

"Showcasing the beautiful power of written and visual art forms."

ISSUE #3, WINTER 2024



GABBY & MIN'S *Literary Review*

**POETRY &
PROSE BY**
**ANGELA
TOWNSEND**
RESPONSIBLE

ART BY
**ALYSSA
HIGUERA**
DEBUG

FICTION BY
**PETER
RUSTIN**
A DAY'S WORK:
**MATT AND
BRENDA**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
**JEREMIAH
GILBERT**
REYKJAVÍK
**STREET
ART 2**



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Literary Review

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

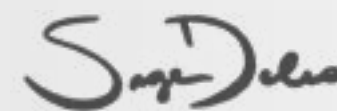
Dear Cherished Readers,

As we turn the pages to present the third issue of *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, I find myself reflecting on the journey that brought us here. The clock ticked closer to February 1st, 2024, with our team working tirelessly, often against the odds, to bring this edition to life. It is with a heart full of relief and triumph that I announce: We made it, albeit just in the nick of time!

This issue is a testament to resilience, a symphony of dedication that resonates through each line of prose, stroke of the brush, and snapshot of life captured within these pages. We've compiled an array of creations that not only echo the brilliance of our past editions but also venture into new realms of expression and insight.

I invite you to dive into this latest collection, a mosaic of artistic ingenuity, where each piece serves as a beacon of inspiration, urging you to explore the depths of your imagination and the vastness of the human experience. As we continue this extraordinary journey, I extend my sincerest gratitude for your unwavering support and enthusiasm. Your belief in our vision fuels our creative spirits and solidifies our commitment to bringing forth a literary sanctuary that celebrates the boundless potential of creativity.

With boundless gratitude and warmest regards,



Sage Delio, Editor-In-Chief, *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*

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- 109 STAFF

★ COVER FEATURE

A DAY'S WORK: MATT AND BRENDA

PETER RUSTIN

A. Matt: Night Drive South

That last cigarette was a mistake. Far from calming you down, it feels like a teenager's dirty nails on the smeared chalkboard nobody bothered cleaning at that school you dropped out of a few years back. *Dude, this was the last thing you need on the way to work; what the hell are you thinking? Like it's not hard enough once you get there? Idiot!*

As a gesture of belated penance, you crank down the window on the pickup, and fling the crumpled pack of Winstons out into the icy blackness. The truck's heater is not even close to the task of battling the sudden influx of November air into the cabin. Your Carhartt insulated waterproof overalls, and ancient L.L. Bean duck boots (mandatory for the job, and the best you can afford) are made in America and are the same ones used by your boss O'Brien. But American-made isn't what it used to be, and the sudden cold jolts you wide awake. It's like when the sergeant would yank the thin government blanket off you at 4:00 a.m. and bellow that it was another glorious day in Uncle Sam's Army, ladies, and get the fuck out of bed before we turn the heaters off. *Heaters, right. Fuck you too, Sarge.*

Maybe the blast of frigid air is a good thing. Your eyelids are feeling gravity's pull, no doubt. You squint down at the ash-covered console. The Cumberland Farms Farmhouse-brand coffee has grown filmy and is barely tepid. You resist the urge to reunite it with the pack of Winstons tumbling with the wind-swept leaves a few hundred yards back.

It's 3:20 a.m. Too close to dawn to be late at night, and too

near midnight to be morning. Everything is in a state of in-between. Home—that is, the rooms you rent over the grimy-windowed storefront church on Bank Street, on the outskirts of town—is an hour behind you. And even though you're the only one driving on the two-lane highway headed south, you'll barely arrive on time by 4. The last time you were late, O'Brien treated you to a profanity-laced tirade, questioning (among many others) your parentage, your intellect, and your work ethic, and threatening to can your sorry ass the next time. *Plenty of other guys need a job, Matty boy, don't you worry about that!*

There are no cops on this windy road at this unlikely hour, and you press the gas a little harder, for a free ten-mile-an-hour insurance policy. You notice that the road noise seeping in from the hardened window seals is the only thing distracting you from reenacting yesterday's fight with Brenda (again, *again*, about your shitty job) and so you turn on the radio to buy some distraction. The radio's bulb on the left of the dial has long ago tossed it in, but who cares, because the only stations you can even get anyway in this part of New England have already been programmed into the rectangular Bakelite buttons that look like thick black Chiclets. You punch the first button, but it's that guy hollering about salvation again. The next three buttons are either static or silence, but you hit paydirt on the last button, when the pounding throb of Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song* explodes into the cab, the bass crackling through the blown driver's side speaker.

