because he has already moved on to another topic, wanting to know: do any of us have tattoos? But again without waiting for a response, he barrels on to say,

"I think some people shouldn't get tattoos, just based on their personalities. I think, 'You look like a little bitch, and then you've got your tattoos.'" He is, simultaneously, a one-man show and a real conversation killer. I feel sorry for the three German girls, since Nolan's generally vitriolic attitude toward Germans flares anytime he sees a piece of bread (which happens at every meal) due to his conviction that they have an annoying obsession with brown bread. At lunch, he tossed a loaf

of Wonderbread onto their picnic table and announced, completely unprovoked, "I'm not going to get into a conversation about bread with Germans. Piss off it." Tonight, he starts asking whether Germany has white trash, but then instantly finds that he himself has so much he would like to say about German white trash that they have no opportunity to answer. By the time we finish dinner I am ready for sleep. Michael has avoided acknowledging me the entire evening, and my coping strategy is just to wait him out, but the tension still exhausts me. I am setting up my bedding when he finally approaches me conciliatorily.

"So, we're really going to do this?" he asks with a nervous smirk.

"Do what?" I reply, confused.

"Sleep on the ground around the campfire, out in the open, no tent, nothing?" We had read in the description of this trip that most nights our accommodation would be an Aussie "swag"—a sleeping pallet on the ground next to the fire with lots of blankets provided against the chill of nighttime in the desert.

"Yeah?" I ask, still confused. Michael and I love to camp and I expected him to adore this aspect of Australian overlanding. The black sky is insane with stars and the campfire crackles comfortingly. What could be better?

"So if you were a highly venomous Australian snake looking for warmth during a cold night in the desert, you wouldn't try to slither into a tourist's warm swag? And what about the spiders?" He rolls out his pallet directly next to mine to make a sort of double bed.

"I see your point," I laugh, knowing he is not entirely kidding. "But I'm pretty sure if there was much chance of a snake or spider cuddling up to us in the night, this wouldn't be the norm for sleeping in the Outback."

"Okay," he concedes, tossing several heavy blankets onto his pallet with decisive thuds. "But just to be sure, I am sleeping as close to you as I can possibly get, for protection."

The muted synthesizer, low electronic beat, and deep

## Non-Fiction

voice of rapper Le Le bring me to consciousness at sunrise the next morning. Nolan cooks up eggs and toast at the outdoor kitchen area of the campsite and sings along:

"You're the cheese on my baguette...the French on my toast...bitch, you're breakfast...."  
His volume increases until we are all up and out of our swags. While we eat, he outlines our day: pack up, drive three hours to Uluru, make lunch, set up camp, and then hike the Mala trail with a local guide who can give us the Aboriginal history of the site. When we all just nod silently, still half-asleep, he gleefully chides us:

"You need a fucking Nazi like me so you can really experience this, so you can really feel like you're in Australia."

I glance to Michael, who raises an eyebrow at me. Before falling asleep last night, I whispered to him that I wanted to start writing down the outrageous things Nolan says. We both sense he is good-hearted, but his word choices nearly always land somewhere between insensitive and offensive, to the extent that I will probably doubt my memory of them as soon as this trip is over. Now,

I discreetly reach for the little notebook I keep in my backpack and begin scribbling. The morning drive to Uluru is through a relentless scrubby, yellow desert. A few more wild dromedaries roam the bleak, waterless terrain. So often the past couple days, I have been reminded of traveling through Africa—less because of being on an overland trip but because of the remoteness and long drives through nearly uninhabited landscapes. Three hours on the road is over too soon.

From our campsite we cannot see Uluru (the behemoth red, domed rock that squats imposingly on the plain of this region and draws so many tourists to the center of Australia). But we got a glimpse of it on the drive in and are all excited for the close-up view. Most of the discussion in the van during the morning's drive was about who is planning to climb the rock (a bucket-list experience for some travelers) and who is not (out of concern about cultural insensitivity toward the Aboriginals for whom Uluru is a highly sacred traditional gathering place).

Nolan tells us that the Aboriginals say tourists should climb or not climb as they prefer, but does not elaborate even when pressed. My guidebook says it is not forbidden to climb the rock, but it is discouraged. Discouraged by whom, I wonder? And why not just flat out disallowed?

After lunch, Nolan says he will do the dishes while we grab our backpacks and swags and set up camp. He tosses Michael the keys to the trailer.

"Mikey, you can unload," he instructs, prompting the rest of us to roll our eyes at his obvious sexism. "I know, I know. You girls are capable of carrying your own bags," he pushes back, "but Mikey's gonna show some basic courtesy. Unlike his counterparts in Europe. Just once, I want to see a European guy say, 'Ladies. I've got this.'" My notebook is already on the table next to me (a few minutes ago he called something "boring as a badger's ass") so I start recording this latest gem. Considering all he says with no care for how it might land on the ears of his listeners, I have decided Nolan could not possibly be aware enough of anyone around him to

even notice my notebook. But I have underestimated him.

"You're not a journalist, are you?"

It takes a jab in the ribs from Michael for me to look up and realize Nolan is talking to me.

"Me? No, I'm not a journalist," I say, probably looking very guilty.

"But you've been writing down all the things I say," he observes.

"Yeah...I...I..."

Nolan bulldozes past my stammering to tell the story of how a few years ago a journalist came on one of his tours and then wrote an exposé about Nolan's racist commentary, causing a shitstorm in the local tourism industry. This somehow contributed or directly led to the tour companies now being required to hire local guides at Uluru to explain the site, supposedly with more detail and sensitivity than the tour companies' own guides could. I promise him, again, that I am not a journalist. He seems satisfied and sends us off to unload the trailer with orders to hurry because his buddy Jonah, the Uluru guide, will be arriving

## Non-Fiction

shortly to take us on our hike to the rock. As I lay out my swag, I mull over Nolan's backstory. The implication is he got in trouble not for his annoyance with Germans' bread preferences or even the well-meant but shockingly racist ways he expresses his appreciation for Asian tourists. Specifically, he must have gotten in trouble for things he said about the Aboriginals. As he has already told us (using the British word for flip-flops rather than describing his underwear, as I first assumed): "You need a fucking bogan like me—a guy who wears thongs and jeans and says exactly what he thinks—so you know you're really in Australia." My mind connects the dots: Maybe that is why he has said almost nothing to us about Aboriginal culture and history. Maybe after the journalist publicized Nolan's racist rhetoric, he was told to cut it out or lose his job? And he decided the only way he could avoid saying offensive things about the Aboriginals, given his inherently offensive way of talking about absolutely everyone, would be to say nothing at all?

When Jonah shows up at the

campground and rides with us to Uluru for a guided walk to see some of its primary indigenous rock art, we ask him to weigh in on the question of climbing the rock. He explains that Aboriginals do not ever climb Uluru, yet they do not feel that anyone can "own" it—or anything else in nature. So their cultural concept of land being communal compels them to accept tourists feeling the need to climb it. I exchange relieved glances with Natalie; his tone makes clear to us, finally, that we should keep our feet on the ground.

After the tour, Jonah sets us loose to explore. Michael has been grouchy all afternoon and hangs back now. So I set off for a solo stroll, taking Jonah's recommendation to follow a red footpath into the shadow of the rock, where some trees and bushes manage to flourish thanks to the shade and a nearby natural spring. I find the water hole tucked magically into a fecund alcove of the rock's edge and stop there for a long time, just breathing and studying the interpretive sign posted in front

of a wooden bench:

After Minyma Kuniya defeated Wati Liru, her spirit combined with her nephew's and together they became Wanampi (water snake). Wanampi lives here today and has the power to control the source of this precious water.

This is a good place to listen to the country.

Take a minute to sit down,  
Close your eyes and breathe deeply.

Enjoy this moment.

Listen to the birds.

Can you hear water trickling?

Concentrate on the wind.

Can you hear it? Feel it?

Kuniya is a strong woman,

This place has a strong feeling.

I obey and sit on the bench, full of that strong feeling. And other strong feelings. Problems enjoy road trips, too, and the problem of my dynamic with Michael sits down next to me with a nearly tangible presence. I try to just sit with it and hear what it has to say. But all I hear is gurgling water and rustling breeze. Then I hear footsteps, sense someone pausing tentatively behind me, and feel Michael's hands on my shoulders,

massaging deeply. I'm sorry, say the fingers of this man who prefers not to put anything into words. How long will we keep doing this to each other? I try silently asking him in return.

One thing Jonah said during his tour really hit me: Aboriginals only tell the beginning and the end of a story, and the rest is up to an individual to figure out. Transcribing this out of the oral tradition and onto a meta level: Life gives us the beginning (our births) and the end (the inevitability of our deaths) and we write the story between those bookends for ourselves. There are also stories within stories, where the first and last pages of a chapter already exist. I know the beginning and I am pretty sure I know the end of my story with Michael. But we are still filling the blank pages between the two.

That evening Nolan is in rare form, even for Nolan. He and Michael tend the dinner meat on the barbeque grill. One of the German women offers to help, but Nolan waves her away.

## Non-Fiction

"The barbie is men's work," he asserts.

"Sacred site," adds Michael with an authoritative nod, quite proud of his place next to Nolan.

"Dead set, Mikey," Nolan confirms. "The barbie is a sacred site for the men. Women are in the kitchen making salads. And you don't say to people, 'Oh, come over for some salads, and we'll also have some meat.' No. It's, 'Come on over and eat some meat, and the women will make some salads.' Just how it is. Dead set."

I cannot take Nolan's chauvinist diatribes seriously while a Spice Girls song blasts on his iPad playlist. Also, as we clean up after dinner, I overhear him earnestly tell Natalie: "It's always nice to have plenty of Tupperware." Once the dishes are done, we gravitate toward the warmth of the campfire. Nolan says he intends to go down the road tonight to party with a guiding buddy at another campsite and his tourists. We are all invited. I ask if Nolan's groups are usually much rowdier than us. He gives his impish laugh at my practically rhetorical question and happily goes on a

verbal tear of memories. Once he had a mother/son duo on a trip, and the mother initiated a game of strip poker that ended with her loudly cheering on her naked son as he tried to swing his penis in circles. Once, completely drunk, he rescued an even more drunken tourist who fell into a dangerously swift river in the dead of night. In the summertime, he tells us, it is so hot in the Outback—even after sundown—that everyone has to drink enough beer after dinner to pass out, as it is the only possible way to sleep for any amount of time; the extreme heat brings you to a state of meditative acceptance of the inevitability of sweat and dirt and discomfort and that is where you find your freedom. By the end of this monologue, Nolan has a look of such awe, reverence, and nostalgia on his face in the glow of the campfire that I feel a flash of real tenderness for and kinship with this man who every day makes my jaw drop with his insensitivity. There is an exquisite moment of silence after he has finally said his peace. And in that silence, I



find the freedom of knowing that people are many things at once, not all of which coexist peacefully within them.

"So, tomorrow," Nolan says, his voice devoid of its usual sarcastic edge, "up at dawn. Hike the Valley of the Winds. Back here for lunch, then back to the rock. If you want to climb Uluru, that's your chance. Otherwise, there's a ten-kilometer path that goes all the way around it. Your choice. We sleep here again tomorrow night. Just for planning purposes, who is going to climb?"

The other American on the trip and one of the German women both raise their hands. Natalie shoots me a look. I know she feels the same clarity I do after Jonah's talk and is disappointed that anyone is still considering climbing the rock.

"Nolan," she speaks up, "It really did seem like Jonah was saying we should not climb the rock. It seems quite complicated with the Aboriginal culture and I—"

"Everything with the Aboriginal people is complicated," he interrupts her, in a tone demanding that this be the last word. "It's like being in a relationship. With a

woman. Complicated. Except it's worse. Dead set." Then he stands, gathers his beer bottles, and kicks one of the logs in the fire with the thick sole of his leather boot. "I'm off," he says, tilting his head toward the party down the road. "Anyone coming along?"

Both the girls who intend to climb Uluru tomorrow afternoon say yes and hop up to follow him down the road to the ruckus. And in that moment, I have to admit to myself I will never feel inspired to rise and jump into the Bohemian travelers' melee I have been observing from the outskirts for nearly twenty years of global adventures. It is time to release my fantasy of belonging to that crowd and that culture. All I really want is to lay down alongside my tender, troubled boyfriend, bury myself under a mountain of blankets, listen to the crackling embers of the fire, think, breathe, and drift into dreaming.

Nolan subdues our expectations for the second half of the road trip by describing

## Non-Fiction

it as three days of endless driving through underwhelming landscape. But I enjoy the remote Outback scenery speeding by outside the van's enormous windows for hours upon hours. It reminds me of Botswana and the many long-distance bus rides I took through Africa. Memories of those days reconnect me with a sense of true nostalgia for the countless unforgettable experiences I did have while traveling in Africa so many years ago, rather than wondering about the ones I did not have. Plus, I think he sells short the stop we make at the fascinating opal mining town of Coober Pedy, where dynamite is sold in convenience stores in bundles called "sausages" and we sleep in an underground motel.

Over pizza outside the entrance to our cave, Nolan admits to me and Natalie that he occasionally falls asleep for a brief moment while driving this long, straight, boring highway but insists he nearly always wakes up still on the road in his proper lane. Horrified, we coordinate a rotating schedule for everyone to take turns sitting in front with him for a few hours at a time to ensure

he stays awake while driving for the rest of the trip. The next day, when we stop for a stretch break at Lake Hart, Natalie has just finished her shift and is turning the Nolan reins over to me. While the four youngest members of our group take selfies from a different viewpoint, Nolan, Natalie, Michael and I stand looking out over the shining expanse.

"Australia has another inland lake, not far from here, that is twelve kilometers below sea level," Nolan tells us, voice tinged with national pride. Michael, Natalie and I throw amused, sidelong glances at each other.

"Twelve kilometers?" Michael asks Nolan. "Are you sure about that?"

"Dead set, Mikey," comes the reply. "Twelve kilometers." Eventually we get him to admit that maybe he means twelve meters. But now I am not sure if I should believe anything he has told us over the past five days. No compensatory confidence is inspired by my conversation with Nolan during my shift with

him in the front of the van. Nor can it truly be called a conversation. I ask him occasional questions and he holds forth at length on any topic, with absolute authority. Australia's experience of World War II?: The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor was a mere pit stop on their way to bomb the city of Darwin because they were mad at Australia for refusing to accept any Japanese immigrants. The 9/11 World Trade Center terrorist attack?: Orchestrated by the American government. Global warming?: A joke. I also learn of his plans to someday run for political office in Australia.

After a while, his conspiracy theories get a little tiresome. Half-listening, I check over my shoulder to see Michael dozing peacefully in his seat, then resume gazing out the van window over the sun-scorched wilderness. My mind time-travels between now and then, Australia and Africa, this choice and that choice, one path taken instead of the other, and one path forward versus another. The vast landscape between birth and eventual death. In the rear-view: gnarled trees of experience and possibilities left behind along

the path. Stretched out ahead: a new landscape, everything about it still to be discovered. Eight intersecting stories, tucked into this van hurtling through the Australian bush under the blazing sun.

Still talking, Nolan drives on. The road rushes forward to meet us all.



## **Spring Snake**

Sara Stasi

## How I Stay Imaginary

Gabriella Adriana Iacono

I remove

all my clothes, my bones,  
hang my heavy suit

up on wire

I wash

with vinegar, I gather myself

in slices of lemon

I drink

fresh-squeezed honey

from a rock.

I bake turnovers

with pieces of me

snapped in irreparable ways.

these parts, the past,

I put them in a jar.

I carry it with me,

a determined mother-bird.

I haul my nest,

and my babes,

they gently color the ground.

I become a sign

on unglazed ceramic—

## Poetry

I wave a welcome  
across the fountain pump.

I puddle in place  
when the show is over,

I cradle  
my mouth. it empties  
this flood.

## **A poet steals the end of the world and hides it inside a cathedral**

\*Title taken from a tweet by Magic Realism Bot on twitter

DT McCrea

Everyone inside the cathedral is smoking cigarettes—Marlboro 27's. A sad song that sounds happy is playing, and someone says they wish somebody would make a happy song that sounds sad. Everyone mutters in agreement, but no one really wishes for that. The end of the world is not so much hidden as it is stored. No one knows what it looks like or where it is exactly, but they know it's inside of this cathedral, and the closed doors are the only thing keeping it there. It's like Schrödinger's apocalypse. Most of the conversation is about the end of the world, trying to guess which object it is among them. Some children run around the stage playing a game in which they touch each item declaring it the end of the world. The pulpit is the end of the world. The organ is the end of the world. The poinsettia. The stained glass. Quickly this devolves into a game of tag, the children chasing each other and declaring You're the end of the world! No, You're the end of the world! Inside of the confessional booth a philosophy student is typing a dissertation on the infinite, she thinks to herself When I finish this paper, it will surely be the end of the world. In the basement a group of people are watching a movie projected against the wall. It's one of those films where many things happen and none of them move a plot forward, but you can tell this is an intentional choice so you admire it rather than deride it. After it ends someone asks, Was that the end of the world but his lover replies We're all still here. Then they all discuss the merits of the film: its cinematography, its obvious but still moving allusions to the story of Christ balanced nicely against its use of profanity and other vulgarities. Throughout the cathedral when-

## Poetry

ever someone strikes up a conversation with a new person, they will exchange the cigarettes they're smoking and both say Wherever two or more are gathered, there you are. The Poet sits alone in the pews. Whenever anyone decides to come and ask The Poet directly where in this cathedral is the end of the world, The Poet will rise, kiss the asker on the lips and whisper And also with you.





# Immigrant Petition for Alien Workers

Angelica Esquivel

## Immigrant Petition for Alien Workers

Department of U.S.

Form I-140

|  |   |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|---|--|
|   | <b>Fee Stamp</b><br>we invade these lands<br>like some cosmos   | <b>Priority Date</b><br>  | <b>Consulate</b><br> | <b>Action Block</b><br>invade a garden we are<br>the cosmos and we are<br>the garden<br>flora as much as fauna |
|  | <b>Classification</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(1)(A) Alien of Extraordinary Ability<br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(1)(B) Outstanding Professor or Researcher<br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(1)(C) Multinational Executive or Manager<br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(2) Member of Professions with Advanced Degree/Exceptional Ability<br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(3)(A)(i) Skilled Worker<br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(3)(A)(ii) Professional<br><input type="checkbox"/> 200(b)(3)(A)(iii) Other Worker | <b>Certification</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> National Interest Waiver (NIW)<br><input type="checkbox"/> Schedule A, Group I<br><input type="checkbox"/> Schedule A, Group II |   |  |
| <b>To be completed by an Attorney or Accredited Representative (if any).</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Select this box if Form G-28 or Form G-281 is attached. |   | <b>Attorney State Bar Number (if applicable)</b><br>native as much   |   | <b>Attorney or Accredited Representative USCIS Online Account Number (if any)</b><br>as alien                  |

▶ **START HERE - Type or print in black ink.**

### Part 1. Information About the Person or Organization Filing This Petition

If an individual is filing this petition, answer **Item Numbers 1.a. - 1.e.** If a company or organization is filing this petition, answer **Item Number 2.**

- 1.a. Family Name (Last Name)
- 1.b. Given Name (First Name)
- 1.c. Middle Name
2. Company or Organization Name

### Mailing Address (USPS ZIP Code Lookup)

- 3.a. In Care Of Name
- 3.b. Street Number and Name
- 3.c. ☐ Apt. ☐ Ste. ☐ Flr.
- 3.d. City or Town
- 3.e. State  ZIP Code
- 3.g. Province
- 3.h. Postal Code
- 3.i. Country

### Other Information

4. IRS Employer Identification Number (EIN)
5. U.S. Social Security Number (SSN) (if any)
6. Online Account Number (if any)

### Part 2. Petition Type

This petition is being filed for (select **only one** box):

- 1.a. ☐ An alien of extraordinary ability.
- 1.b. ☐ An outstanding professor or researcher.
- 1.c. ☐ A multinational executive or manager.
- 1.d. ☐ A member of the professions holding an advanced degree or an alien of exceptional ability (who is **NOT** seeking a National Interest Waiver (NIW)).
- 1.e. ☐ A professional (at a minimum, possessing a bachelor's degree or a foreign degree equivalent to a U.S. bachelor's degree).
- 1.f. ☐ A skilled worker (requiring at least two years of specialized training or experience).
- 1.g. ☐ Any other worker (requiring less than two years of training or experience).
- 1.h. ☐ An alien applying for an NIW (who **IS** a member of the professions holding an advanced degree or an alien of exceptional ability).