You shriek your best Robert Plant and pound the hard plastic wheel, the kind with finger indents on the back. Closing your eyes and flinging your imaginary ringlets, you shout to your teachers; the world; to Brenda and to O'Brien that your *ONLY GOAL WILL BE THE WESTERN SHORE!* And you open your eyes to see two yellow circles--lit like baby suns--staring back at you from the middle of the road about 75 feet ahead.

The deer is frozen in place, but *thank Christ*, you're not. You jerk

the wheel—*hard!*— to the right and slam on the worn and pulsating drum brakes. The shrieking of the Goodyears is all the deer needs to jolt it from its statuesque terror and it bounds like a comet to the left. Your truck fishtails, but you remember to *turn into the skid, son* like your driver's ed teacher Randy told you, and you've managed to scrub off enough speed so that when the truck slams into the trunk of a gnarled sycamore, your head hits, but doesn't break, the pitted windshield before the tree silently absorbs the truck's speed, and the truck, after the rear axle lifts maybe a foot off the loamy ground and the rear end lands with a bang, stops. You sit there for a minute, and wonder if you are dead.

The radio is still playing, but Led Zeppelin has been replaced by *The Pina Colada Song*, and you snap the dial hard to the left to turn that shit off. The woods are silent, and all you can hear is a thin ticking as the hot engine metal angrily contracts from its exposure to the cold night air.

You open the door and stumble onto the rocky ground. You're afraid to even look at the front of the truck, but actually it could be worse—the steel bumper is dented to hell, sure, but it looks driveable. Realizing how close to being truly screwed you were, you start to shake and it's impossible to tell whether it's the release of adrenaline or the insufficiency of your clothes. You gingerly back up to be greeted by a metallic groan from the front bumper. You turn back to the road and slowly drive a few hundred yards to be sure that you can get to work.

Although there's a slight shimmy over 40 mph, you're close enough that maybe O'Brien will cut you a break, like that one time when you arrived late after you had first started when you left the Army and he had won 80 bucks at Stan Barger's poker game earlier that night. The forest begins to thin and soon you are driving over a marshy causeway, with cattails thrashing from the ocean winds. Almost there.

You should know better, but *you're fucking late* so you gun it and screech to a fishtailing stop on the dock's gravel parking lot. Like a

pudgy Colossus of Rhodes (about the only thing you remember from Miss Novak's history class the year you dropped out) you see O'Brien astride the stern of the ferry wearing bright yellow rain overalls and the regulation duck boots.

There was no poker win for O'Brien last night, and as you gingerly emerge from the truck and make your way up the dock to the ferry, a torrent of curses and abuse spews from O'Brien's grizzled face. As you draw closer, he suddenly stops and gapes. *Jesus, Mary and Joseph Matty what the hell have you done to yourself, lad?*

You reach up to your forehead to where O'Brien is staring and your right hand comes back warm and wet. *I'm fine* you say but you collapse like a dropped accordion with your back to the gunwale on the ferry's damp deck. You sit there until the EMTs load you into the van, the blue and red careening around your vision like an evil carnival. The rest is silence until you wake up in New England General, with Brenda holding your blood-dried hand.