## Music

### **RIOTS**

**LCKY,  
Meganoke, &  
Artemis**

LCKY is an NYC based  
artist and music pro-  
ducer.

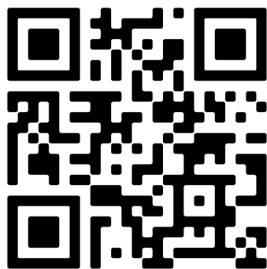
Video & music recorded  
10/31 - 11/04 2019

From the artist, on  
*RIOTS*

As artists, we had  
reasons we already  
felt were relevant, in  
making "RIOTS" as concept, theme, content creation and  
final works.

We never hoped that unfortunately,  
the work would continue to be relevant  
or reflect a current situation. We Are  
Not Ok With The State Of This Country  
& Similar Effects Around The World.  
Governments Cannot Stifle Media &  
Information That Belong To Us, The  
Public. This Is Not Entertainment Of Loss  
And Struggle, It Is Enlightening To The  
Repeating Reality & Our Responsibility  
As Individuals To Be Fly, Good People.

XXX , LCKY, MEGANOKE, ARTEMIS



## **Last Stop**

### **SG Huerta**

I stop at a Valero  
to use the bathroom nobody  
keeps clean. There stands  
the funeral director in line  
ahead of me. This Valero:  
my dad's body's last stop  
before the veterans' cemetery,  
sticky floors and cheap beer.  
Does he feel at home?  
Did he ever? I never stopped  
to think that the hearse would  
have to put gas after a three hour  
drive across South Texas. I did  
think about the bumps in the road,  
my dad's body bouncing against  
the casket. Closed casket.  
I had a hard time believing  
he was really in there. He's really in there  
became my mantra for the viewing  
during which we viewed nothing  
but masked faces, the masks soaked  
with tears. I sanitized my hands after  
each pitying, apologetic handshake  
and hug. This is conversational  
and I'm sorry. I want to have this  
conversation with my dad, I want  
to believe the bumps in the road  
didn't disturb his half-decomposed  
body. My tía told me I have my own  
personal angel now. That terrifies me.  
Dad, can angel wings decompose?

## **Small Talk Backstage at Wheel of Fortune**

W. T. Paterson

Randy had his feet on the coffee table, dirty socks with the holes, bottle of beer resting on his round belly, laughing at an advertisement on TV when Sandra got the congratulatory email from Wheel of Fortune. She nearly toppled forward and dropped her bag of groceries at the sight. It was, hands down, the most interesting thing to ever happen to her.

"Boys, empty the car please," she called upstairs.

"Look at this," Randy said, pointing at the screen. "An ad for hearing aids!"

"Ok," Sandra said, scrolling through the text of the email.

"The people who need it most can't even hear it! Hilarious!"

Dear Sandra Wellworth,  
CONGRATULATIONS!

We receive thousands of auditions every day, but our producers have chosen you to be a participant on WHEEL OF FORTUNE. Please respond to this email within 48 hours to confirm your willingness and we will forward the necessary paperwork.

"Boys!" Sandra called again.

"Leave'm be. I'll lace up," Randy said. He stamped his bottle onto the coffee table next to a coaster and shoved his feet into the worn-out work boots beneath. Standing with a wince and a hand to his lower back, he hobbled out the front door to Sandra's car parked along the noisy suburban curb. Sandra watched him load his arms with flimsy plastic bags bursting with produce and store-brand ice cream and generic potato chips, and went back to her email like a secret affair with a dreamy lover. She replied in all caps.

YES I CAN'T WAIT  
THANK UYO SO MUCH IS  
THERE AONTHER EMAIL OH  
WAIT YOU SAID THERE WAS  
I'LL WATCH FOR IT.

Randy lumbered through the door as one of the boys upstairs hollered in pain followed by his brother telling him to quit being such a baby.

"Boys!" Randy shouted,

and all noise ceased. "What's the damage? And what's for dinner?" he asked half-limping into the kitchen and looking at the grocery receipt.

"Taco Tuesday," Sandra said, and took the receipt from her husband. "Eighteen forty-one total. Now go sit down like the doctor said. Your back and legs won't heal otherwise."

"Ah, doctor-shmockter," Randy said. He waited until his wife turned around to write \$81.41 on the budget chart hanging from a magnet on the fridge. Then, he hobbled back to his spot on the couch and let himself fall onto the cushions with a strained groan. A life of physical labor, Randy's already-broken body was backed into by the foreman's son trying to parallel park and the union sent him home on semi-paid leave until he was fit to work again.

That had been three months ago, and Sandra had since made a list of injury attorneys that advertised during Wheel. While the medical bills piled up,

their bank account felt the very real pinch of what might be an early retirement. If the boys had any shot of college—lord knows scholarships were out of the question once they showed signs of that reading thing that Sandra had where sometimes letters and numbers switched around—they needed a lump sum of cash from somewhere.

The boys thundered down the stairs and rifled through the bags. They tore open chips and cookies and shoved handfuls into their mouths while Sandra shrieked for them to knock it off, that it would ruin their dinner, that they needed to put the food away instead of being little piggies.

"What's for dinner?" they asked, chomping down snacks and moving around the kitchen in dizzying circles to put away the more boring foods.

"Taco Tuesday," Sandra said, and the boys high-fived. They left the empty

## Fiction

plastic bags on the countertop and joined their father on the couch. Sandra caught a glimpse of herself in the dark kitchen window. A life of housework and raising two boys had gifted her the physique of a farmer's wife. Sturdy but set. Top-heavy with knees no longer built for gymnastics.

"I want us to start eating healthier. As a family," she said, and pushed her shoulders back.

"It's ok, Ma," one of the boys said, pointing at an ad on TV. "They've got pills for diabetes now."

"It's pronounced dia-bee-tus," the other boy grinned, and the three males shared a deep laugh while Sandra fired up the stovetop to brown the ground beef.

Plates cleared of everything but crumbs, the four watched Wheel of Fortune from their spots on the couch and loveseat. Randy was bookended by the boys while Sandra had the loveseat to herself.

"Loose Lips Sink Ships!" Randy said, and sat back proudly. The contestants on screen seemed baffled by the partially solved puzzle.

\_OOS\_ \_ \_ \_ S S \_ N \_ S \_ \_ \_ S  
stared them down like the Cheshire cat as they guessed 'T' and 'R' and 'Can I buy a U?' to no avail.

"Nice, dad!" one of the boys said. "You should be on this show."

"Nah, it's built for morons," Randy said. "A game so simple, the goal is to spell words. Not even hard words! Just words. The categories are simpler than simple. People, Places, and Things! Ha! What a crock."

Sandra wanted to break the big news, but what would she tell them when they asked about her audition? Well, this moron had a second glass of wine and recorded herself playing the online version of the game while your father was passed out from pain meds, and you boys were glued to their videogames upstairs, and that was all it took.

"Let's pretend we're contestants. How would you introduce yourself?" Sandra asked.

"That I'm the best at owning noobs in Call of Duty,"

the older boy said.

"No, I am!" the younger said, and a wrestling match erupted across Randy's large torso.

"Take it to the floor, hooligans!" he said, and shoved them to the carpet.

"Boys!" Sandra said, and then daydreamed what her introduction might be. There was the time on her honeymoon in Maui when Randy pointed to the ocean and a dolphin swam by. Or she could mention how, at the coffee shop, she thought she was buying a blueberry muffin, but it ended up being chocolate chip, and now chocolate chip muffins are her favorite. Maybe she could tell the story of when she did a cartwheel on the dancefloor in seventh grade, and one of the popular kids from the soccer team gave her a high five.

"Ma," one of the boys said, as his face turned purple from a headlock. "You should talk about how you were cleaning the tub that time and fell forward and got stuck and dad had to come home to get you out!"

The boys howled as they tumbled across the floor.

Sandra sat back, wound-

ed. Was that how her family saw her?

"Tell'em how you caught that raccoon in the attic by feeding it cookies until it was too fat to move and eventually had a heart attack," Randy said.

"That's not funny," Sandra said, as though Randy had spoken ill of a departed friend.

On screen, Pat Sajak checked his notes and smiled as the contestants continued to guess letters until someone finally said 'P' and broke the puzzle wide open.

"What's for dessert?" the older boy asked.

"I'm going to be on Wheel of Fortune!" Sandy said, standing up and stomping her foot. The room went quiet. "I auditioned, and they accepted me, and I don't appreciate the jokes!"

The boys stopped wrestling. Randy turned his torso toward the loveseat.

"This show?" he asked, as an ad for heart medication played. "Darling, that's amazing!"

## Fiction

"Mom's going to be on TV!" the boys chanted. They scampered up to clear the plates from the coffee table and make room for the would-be family champion to claim her new spot front and center on the couch. Sandra sat next to Randy to play out the rest of the episode feeling like she was in seventh grade having just done a cartwheel in front of the girls' soccer team.

After a few days, Wheel of Fortune's digital documents arrived. The show covered round-trip flights (business class!), hotel (look at that comforter!), shuttle transportation (my own driver!), hair and makeup (I'm a star!) and a contestant meal backstage (my own chef!). Contestants were not to approach Pat Sajak or Vanna White for any reason unless it was a designated interaction for taping, contestants should pre-plan a twenty second introduction with a fun, family friendly fact about themselves, and contestants weighing over two hundred and fifty pounds must notify producers 72 hours before filming.

Sandra stepped on the scale. Two-hundred and five pounds, not the young gymnast

she used to be, but not the still not the ogre time had tried to force upon her.

With Randy asleep in their bed snoring and twitching from the pills, groaning at a dream that ailed his slumber, Sandra logged onto Facebook to research winning strategies for Wheel. Would she post about her upcoming visit ahead of time? Or wait, what did the contract say? Shows are filmed three months in advance of the air date. Episodes are subject to editing. Producers reserve the right to withhold episodes in the event of an incident – See below. Incidents included foul language, visible tattoos, obscene gestures, injury, wardrobe malfunctions, threats of violence, etc, none of which seemed a problem for Sandra although she chuckled at the idea. How many upset contestants had sworn, or thrown tantrums, or let slip a cuss word? Enough to warrant rules and waivers apparently.

She found a Facebook group of previous contestants who shared their stories of prizes and cash. Most cautioned



readers about taxes and such, but everyone seemed pleasant. It was in the comments section where people who had never been on the show raged with venom. The weight limit is body shaming! One person wrote.

Wheel of Fortune is just a 30-minute ad full of product placement. Fatties can't sell products, idiot! The person below them wrote. Heavy people have to have their stoop lowered so they don't fall onto the wheel when they spin, a third wrote.

Sandra felt her heart thump into her neck. Her shoulders tensed. Why was there so much hate for one America's favorite pastimes? What type of meaningless lives did people lead that drove them to cut down the success of others online? At least she wasn't like them, even if her life was a constant cycle of cleaning, feeding, tending, and driving. The boys had school and sports, and their appetite was enormous, and Randy had doctor visits, and his medicine made him extra hungry and extra sleepy, and there weren't enough hours in the day to vacuum, and food shop, and clean the pots and pans. The

hour that Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy aired was the only time in her day where she found quiet moments with her family, even if they shouted answers at the television. She felt quietly connected to them because they all shared a common goal – solve the puzzles and answer the questions. Now, she had the chance to capture their full attention and bring home some much-needed cash in one fell swoop. It filled her with the type of pride that made her feel invincible, and so she typed a response to those online trolls. **AT LEAST THEY HAVE A INTERESTING STORY TOO TELL NOW!!!!**

It felt good, like being handed a cherry popsicle on a summer day, or opening the refrigerator to find it fully stocked and sorted. What could they possibly say to that? Feeling confident, she clicked on her profile to scroll through Facebook page and look at old pictures.

There were the birth-day pictures of the boys smiling and roughhousing through the years. There was Randy opening

## Fiction

his Christmas gifts of work gloves and winter hats last Christmas. She paused at the honeymoon picture from Maui when she and Randy lived in younger bodies and the boys were nothing more than a daydream. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel the prickly heat of the tropical sun and smell the fragrant hibiscus breeze, could still hear sing-song accents of the local surfers explaining that Aloha meant both hello and goodbye. Sandra soaked it all up and savored the memory wondering how a simple girl like her had ever been so lucky. Looking at the picture brought unexpected nostalgia, and she felt sad that moments were fast and fleeting. The big moments came and went along with the everyday drudgery of domestic life, which made them feel like they never happened at all.

Just as she was about to sign off and go to bed, a notification popped up that someone had commented on her comment in the Fans of Wheel of Fortune page. She clicked over. Game Show contestants are literally the most boring people on the planet, the commenter wrote, and

Sandra turned off the computer to sit quietly in the dark.

Randy and the boys drove Sandra to Logan International Airport for the flight to California. They hugged her, wished her well, and Sandra promised to give them something extra special to talk about, something exciting.

"Just have fun," Randy said, and then kissed her forehead.

"And get super rich!" the boys said, eclipsing her inside of their awkward teenage-boy hug.

She checked in at a kiosk taking note of how all airports smelled the same – recycled air and scorched rubber – and wandered to two wrong gates before finding the correct California flight. Something about how the terminals labeled everything didn't seem to match her ticket. 11B, or 1B1, or why couldn't they just call it what they called it? Nonetheless, she found a seat and told anyone who would listen that she was going to be on television.

"Well done," an older

gentleman said, and then asked if he could plug his phone into the outlet near her feet.

The flight was long, but fine. The back of the seats had televisions with more to watch than one person could ever hope for, so she watched reruns of *Wheel of Fortune* on demand as a way to gain a competitive advantage.

A shuttle with a driver named Ahmed picked her up from an airport and brought her to the hotel for check-in. Once inside the queen deluxe, she dressed in the outfit reserved for Tupperware parties – a blue and airy sleeveless top that went to her thighs, and cream-colored khaki pants. When she went down to meet up with the driver and get to the studio, she secretly hoped Ahmed wouldn't recognize her. But he did, and Sandra reasoned that it was his job to recognize people.

At the studio, a producer in a headset led her inside and pointed out the contestant's waiting room with televisions, mirrors, and couches, the room for hair and make-up, and craft services.

"Real quick," the pro-

ducer said in a hushed voice, "what's your weight?"

"Two-oh-five" Sandra smiled, masking the sudden hurt of the question.

"You're certain?" the producer whispered, and Sandra nodded remembering the reading from the scale just a few days ago. The producer smiled an uneasy smile as they walked away.

In the dressing room, she said hello to the two other contestants – a man with bright red curly hair in a tweed blazer who blinked at twice the normal rate, and a woman with perfect posture and shining white teeth in a dress suit.

"What are your fun facts?" the guy asked.

"I have three cats, and I volunteer at an animal shelter," the dress-suit woman said.

"Me? I've completed over five-hundred puzzles," the red-head guy said, blinking.

"I have two wonderful boys and a loving husband," Sandra said.

"This is going to be fun," the dress-suit said, and all three sat on separate couches

## Fiction

smiling at each other for an hour until a PA collected them for the pre-show meal.

And just like that, it was places.

A producer walked the contestants to the podium and had them practice spinning the wheel to get a feel for it. When Sandra gave her test spin, she had to catch herself on the lip of the podium, her thighs catching the forward-leaning weight, because the thing was heavier than she imagined. She wondered if she might need to get her platform lowered, but was there even time? Besides, she was only two-oh-five. Unless...

"Remember," the producer said, "this is a game. Smile when you win, smile when you don't."

The studio audience filed in and the contestants waited patiently until the lights went out, the music came on, and Pat Sajak walked onto the floor with Vanna White. Sandra watched, starstruck.

They jumped right into the first puzzle. Event. Two words. Four letters, seven letters. Sandra spun and landed on \$500.

"T" Sandra guessed.

"There are two T's" Pat

Sajak said.

"I'd like to buy an A,"

Sandra said.

"There is one A," Pat said.

TA\_\_T\_\_\_\_A\_

the puzzle read. Sandra spun again and landed on \$800. She guessed "Y", and there was one way after the A.

T A\_\_T\_\_\_\_A Y.

Of course! It was so obvious. Up eighteen-hundred dollars, she made the leap and said she'd like to solve the puzzle.

"Tank Truckway," she said proudly, and waited for the music to celebrate the victory.

Instead, buzzers.

"Well, not quite," Pat said. Next up, the blinking man with red hair said he'd like to solve.

"Taco Tuesday," he said, and the triumphant lights flashed as the audience applauded. Sandra felt immediately and horribly self-conscious. What would her family think when this episode aired and they watched her make such a moronic bumble? What would the online forums say?

Pat Sajak began his contestant introductions.

"It says here that you, Sean, have completed over five-hundred puzzles. Isn't that something?"

"Yes, it started as a kid during family vacations, and I just kept on going from there," he smiled, and blinked.

Pat moved on to the next woman.

"Elaine, you have three cats?"

"Buster, Penny, and Jojo," she smiled. "We watch this show together every night."

Pat swung back around to Sandra.

"Sandra, you are the proud mother of two boys," he said, and Sandra sucked it up.

"Yes. Hello boys, and hello to my wonderful and supportive husband Randy!"

"Hello, boys, hello, Randy," Pat said. "Let's see if you can bring them home some money. Our next puzzle is What are you Doing?"

Five words. Two letters (split by an apostrophe), six letters, four letters, two letters, four letters.

Sean spun and landed on

\$300.

"T" he guessed, and there was one T in the final word, second-to-last letter. He spun again. \$450. He guessed L, and there were three L's. He bought an A, and there were two A's. Sandra thought she knew it, and one or two more letters would seal it.

' \_ \_ L A \_ \_ \_ \_ A L  
L \_ \_ \_ T \_

Sean spun again. Bankrupt. Slide-whistle sound effect. Onto Elaine who spun and landed on \$1,000.

"Y" she guessed, and there were two Y's.

' \_ \_ L A Y \_ \_ \_ A L  
L \_ \_ \_ T Y. Elaine bought an I. Two I's.

I' \_ \_ L A Y I \_ \_ \_ A L L  
\_ \_ \_ \_ T Y. Elaine spun.

I'm playing and Carl is Dirty, Sandra thought. The phrase replayed in her head like a broken record. Everything fit, she just knew it.

Elaine landed on Lose a turn. Back to Sandra.

"I'd like to solve," she said. Here it was: redemption. "I'm playing and Carl is Dirty."

Again, no music. Again,

## Fiction

buzzers.

"I think you added some extra words and letters there," Pat Sajak smiled.

"I'd like to solve," Sean said. "I'm Playing Call of Duty."

Again, music for Sean.

Applause for Sean.

The feeling of humiliation crept across Sandra's body and held her captive. That was two bombs on national television in a game so simple, it was built for morons. Yet, there she was getting simple answers wrong. Her boys would have a meltdown when they saw this one, and how could she laugh it off? How could she hide the shame? The only validation would be a big win, but the second guessing had already started as the next rounds went by in a sort of blur. She guessed letters, and some of them were correct, but made no attempts at the solves. It was like the game show preyed on her inability to focus on a singular task. It was like the gameshow knew she spent all of her free time running errands, and cleaning, and cooking, and driving to ever slow down and read, to ever step back and look at the larger situation. Sandra wondered

if maybe that was the point.

This wasn't a game for the super smart and elite, it was a game for the tired and worn-out, a way for the working class to feel special.

During a commercial break, Pat Sajak made pleasant small talk with the contestants about the weather, and he assured Sandra that she could still make a comeback. Sandra knew he was just being nice – it was his job to be nice – so she didn't fully buy into the idea of a win. Had the producers mentioned anything about a do over? A mulligan? Maybe if she swore...