B. Brenda: Acquisition

Despite being on the clock, she wasn't paying attention at all. Brenda was instead scanning her phone in vain for a return text from her boyfriend, Matt. *Jesus, WTF? I texted him like 4 hours ago.* Thinking about him had dominated her free (and not so free) time lately; they were increasingly at sixes and sevens. His job as a deck hand for the ferry to the island paid even less than Brenda's, a fact frequently raised by Brenda's mother: "*Why are you dating him of all people? Bren, you could do SO much better!*" But Brenda liked them a bit rough; a bit handsome, in a raw-boned way; and a bit indifferent. The mousy and eager business studies majors at college, with their stupid aviator glasses focused on her sweater, were of no interest to her.

But off-season, especially, was both boring and barely profitable enough for Brenda to support herself and her cat, Charlie Watts. Worse, Brenda found herself increasingly footing the beer tab with Matt at

Micawber's (an obnoxiously Dickensian pub, where the waitstaff spoke in trite Cockney accents, and the only one open after Labor Day).

To be sure, despite her distracted state, Brenda was grateful for the work at all. The market demand for art history majors from community colleges was, to be generous, slight. Even landing a minimum wage-plus-commission job at a tourist art gallery was a bit of a coup, the news of which elicited envious side-glances from Brenda's classmates. As a sweetener, the shop's mostly absentee owner, Sandy, had bestowed on Brenda the honorific of "assistant manager." This title bought with it a set of keys to the gallery; a 20% employee discount; and the authority to purchase art from customers with a strict \$2,500 price limit; the gallery was the only one in town that both bought and sold.

So, Brenda jumped a bit when the tarnished silver bell over the art gallery's paned red door pealed its timid jingle, announcing that a rare November customer had entered on this lonesome, frosty day. Reluctantly, with a sidelong glance at the empty screen, Brenda deposited the phone behind the shelf in front of the chipped white reception table and turned to face the day's first client.

The woman had clearly enjoyed a lifelong friendship with alcohol, evidenced by her broken bluish nose veins. A gray gabardine overcoat, last deemed chic in the Johnson Administration. Medicaid-issue plastic glasses, with a frayed band-aid keeping the bridge together. And in her hand, a grimy cardboard tube.

"Hello dear. They tell me you buy art? I have something--an old print?--that we found cleaning out my sister's apartment." The woman looked to both sides, despite there being nobody else there, and whispered "Cancer!"

Oh shit thought Brenda, *what garbage did this lady find in her old sister's slum?* But remembering that she was the face of the gallery, she pasted on a smile that a more observant customer might have identified

as illusory, and directed the woman to a butcher block table next to the reception desk.

Brenda found the four cream-colored leatherette beanbags under the table in an ancient Victoria's Secret Pink gift box, and placed them on the table. "*Let's see what we have, shall we, ma'am?*" purred Brenda, in her most officious assistant-manager delivery. The woman, with no small degree of difficulty, removed the white plastic cap from the tube and gingerly extracted a coiled, translucent paper with hand-torn edges. She handed the paper to Brenda, who delicately unrolled it, placing a beanbag on each corner, and then stepped back to look.

To say that it was a 12-by-20-inch lithograph, with pink, blue and green translucent washes of color suggesting the intersection of a sea and a hill, would be akin to saying that the Chrysler Building was a decaying structure in mid-town New York, or that a 1962 Cotswald Blue Jaguar X-KE was an old car they stopped making.

Even in the reluctant November sun slanting through the windows, the print glowed almost as if illuminated from within. In fading pencil, the print's title, *Acquisition*, was written below an especially incandescent burst of pink. On the bottom left, "2/100" was written in an almost architecturally neat print. The lower right corner bore the words "S. Angelico '59."

Susan freakin' Angelico! Brenda thought back to her second year of college, when they covered the Modern American mid-century movement. Susan Angelico stood virtually alone as a woman swimming against the tide of a male-dominated sea of abstract American artists.

For the first time in years, Brenda recalled a film shown to the class by Mr. Hendricks, their instructor. There was Susan Angelico, laughing in a photograph with Jackson Pollack taken at a long-gone Greenwich Village bistro. Susan, cat's-eye sunglasses and Pucci paisley scarf rippling behind her, in an Austin-Healy driven by Mark Rothko. Susan, in her studio, wearing paint-streaked capris and a man's oxford dress

shirt knotted at the waist, squinting at a huge canvas, palette knife in hand. And the *Times Arts Section* headline announcing her death at only 44.