The lights came back up and the second to last round began, the round for all the marbles if she had any shot of making some real cash and winning the final round for all the marbles. The much-needed marbles to fund Randy's recovery and not worry about grocery bills. The boys-can-afford-to-go-to-college marbles. One last round.

The board lit up and Vanna clapped from her post on the side of the enormous

blank spaces. The category was "Phrase". Five words. Five letters, five letters, five letters, three letters, seven letters.

Elaine spun. Her blazer caught the light like an angelic halo and Sandra did her best to smile through the building frustration.

"T" the woman said.

"Sorry, no T's" Pat said. Sandra's turn. She spun the wheel. \$1500.

"S" she said, and there was one 's' at the end of the second letter. Another spin. \$700.

"L" she said, and there were three l's.

    \_L \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ S \_ \_ LL \_  
 \_ \_ \_ \_ \_

She needed another clue, one more to break the puzzle open, it's how it always worked. She needed to buy a vowel, but the most common letter "e" was too sure of a shot for the final round. That's how they shook things up, she saw it happen too many times on the flight while watching reruns. That, and when contestants knew the answers but got greedy and kept spinning until they hit the inevitable bankrupt slot.

"I'd like to buy an...O," she said, and four space holders lit up.

    \_LO \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ S \_ \_ LL  
 O \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ OO \_ \_ \_ \_

No, she thought, remembering coconut drinks with tiny umbrellas and dolphins swimming just beyond the crash of the waves. Could it be?

She spun again. \$1500.

"H" she said, and two more letters lit up.

    \_LOH\_ \_ \_ \_ \_ S H \_  
 LL O \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ OO \_ \_ \_ \_

Aloha Means Hello and Goodbye, she was certain! More than certain, she was willing to face down the giant wheel of fortune and fight against the looming bankrupts to clear the puzzle and bring home the cash.

She spun again. \$400.

"M" she said, and there was one M. She spun and landed on a sparkling \$10,000 slot.

"D" she said, and there were two D's

    \_LOH\_ M \_ \_ \_ \_ S H \_  
 LL O \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ D \_ \_ \_ \_

"I'd like to buy an A" she said, just to make double-damn sure this puzzle was on lock.

## Fiction

There were four A's.

ALOHA M \_ A \_ S H \_ LL  
O A \_ D \_ OO D \_ \_ \_

She spun. \$650 and guessed N, of which there were two. Another spin. \$700, and she guessed a Y, of which there was one. Another spin, \$1000, and she guessed B. There was one B. ALOHA M \_ ANS H \_ LLO AND \_ OODBY \_

No need to buy a vowel and waste money, one final spin to secure the last letter, solve the puzzle, and go onto the final round for a shot at even more money! As long as she didn't lose a turn or go bankrupt, she had this game on lock.

Joy filled her stomach and made her feel light. Her family would be so proud and forever get to tell the tale of how their mother went on Wheel of Fortune and won the whole shebang. They'd have an interesting story to tell at parties, and college applications, and job interviews for the rest of their lives. As long as that wheel landed on a number, Sandra would be golden. Feeling the rush of victory, she bent over a little too fast and spun the wheel with a little too much force, which caused her to lose

balance. Before she had time to brace, her legs went up above her head and she toppled over the podium falling shoulder-first onto the spinning wheel. She saw Pat Sajak reach out as though in slow motion. The audience gasped, but no producers called for a commercial break. Instead, the wheel clicked to a stop on "bankrupt" as Sandra stared up into the bright studio lights. Overcome with a tranquil calm, she knew she'd be leaving the studio that night with something that no other contestant that could – a story that lived in infamy – and even though she lost the money, and Sean solved, and his total beat hers out, she understood that some things were more important. Oh yes, sometimes all the marbles meant being the butt of the greatest story ever told, and that was far better than any consolation prize those advertisers had waiting in the back. No longer was she just a mother, a wife, or an errand-runner, she was the woman who fell onto the wheel during Wheel of Fortune and lived to tell the tale.





**Cosmic Dreams**  
Jennifer Weigel

## **Achluophobia**

**Violet Mitchell**

I was watching your yellow handkerchief  
swirl from your pocket like a magic trick. If  
I heard the hammer slip from your hand &  
it hit the concrete before your knee —  
that ground, that floor, & your balance —      such uncontrollable  
weather.

If I heard your glasses break against  
your palms, cut your eyebrow, If I heard  
your groans of a body coming back to life —

It rains & I see your rocking chair.

It rains. It rains & I am afraid the wind  
will knock you right over.

You silhouetted against storm —  
beautiful, like something dying.

I choose darkness.

I choose static, voices in stereo  
coming from behind me, beside me,  
from inside. I want to follow the sun.  
I want a halo & a stripe down my back.  
It rains.

You sound stiff & barnacled like a dying whale.  
(Where did you come from?)      I seem  
to keep referring to myself as a dying star.  
It rains & the moon  
blurs.

I cannot take your hand take the rain  
cannot wipe the blood away from your brow, the rusty  
ooze like a thick syrup I cannot  
give you my mask give you my hand to hold

Your eyes are wet like the                      ground but we are  
strangers

## Performance



Please utilize the QR Code to view this performance. Note, it will also be available for viewing, for the duration of this volume, on the Defunkt Magazine website.

## **Man Feed; Thing; to Me**

**Brittney Graves**

This video performance was a reaction to how capitalism and sexism have silenced my voice or ability to express myself. The imagery was inspired by dreams I had in the past and dream symbolism.

## At the Embassy

Catherine Farber

The chants of Death to America tended to wane in the one o'clock hour: even the most fanatical Yankee-Go-Home protesters demanded lunch breaks. But today, the multilingual assault continued unabated.

Ambassador Bridger's feet fumbled in the campground detritus beneath her desk – finding the black Rothys flats that had survived three postings, and the still-more-dire bouts of home leave occupying her sister's spare bedroom. The right scraped her bunion. She stood straighter and strode toward the Regional Security Office. Felix, a veteran of Sana'a and Baghdad, indicated a chair.

"When did you all pack it in last night?" she asked, gesturing to the coffee-cup-cabal on his desk.

Felix pinched the inside corners of his eyes. "Ma'am," he said, "They've got catering now."

"Midnight?" she persisted. Felix frowned.

Ambassador Bridger

deferred to expediency. "Courtesy of the Liberation Front? Or is this another of Colonel Baba's attempts to play both ends against the middle?" Felix said, "Abdul's looking into it." Abdul, a former police detective, had earned his annual salary within three days of hire. "He noted the food trucks aren't taking money. And Public Affairs says folks are retweeting free-plate updates." Felix's unsteady gesture knocked over the pen cup; Ambassador Bridger scooped up the writing implements and replaced them. "And the night before last?" Felix shrugged.

"Before that?"

"I told Abdul to go home after briefing Elizabeth," he said. "He won't."

"We can't afford to have him burning out." She rose.

Felix pressed his thumb and forefinger against his nose. "I'm going to do my daily walk-around, so I'll be out of my

## Fiction

office for a while," she said.

"Ma'am..."

"The couch is clear and there's a pillow in the closet," she said, pausing at the door. "I expect an award nomination for Abdul by Friday."

Felix, reverently: "Yes, ma'am –"

Jing ignored the unabated intonations. She presented Leila, her local-hire Public Affairs Specialist, with cleared points – a Tweet thread in English, soon-to-be replicated in multiple foreign language incarnations after Leila's skilled renderings. It elucidated that the United States 1) respected the demonstrators' rights to assemble, 2) encouraged respectful debate, and 3) continued to object to calls for violence against Americans. Leila glanced toward her phone.

"I hope he's OK," said Jing.

Leila's husband was a journalist covering the protests.

"He's fine," snapped Leila, snatching the points, glaring at her phone again.

Jing said, slyly, "He probably got his interview with Colonel Baba."

Leila flashed a half-exasperated

smile –

Elizabeth discreetly vomited into her trash can, sprayed Febreze inside, tied up the bag, and finished her cable draft.

Josh poked a concerned head around the cubicle wall.

Elizabeth rested a hand on her midsection. "I'll tell the ambassador when things settle down. But if I mention it now, Washington will insist on a medevac. And I don't want to make our motorpool colleagues run a mob-gamut to the airport."

"Good call," observed Josh. Set a fresh water bottle on her desk –

BOOM –



**Hunger Desire**  
Kateryna Bortsova

## **Transfiguration**

**Autumn Bernhardt**

I am Cinderella in crepe soled work boots  
waiting for a brown savior in a tube top  
to jump the hedge and pull the trigger  
on a caliber of love  
she might not be up for.

I've been waiting a while now  
and maybe the devil is right  
“... it's just too late for me.”

I will tell you some things before I go though.  
I was star born of rebellion and earth horses  
but spent most of my time in the Elysian Fields  
of scape goats.

My Red Road is lit by the psychedelic blur  
of gas lights and the  
veiled threat of light pollution.

Yet, here I am on Monday  
worried about billable hours  
for blood  
that don't have my best interest  
in heart or mind,  
sheltering against the frigid wind,  
and the ache of broken cartilage.

Sometimes, I am held together  
only by the true blue casualty of strangers.  
But what else do I have to speak of



other than what was promised  
by the strength of heaven?

I fight thunder and stars  
and listen to holy elk.  
I need the glamorous ones  
to not only be drawn  
but to stay for an afternoon or more.



## **Trenal Original Beadwork**

Kellen Trenal

## The Wino & I Know

J. T. Townley

I catch her staring at me with her one good eye. The other hides behind a patch to make a pirate proud. She idles on The Drag, cradling a gigantic guitar case that dwarfs her petite frame. In the spring sunshine, she shimmers a little around the edges, like a mirage.

Now she takes out her guitar and strums one chord, followed by another. When she begins playing a jangly rhythm, people slow, stop, and stare, mesmerized. By the time she starts in on the melody, a crowd has gathered, clogging up the sidewalk. I'm right there with them. So is the wino.

Lupe, as I learn to call her, ain't some run-of-the-mill street-corner singer. Not that I'm the world's greatest expert, but anybody can tell she's got talent. When she wraps up her set, I'm the lone straggler, besides the wino, babbling drunk at her feet. Where I get the gall to approach her, I know not.

"That was outstandin,"

says I.

She grins.

"You got real talent."

"Gracias."

I nod and keep right on standing there, shifting my weight from one boot to the other. It gets real awkward. But I sense there's something going on between us, a charge, you might call it, and I don't want to let it go. Just because you ain't looking don't mean you won't find something, right? I got Cindy at home, holding down the fort. That ain't the issue. It's something else altogether.

Now Lupe gives me this up-from-under look, all batting eyelashes and puppy-dog eyes—or eye, given the patch situation. "You could do maybe a favor for me?"

"Sure, darlin," I say.

She opens her case, puts her instrument away, and locks the fancy bronze latches. "Carry my guitar?"

"I don't see why not."

I lean over and grab the case

## Fiction

by the handle, nodding toward the wino wrapped up in his filthy trench coat. "He a friend of yours?"

"Who?"

That answers that. "Now where you headed, darlin'?"

She sparkles around the edges.

"You got a car?" she says.

"Uh-huh."

"Let's get outta here."

Me and Lupe and the wino push my old Caddy up North Lamar for a while, till she says to hang a Louie. When we hit Mopac, we head back south over the river, and she has me pull into Zilker Park. It seems she and the wino have some business. Outta the corner of my eye, I spy them slapping palms with a hippie type sporting a giant beard, sunglasses, and lots of beads. The wino stuffs something into the pocket of his filthy trench coat. They're all grins and furtive smiles when they climb back into the car.

After the pitstop, we head east on Oltorf. Then, via some crazy shortcut, we cross back over the river and wind up in East Austin. I keep waiting for Lupe to call another unplanned stop, but she has me turn left again when we hit MLK. We ride it under the

interstate back downtown.

Another couple turns, and we're on The Drag again, back where we started, more or less.

"Left here," says Lupe.

That puts us on 23rd, right near the Co-op. "Now what?"

"Now right."

I ease into a parking lot. It's mostly empty. Lupe points and says, "Just there."

The wino's already outta the car, listing across the pitted asphalt and lighting a fire in a fire pit made from an old oil drum. He flops into a lawn chair and guzzles a bottle of Strawberry Hill from a paper bag. Behind him is a parked old school bus somebody muralized in big, bold splashes of color. Looks like they ain't quite done yet.

In the dusky light, Lupe shimmers around the edges. I figure that old bus will be a rust bucket, but what do I know? Up close and personal, it don't look half-bad. Me and Lupe gaze on in admiration. Then she unlocks the door, and we climb inside.

The place is cozy. Even

in the dirty streetlight, I can see that. Lupe turns on these little twinklers she's strung above the curtained windows all the way around the interior, and they light the place up like Christmas. She's laid a colorful rug on the floor. She's put throw pillows all over the place. She's covered the bed in the back with one of them Mexican blankets from the mercado down in San Antone.

I ease into one of the swivel chairs. Lupe slides onto the bed, dress riding up her copper thighs. She's giving me this sultry gaze with those big brown eyes and showing off her cleavage. The girl's a looker, no doubt about it.

"Is late," she says.

The fake Tök-Jaar I managed not to hock says otherwise. She piles her thick black hair on top of her head, then lets it cascade back down over her shoulders. "And very cold outside."

"Maybe if you're from a tropical isle."

Lupe gives me a moue, but not like a cow. She has pouty lips and a furrowed brow. "You like maybe to stay?"

Without thinking, I say, "You got it, darlin'."

The very next day, I decide to back Lupe all the way down the line, and I tell her as much.

"I'm gonna take you to the top."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Take a look at your new manager."

She gives me a skeptical smirk.

"What you know about the music biz, Jake Starr?" That was my songwriting name for a time. It didn't stick, since I didn't write many songs— nothing you could call good, anyway. Where Lupe learned it, I haven't got the foggiest. As to her point, maybe I don't know jack squat, but when have I ever let that stop me?

Next morning, caffeine jolting through my veins, I get after it. I just belly up to the pay phone on the corner and start plugging quarters. Lupe stays home to write an album of award winning songs.

I resolve to start at the top.

"Eno's," says the guy.

"Got a new act you'll wanna hear. Singer-songwriter in the blues, folk, and Americana tradition. What open

## Fiction

dates you got in the upcomin?”

“You need to contact the booking people.”

“What’s that number, if you please?”

He gives it to me, begrudging every digit. Maybe he’s hungover. I scribble it in the air, then ask him to repeat it. Measure twice, cut once, as they say.

I plug another quarter, but can’t get nobody to give me the straight story, despite my tenacious spirit. I get the runaround from all the best venues: Mainland and Bub’s, Gear-Up Gary’s and Keyhole Club. The girl at State Line simply says, “That’s not how it works”—click, dial tone, end of discussion. I stand there so long, the operator comes on and kindly commands that I place the receiver back in the cradle before she has to sick the law on me. I follow orders. Then, dazed, I stumble out into the harsh spring sunshine. When I get back to Lupe’s, the wino’s MIA. A double-time chord progression in some minor key pours outta the bus, along with her voice singing this intense melody that pulls me up short. All the words are Spanish, so I don’t catch but ojos and llorar. That

don’t matter. It’s the sentiment of the thing that gets to me: loss, grief, desolation. I stand there on the chipped asphalt, eyes closed, till the last chord resolves and Lupe’s voice dissipates into oblivion. I have to will myself not to weep.

“Why you standing there like some loco?” She studies me from one of the windows, her edges wavy and indistinct. I blink a tear or two away.

“That was some powerful music, sugar.”

She messes with her hair. There’s something different about her.

“Wasn’t your patch on the other eye?”

“Ha ha,” she says, switching it from one eye to the other and back. It’s like the shell game: I can’t remember which eye it covered first. “It fits both, yes?”

I force a laugh. By now, I’m inside the bus. “You make that ditty up all by your lonesome?” She nods.

“Well, then, what do you say about hittin the big time?”

A sweet smile unfurls.

“You got that sumpin

special, darlin. Talent, plus looks and charisma, to boot. We can make you a star."

When Lupe wraps herself around me, I can feel her perfect titties squishing against my chest. Townley, "The Wino & I Know" 6 This whole entire time, I keep expecting Cindy to barge in, cuss a blue streak, and drag me home. But nothing doing. Maybe she filed a missing persons report, and she's just waiting for those lazy, good-for-nothing cops to get up off their cans and get to work. Anyway, I hope she ain't forgot about me, out here busting my hump to make us a living.

Few days in, or maybe weeks, I run plumb outta clean clothes. An hombre can only sport the same getup for so long. Lupe tries to foist some of hers on me, all those bright, colorful dresses, but I have to draw the line somewhere. I'm pretty ripe by now anyway, so a hot shower won't hurt none. For her part, Lupe always smells like mint and hibiscus. How, I know not.

It's ten-thirty in the a.m. when I ease my Caddy up to the curb. I park down the block. Cindy will already be off to her job

at the capitol, but we got nosy, bored neighbors who spend all their time yakking. I skulk up the sidewalk, hiding beneath the brim of my Stetson, and nobody spots me. Or, put another way, I spot nobody. My key still fits in the lock. Cindy ain't yet installed an alarm system that howls and bleats as I make wild guesses at the secret code. I step into the cool shadows.

It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. The wall clock tick-tocks. The ceiling fan whumps the air. The house smells like Pledge and potpourri, while I, on the other hand, reek of eau de homeless.

I sidle into the bedroom and dig in the closet for an old duffel, then pack clean Wranglers and pearl-snap shirts, plus some necessities. When everything's ready, I crank on the shower, waiting till that water's steaming-hot, then slip in for a scrub-down.

As I soap and rinse, I imagine Cindy joining me. Hot water splashing over us, I'll tell her all about Lupe, how I'm gonna make her a star. When she pulls that face, I'll nip her

## Fiction

naysaying in the bud. "Don't worry, darlin, it won't be nothin like the oil or ranchin, real estate or jewelry or songwritin." She'll try to talk me out of it, but I'll say,

"This here's a sure-fire, can't-miss opportunity." As I towel off, I feel a whole heap better. I run a comb through my hair for the first time in a good long while, then I get all duded up in Western suit, bolo tie, and spit-shined Tony Llamas. Talk about sharp. I'll have to beat them gals off with a stick.

Just don't say nothing to Cindy.

When I get back down to Lupe's place, all's quiet. I thump on the door a couple-three times, then push it open, climb the steps, and peer into the dim light. Sure enough, Lupe's buried under the blankets, dead to the world.

"Rise and shine, sugar," I whisper. She don't budge.

I clear my throat. "Ascend and glow."

Lupe rolls over and covers her head with a pillow.

I tickle her foot sticking out from under the covers. "Let's go, darlin," I say. "We're burnin

daylight."

She sits up, hair a rat's nest, eyes bloodshot. If we were outside, she'd probably spit in disgust.

Now a sour, rotten wave brings tears to my eyes. I hold my nose and try not to breathe. "Hell's that stench, darlin?" says I, sounding like I got a bad cold.

"What you want, Jake Starr?"

The covers next to Lupe wriggle. We both stare. A few ticks later, who should sit up but the wino, his stained grin glimmering in the sunlight.

"Pardon me," I say, miffed. "I didn't realize you was presently occupied." Lupe unfolds from the bed-sheets, red-eyed and woozy. She slugs the dregs from a bottle of Jim Beam at her bedside, then slithers into one of her colorful dresses. She don't say nothing, just runs a brush through her silky black locks.

The wino follows her lead, though less gracefully. He rolls over twice, thuds to the floor, and cackles for a minute, before hoisting himself unsteadily



ly to his feet. Now he stands there, buck naked, a hairy, disgusting mess. Lupe ignores him. He pulls his heel-busted boots over his bare feet, then dons his filthy trench coat, and he's ready to roll.

I usher them into my Caddy and head across the river. We wind up at Retread Threads. "Time for a new look," says I. The wino rifles the racks with unexpected zeal. Lupe, on the other hand, seems less than ecstatic, gathering up two or three dresses that look identical to the ones she wears every day. I head her off at the entrance to the fitting rooms.

"Gimme them," I say. "Try these instead."