“Is it worth much, miss?”

Brenda carefully composed herself, affecting a blandness of affect that belied the pounding of her heart. She envisioned a slideshow of her current life: The walk-up studio. The 3-year-old Michael Kors handbag, with a bit of stitching unraveling on the strap. The 2015 Honda Civic. The checks she picked up on her evenings out with Matt. “*Careful*,” thought Brenda in an internal whisper. Her wishful and frequent Googling of art auctions (a guilty pleasure, financed by Sandy’s memberships) suggested that this piece—number 2 of 100!—was worth nothing south of \$30k or so.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry, but this is a mass-produced print. Look at the signature: it’s obviously machine-generated. And the edges; see how they are sort of torn? You can tell that’s done to simulate a hand-made piece of art. Oh, and look at those letters at the bottom; nobody’s writing is **that** regular.”

I’m going to hell, Brenda concluded to herself.

The hope in the woman’s eyes visibly dimmed.

“So, you can’t buy it?”

Conjuring a hearty--and ersatz--reassurance, Brenda permitted herself a silvery laugh. “Oh no, of course I can! But I’m afraid all I can do here is, say, \$350?”

The woman’s face was at once a mixture of doubt and relief. So, she would not leave empty-handed even though it *looked* valuable. But her sister was forever buying nonsense and such on QVC and at yard sales; this was obviously but one more example, and why would the nice young lady have any reason to lie to her?

Brenda carefully counted out the money in 50s and a few 10s and escorted the woman out of the shop. She turned the fly-specked

“Closed! See You Soon!” sign in the window and, before she shut off the lights, created a \$350 invoice for Sandy’s benefit, tucked neatly under the cash drawer of the tarnished mechanical cash register, vowing to pick up some cash for the register in the morning.

Under a solitary desk lamp from Staples, she Googled Susan Angelico’s *Acquisition*. The last public sale, at Christie’s, in 2018, brought \$42,000; who was to say what it might get today? In bed, Brenda permitted herself to imagine a better car; a better purse; a better boyfriend.

Those pleasant thoughts, though, flew like Canada geese southbound when her phone rang at about 4:30 a.m. It was Matt’s boss, Frank O’Brien, on the phone. Matty had shown up to work after an auto accident and was at New England General. Did she know whether he had any health insurance?

Brenda knew the answer to that life riddle, and realized at once that her acquisition was at best as fleeting as her cruel triumph over the woman with the taped-up glasses.



THE SALESMAN

T.M. THOMSON

He looks so polite—the mustached,
top-hatted, sage-trousered, waistcoated
man, complete with pocket watch.

And yet he stands in the gloaming,
his mild face sliced by moon,
devil's walking stick tickling
his shadow with its pulp-
swelled berries rolled out
on stalks like pink tongues.