Soon as Lupe locks herself in, this blonde gal petting a crushed velvet jacket screams. The cashiers look like they've just witnessed a ritual disembowelment. Close enough: the wino's dropped his trench coat to the floor. Except for his old boots, he's wearing nothing but his birthday suit and a layer of filth. When he sheds his footwear, the whole store reeks instantly of moldy cheese. Now he stuffs his yellow toenails into a new pair of old boots and wraps himself in a shabby new trench coat. When

he hits the door, he sends me a sloppy salute. I watch the wino climb into my Caddy through an open window.

"Don't worry," I reassure the manager. "He's with me."

When Lupe comes out in denim skirt, Western shirt, and boots, I set a straw cowgirl hat on her head. "Why, you look pretty as a picture." I unload fistfuls of coins from every pocket to pay for her new outfit, along with the wino's stuff. Then we hit the road.

Lupe plays her first gig that very same night. At Eno's, no less, probably the most famous club in Austin. She don't hesitate none when the time comes, just tunes her guitar, straps on her eyepatch, and goes for it. Lupe's more of what you'd call the warm-up act. Folks ain't easy to win over. They come and go and chatter, but ain't that always the way? No cover charge out here, but as Lupe gets loud and up-tempo, the tips start rolling in, just like I knew they would. At the set break, a mound of small change all but fills her guitar

## Fiction

case. A few bills are buried in there, too, and not all of them singles.

I pass Lupe a cold one. We clink bottles and drink. After that, we clink different bottles and drink some more. Lupe tells me stories of her former lives as Patsy Devine, Ladybird Wilson, and the Queen of Sheena. Then she straps her guitar back on, pops her eyepatch into place, and strides ten steps down the sidewalk to play her second set.

You don't have to read the reviews to know it's one helluva debut.

They go on like that, too. Owing to my silver tongue and powers of persuasion, I land Lupe gigs in all the hottest venues. Or if not exactly in, at least at. Outside is probably most accurate. Them booking agents is stuck-up snobs, believe it or not. That ain't the reputation around here, I know, but there you have it. Still, I'm getting us some choice locations, which I scout out myself, sound-checking with yodels and ukulele chords to test the acoustics. Lupe knocks 'em dead every night.

At one point, I book us a

show on the sidewalk outside of Mockingbird Lounge. It's this speakeasy type place that's mighty hard to find. We drive around East Austin for two hours without tracking it down before my Caddy coughs and wheezes and runs clean outta gas. Takes four days and a mean bender before we cadge enough to fill the tank and splutter back across town to Lupe's.

We're sitting around the firepit: me, Lupe, and the wino. We've been out here for a good long while. Me and Lupe dove into a bottle of Jack Daniels after putting away a half-dozen longnecks apiece. We blather about songs and gigs and giant mountains of money. As for the wino, he don't say much, just grins drunkenly over his paper bag of Thunderbird. His miasma of jet fuel, B.O., and rot mingles with the mesquite smoke.

Now Lupe and the wino slip off behind the bus to smoke something from a Coke can. I stoke the fire. They come back giddy and reeling. Lupe flumps into her lawn chair. She's

quiet now, mesmerized by the flickering flames. The wino don't say nothing either, but when does he ever?

I stare at the wino, wondering. He stares at me, hiccupping and cackling, lips cracked, eyes hollow. He's a disgusting specimen, ain't no question. How could anybody sink so low? Ain't he got no family to care about him, such as a loving wife named Cindy? Don't he have hopes and dreams and ambitions? The wino ain't nothing but a bottle and a fix.

But other times, like now, the whole thing gets real confusing. Maybe I oughta lay off the sauce? Because when I look at him, it's like I'm looking into a mirror. Not him in his filthy new trench coat and boots, unshaven, hair greasy and wild, but me in Western suit and bolo tie, unshaven, wild, greasy hair hidden beneath my Stetson. It don't make sense. I gaze into the fire for a moment, then take a hard pull of whiskey, followed by another, hoping everything will go back to how it was.

And, just like that, there he is again, in all his grubby glory.

After Lupe plays a couple poorly attended weeknight gigs, things take a turn for the strange. For one thing, Lupe ain't just telling stories of her past lives as Janis Jonson, Salomé, and Frieda Karo: she's acting them out. That puts a whole weird spin on things. Makes gigs next to impossible, too. Who's gonna stop to listen to a little Texican gal playing bad Chixies covers? (She thinks she's all three at the same time.) Whole lotta nobody, is who.

It all gets muddled real fast. Doesn't help that we're drinking from sunup to way past sundown, sipping longnecks till it's time to start guzzling whiskey. The wino nods, grins, and gives us a sloppy salute, then raises his Night Train bottle to toast before guzzling like he's dying of thirst in the desert. That wino's liver must hate his guts.

One day we pile into my Caddy and head out to Luckenbach. It ain't easy to swing a show out there, lemme tell you. Had to pull some strings. Now it's supposed to be just me and Lupe, but right

## Fiction

at the last minute, the wino slips into the backseat. Once that guy gets a foothold, there ain't no moving him. It's a hot day, and we gotta cover them miles with the windows down, sweating onto the leather upholstery to keep from choking half to death on the wino's perma-stink.

We unload and set up. I send the wino to the bar for longnecks to get him outta the way. Lupe thanks everybody for coming, though there ain't but me and the wino. Plus, Tommy, the booking manager, who granted me, us, this fine opportunity on an empty Sunday afternoon to audition live for a possible gig on an unspecified future date.

Lupe strums a couple warm-up chords. In the heat she's all sparkly around the edges. Now she launches into "Risky Whiskey," a song I've always loved but never once heard her play. Next comes "Rainin' Tears." Tommy gives me a sidelong glance, switching his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. The sun bakes. A hot wind carries pollen thick as snow. When she breaks into "Federales," I hotfoot up to the so-called stage, just a patch of dirt

outside the dance hall.

"What in hell are you doin'?"

She steps away from the mike.

"What it looks like, Jake Starr?"

"We got us a real opportunity, sugar. Don't blow it on covers."

"Who talks about covers?" Then she launches right back in.

Tommy lets her finish the tune, Lord knows why. Maybe he just needs the fresh air. Then he pitches his toothpick down in the dirt and heads back inside.

Audition's over and done with, but I can't get Lupe to leave off. She plows right through the Willie Waylon catalog, from "Always 'n' Forever" and "Cowgirls on My Mind" to "Tangerine Sunset" and "Wanderin' & Wonderin'." I like Willie much as the next guy, but that performance grows tiresome mighty quick. It gets so she won't even answer to Lupe: "Is Willie, got it?" she insists. Me and the wino sit in the shade and graduate from longnecks to whiskey shots.

The day blooms hotter. The wind coats us in dust and pollen. By the time Lupe starts belting out "Ruby Red," I get to wondering what in hell I'm doing out here with this pair of lunatics. I chew it over till I can no longer stand the sound of Lupe's voice. Then I pull the plug. Literally. I roll up the extension cords and load the mike, amp, and stand in the trunk. The wind swallows Lupe's song. The wino waits in the backseat. I fire up the Caddy. Lupe lingers, toeing the dirt for a while, so I rev the engine, then push open the passenger door. "Let's go, darlin." She drags her heels but eventually climbs in.

It's an odd ride home. One minute Lupe's sulking and pouting, the next it's more Willie Waylon, all these stories about travelling round the country, playing to packed houses with Merle and Dwayne and her other buddies. That goes on for a while. The wino passes out, drooling against the window. I tune the radio to The Texas Ladykillers, and just like that, Lupe says she's Bob Stills. I switch the station, and she's George Jonestown, then Boy Ror-bison. I don't know what to think.

I take a swig from a bottle of Wild Turkey I keep under the seat, then I send it Lupe's direction. That does the trick. I only wish I'd thought of it sooner. They're both dead to the world when I dump them off around the firepit. I drag them over and set them in lawn chairs. I consider lighting the fire, but it's hotter than blue blazes out here, so it ain't like they'll freeze to death.

Now I point my Caddy toward home. I only got one destination, and that's Cindy's arms. Maybe I didn't meet my goal of ushering Lupe into the limelight of musical stardom. I'll be the first to admit it. Still, it ain't my fault she's bat-shit crazy, channeling the ghosts of yesteryear, as well as folks that ain't even kicked the buck-et yet, like she's some gypsy psychic. I did my best. That's no cause for shame.

When I park at the curb and cut the engine, there's some high-dollar sedan in the drive. What happened to Cindy's old station wagon? I sit there for a minute, smoking and pondering. Something stinks

## Fiction

like B.O. and foot funk. I peek into the backseat, but the wino ain't nowhere to be found. Some reason, I got on his filthy trench coat. Don't ask me how that happened. I start to take it off, till I realize I'm naked as a jaybird underneath.

I squint at the address mounted on the wall near the front door, and it's my address. I crane my neck out the window to read the street sign, and it's my street. "Don't make no sense," I say, crushing my joint in the ashtray. I get out and step to the edge of the sidewalk. Why does the yard look thicker and greener? When did Cindy plant all them daisies and lantana?

I'm still shaking my head when I dig out my key. Guess what? It don't fit. I try again: it still don't fit. "Hell's going on?" I say, though nobody's listening. I check and double-check the address. I spin around and eyeball the neighbors' houses. Sure enough, I'm in the right spot: this here's my neighborhood. It ain't like I don't know my own home.

Jaw clamped and fists clenched, I spin back around and kick in the door. Takes longer

than on TV. I'm panting and wheezing when the wood finally splinters, and latch parts clang to the ground. The door swings open, silent on its hinges. Then all hell breaks loose: the most god-awful howling and bleating I ever heard crashes over me in waves. I clutch my ears, hollering, "Cindy? Cindy?! Cindy!", but it don't do no good. I can't exactly hustle out to my Caddy and make a quick getaway, since somebody'll notice my plates and call me in. Anyway, I ain't gonna abscond from my own home.

I punch every combination of numbers I can think of into that keypad: birthdays, anniversary, you name it. Nothing works. I even try dates related to my many failures and catastrophes—oil and ranching, real estate, jewelry, and songwriting—but no dice. I stand there, plugging my ears and wracking my brain, but numbers wasn't never my forte. Next thing I know, cop cars screech to a stop out front, and I got officers sprinting up the lawn, weapons drawn.

"Freeze!" they holler.

I shake my head and grin. I appreciate the quick response, but who ever heard of such? "This ain't what it looks like," says I.

By now, I'm looking down the barrels of four Smith & Wessons.

"Hands on your head!"

"But I live here," I say, complying with their request.

"On the ground!"

"It's my house, officers." I take one knee, then another.

"I been gone, and the wife done changed the locks." Still ain't nobody shut off that alarm: what a racket!

One of them wrenches my arms down behind me and slaps cuffs around my wrists, while another starts reading me my rights.

"That ain't necessary, officers," I say. "Y'all got it all wrong." One of them cops got his pistol trained on me the whole entire time.

Nosy neighbors pour out onto their porches to watch the spectacle, eyes wide with curiosity. Funny thing is, I don't recognize a single solitary one of them. How long have I been gone? I figure they'll drag me into the middle of my own yard and start grilling me in front of God and everybody,

but that ain't the way it plays out. Instead, they bundle me into the back of a cruiser. It stinks of sweat and French fries. The cuffs dig into my wrists. The police radio flares with staticky voices, then goes dead.

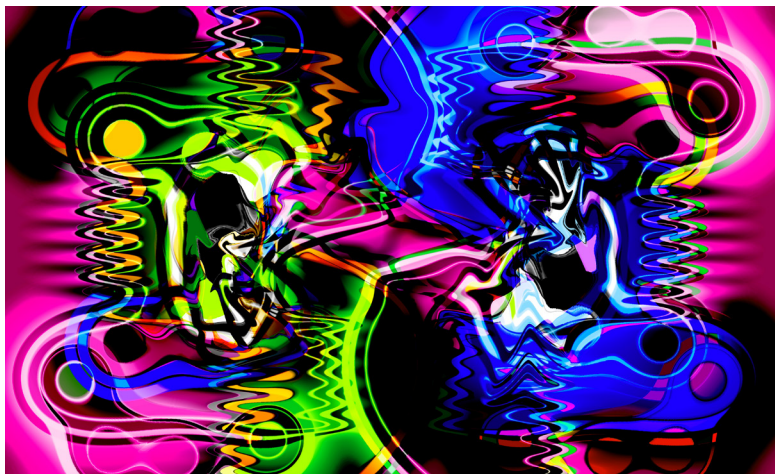
Now a brand-new silver Range Rover squeals into the driveway. A couple tumbles out and hustles to the door. I don't get a good look, but they're dressed in tennis whites: shorts and tennis shoes, sweat-ers draped over their shoulders though it's pushing ninety in the shade. Not a minute later, the electronic bleating finally dies down. Good riddance. The cops make notes in their little notebooks. How long's it gonna take to clear this whole mess up? Then something weird happens. When them officers move outta the way, I finally get a clear view of the tennis twins, standing there like they own the place. I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's Cindy—my Cindy—with some bronzed knuckle-dragger half her age. Backlit like that, they got luminous rainbows around their edges. I squint against the sun.

## Fiction

Then, when I look again, they're the spitting image of Lupe and the wino—minus the eyepatch and trench coat. I blink, shake my head, blink again. I rub my eyes, taking deep breaths and wiping the sweat from my forehead. I got the chills and this ugly green feeling. I really need some rest.

When I glance again, I expect to see Cindy's concern and her beau's bored confusion. Only nothing's changed. Lupe blows me a kiss, while the wino sends me a sloppy salute. I open my mouth to shout, but nothing comes out. Lupe and the wino watch, chuckling and waving. Before I can protest, the cops pile into the cruiser, fire the engine, and lurch away down the block.





## **Vibrant Turmoil**

Edward Michael Supranowicz

## **Art Contributors**

At the present time, Kateryna Bortsova is a painter – a graphic artist with BFA in Graphic Arts and MFA. Works of Kateryna took part in many international exhibitions (Taiwan, Moscow, Munich, Spain, Italy, USA etc.). Also, she has won a silver medal in the category “realism” in participation in “Factory of visual art,” New York, USA, and 2015 Emirates Skywards Art of Travel competition, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Kateryna is always open for commission, and you can view her work on Instagram: @katerynabortsova, or on her website: <http://bortsova6.wix.com/bortsova>

Brittney Graves is a Master of Fine Arts student at The University of Nevada, Reno. Currently, she is working in time-based media and focusing on the distribution of ideas, culture, and information.

Monique Renee Harris is a Black artist who won the Red Planet Magazine Cover Art Contest.

Sara Stasi is an artist and poet residing in Santa Cruz, California, with her husband and two cats. She finds inspiration in the natural world and enjoys creating nature-based images. Drawing on her background in anthropology and literature, her work explores the relationship between symbols and meaning. Her art and poetry has been featured in the Porter Gulch Review as well as various online publications. Find more of her work at [sarastasiwrites.com](http://sarastasiwrites.com).

Edward Michael Supranowicz has had artwork and poems published in the US and other countries.

Kellen Trenal is a gay man of Black and Nez Perce descent. His identities empower his work.

Ronald Walker is an artist living in the Sacramento area. He works in a style he calls "Suburban Primitive", this style combines his interest in the origins and functions of art along with life in the suburbs. He holds both an MFA and a MA in art and has had 50 plus solo exhibits to date.

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, video, and writing. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards. [www.jenniferweigelart.com](http://www.jenniferweigelart.com)

## Poetry Contributors

Joanna Acevedo is the author of the poetry collection *The Pathophysiology of Longing*.

Autumn Bernhardt's work has appeared in a number of book collections, including *Vison & Place*, *Tales from Six Feet Apart*, *Grazing the Fire*, *Bawaajigan*, *Beyond Queer Words*, and *Blood, Water, Wind, & Stone*. Autumn is wiłhákte and the current Poet Laureate of Fort Collins, Colorado.

Angelica Esquivel is a Xicana writer and multimodal artist. She has received awards and grants from the Hopwood Program, Zocalo Public Square, the Awesome Foundation, and the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *America Magazine*, *Chestnut Review*, and *Rabbit*.

SG Huerta is a Chicana poet from Dallas. They are pursuing their MFA at Texas State University and live in Texas with their cat Lorca. SG is the author of the chapbook *The Things We Bring with Us: Travel Poems* (Headmistress Press, 2021). They are a poetry reader for *Borderland: Texas Poetry Review* and *Pithead Chapel*. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *perhappened mag*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Lavender Review*, and various other places. Find them at [sghuertawriting.com](http://sghuertawriting.com) or on Twitter @sg\_poetry

Gabriella Adriana Iacono is a writer and artist from Staten Island, NY. She was a recipient of the 2016 Mayapple Fellowship, the 2020 Poetry at Round Top Fellowship, and is an Inprint Fellow. Iacono serves as Graduate Advisor to the University of Houston's undergraduate literary magazine, *Glass Mountain*, for which she also serves as conference coordinator for the *Boldface Conference for Emerging Writers*. Her work was recently published in *Defunkt Magazine* and

SIZL. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Houston and is working on her first collection of poetry.

DT McCrea is a trans anarchist. Her work can be found in Gordon Square Review, HAD and elsewhere.

Violet Mitchell is a Denver-based writer and artist. One of their many passions is space — so much so that it transformed into their most recent manuscript, called ‘Dear Universe, Everything in Me You Eat.’ Their favorite holiday is St. Patrick’s Day (otherwise known as ‘Leprechaun’s Day’ to the rest of the family) and could be a professional Hummus taste-tester. website: [violetthepoet3.wixsite.com/poet](http://violetthepoet3.wixsite.com/poet) instagram: @violetthepoetpainter twitter: @violetthepoet

Alix Perry is a white, trans, and neurodivergent writer based in Oregon. More: [alixperrywriting.com](http://alixperrywriting.com).

Lindsay Phillips is a Chicago based writer and editor, currently unpublished.

## Prose Contributors

Joe Baumann's fiction and essays have appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Electric Spec*, *On Spec*, *Barrelhouse*, *Zone 3*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and many others. He is the author of *Ivory Children*, published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He possesses a Ph.D. in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. He has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and was nominated for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 2016* and was a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction. He can be reached at [joebaumann.wordpress.com](http://joebaumann.wordpress.com).

L.A. Clark's writing has previously been published in magazines such as *Cardinal Sins*, *The Ear*, and *Ghost Parachute*, as well as *The Shanghai Literary Review*. She is also the author of a travel memoir, "Land of Dark and Sun." Nothing ever feels completely real or understandable to her until she writes about it.

Catherine Farber writes past her bedtime. She enjoys sudoku and travel.

Phil Gallos has been a newspaper reporter and columnist, a researcher/writer in the historic preservation field, and has spent 32 years working in academic libraries (which is more interesting than it sounds). Most recently, his writing has been published in *Cagibi*, *The Writing Disorder*, *STORGY Magazine*, *Treehouse*, and *Dark Moon Lilith*, among others, and is forthcoming in *Wisconsin Review* and *Blueline*. He lives and writes in Saranac Lake, NY.

W. T. Paterson is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from the University of New Hampshire, and is a graduate of Second City Chicago. His work has appeared in over 90 publications worldwide including *The Saturday Evening Post*,

The Forge Literary Magazine, The Dalhousie Review, Brilliant Flash Fiction, and Fresh Ink. A semi-finalist in the Aura Extra short story contest, his work has also received notable accolades from Lycan Valley, North 2 South Press, and Lumberloft. He spends most nights yelling for his cat to "Get down from there!" Visit his website at [www.wtpaterson.com](http://www.wtpaterson.com).

Meridian Payseno is a fiction writer exploring the land of make-believe from her home in Berlin. Originally from Seattle, Meridian's affinity for rainy days and strong coffee should come as no surprise. Since graduating from Seattle University, Meridian has contributed to editorial publications such as First Page Literature and Hash Journal. Find more from Meridian on her IG: @meridian.payseno

J. T. Townley has published in Harvard Review, The Kenyon Review, The Threepenny Review, and many other magazines and journals. His stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize (three times) and the Best of the Net Award. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and an MPhil in English from the University of Oxford. To learn more, visit [jttownley.com](http://jttownley.com).