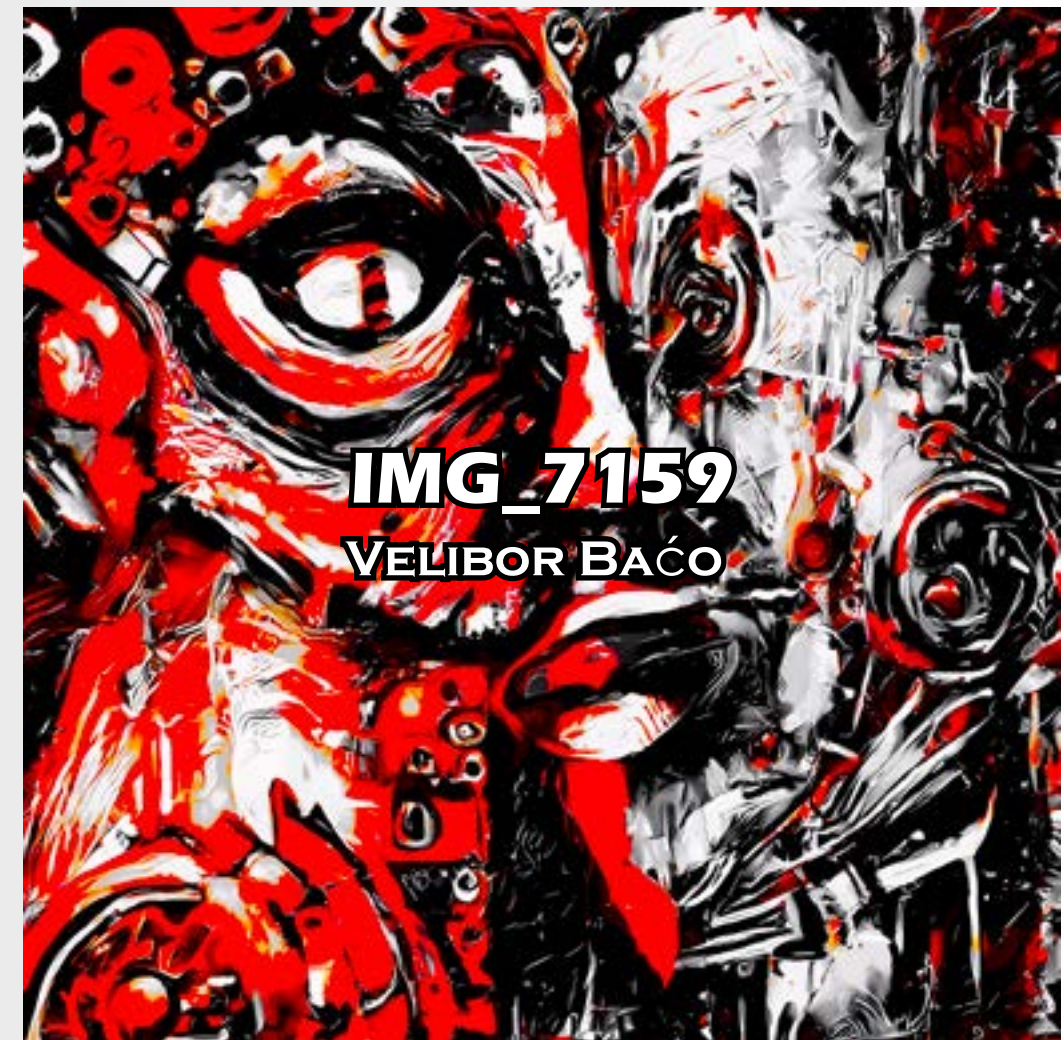
Perhaps that's why he opens one
wing of his jacket, holding it wide
until the bats therein jangle as they
dangle from pieces of cave ceiling,
mouths ajar with tremolo squeaks,
unfolding capes like twilight leather.

Maybe his cause is not hands-in-
pockets, pipe-smoking innocence
after all but rather to sell night
& mist & witching hour kisses
from dragon fruit flowers shaking
lipstick centers with bats' probing.

He waits for your answer—something
beats a ragged rhythm under buttons & belt
& pockets, his & yours, unheard but real

like bat clicks bouncing from
jasmine to honeysuckle
to wolf to moth to
mouse's velvet
suit, plump
flesh.

~inspired by Catrin Welz-Stein's "The Salesman"



WINEHAVEN

WILL NEUENFELDT

The one jug we left a third full
 has chilled in my fridge for almost
 one year after we found warmth
 in home-cooked Tuscan Chicken
 and plaid blankets in the basement.
 I can't go through one swig
 of the stuff without squeezing
 my face in the shape of her body
 huddling next to my right arm
 but there is no heat, no breath
 keeping track of seconds.
 Even in July I shivered and winced
 with taste the label proclaims as
 "a delicious blend of strawberry
 and cherry flavors".
 This November morning,
 I grab the bottle peeking in back and
 dispose what's left of Rosé down the sink-
 she did her dumping over the phone.

ODE TO DEMETER

ZOE HUOT-LINK

He circled me, mama. I wanted love.
 He told me I was beautiful, it stung.
 He spun me round and round,
 Confusion was enough.

He tricked me silently; I've fallen hard.
 I was so scared of what was in my heart.
 I chased the thrill he led,
 I ran until I bled.

My body left behind a guarded mind.
 He told me one thing, then destroyed my life.
 I wish I stayed with you,
 I wish the gardens grew.

I miss flowers, I miss the scalding sun.
 Your gardens were the last place I felt strong.
 I know now Heaven's Earth,
 I want to be returned.

ABSTRACTION #2**CYRUS CARLSON****ROOTS**
HEIDI SPETH

The first plants I ever remember calling my own
 Were three small sprouts off of a jade plant
 My Grandma, whose plant was overflowing with growth, gifted them
 In a small terra cotta pot with some earthly moist soil in it

I buckled the small green beings into the passenger seat of my car
 Like my most prized possession
 And drove them down the three-hour patch of a highway back to my
 small college town

Of the three sprouts, only one survived
 The first one to go dried up like a shrunken head
 The second one fell out of the soil, never having taken root
 The third sprout, though originally the smallest, found its roots in the
 soil and started to grow

The summer after my sophomore year
 My single sprout had grown a miraculous five inches, looking rather
 awkward in the pot by itself
 So I took scissors and snipping close to the top of two of the silky leaves
 Cut the tall stalk in half and dug a small hole for the new sprout in the
 soil
 Hoping and praying that once I placed it would take root and grow

I did the same thing the summer after my junior year

Now approaching the end of my senior year, my small jade was back to three sprouts

I have since graduated, and am about to start my first year of teaching kindergarten

The weekend before the first day of school, something miraculous happened

I cut off the top of my tallest stem, put it in a new pot, with plans to gift it to my mother

As I buckle my jade plant into the front seat of my car to head across town to my parent's house

I can't help but think to myself

This plant grows and grows and grows, multiplying over and over again

It has taught me how to nourish, how to share, how to be patient, how to love,

It is wild to think how a small stem can teach one so much



THE BEAM
FRANCES FISH

CLEANINGS

WHITNEY WEISENBERG

Lydia and James sat on the couch side by side. James was content, but Lydia wasn't. She might as well have been sitting next to her dentist for all the attention her husband paid her. Even if her mouth was pried open and it was impossible for her to respond, Dr. Stein didn't seem to mind. He spoke with enthusiasm, recommending podcasts and restaurants. He carried the conversation.

Dr. Stein said, "Have you been to Marcos Grill yet?"

The light he used to highlight his work in her mouth was too bright, so Lydia kept her eyes shut, but she nodded.

"Have you had their filet burger?"

This time Lydia shook her head, and he began to describe how incredible the burger had been. The meat was moist. The cheese was sharp. It was one of the freshest buns he ever tasted, and that sauce? It was perfect. Lydia tried to lick the corner of her lips out of solidarity, but the hygienist stepped between them and suctioned the water in her mouth. Unlike Lydia's husband, Dr. Stein was committed to filling up the space between them.

There had been a rumor about Dr. Stein having an affair with his dental hygienist, Susan, but Lydia didn't believe it. Susan was an idiot. She said, "Axe" instead of "ask," and at the end of every sentence she said, "You know what I mean?" Lydia never understood this. It wasn't like Susan was explaining how to solve an equation in which she had to compare Celsius to Fahrenheit and then increase the total by a half of

a degree and based on the answer determine what type of clothing she should bring on vacation. There was nothing to not understand. Even her laugh irritated Lydia because it sounded like she was making fun of herself. A ha, ha, ha, ha. Her boobs were so large that they were bound to be artificial, but she was sure Dr. Stein didn't care about that sort of thing. He was a man with scruples.

Lydia turned to her husband. "I don't think it's healthy the way you never want to talk about your day."

He flipped through the channels. "You used to work; it's not like it's that different."

"I still work."

"You know what I mean. I just don't want to relive it."

"I get it. You have a life outside of our home, and I don't. I spend my days at the market, folding the laundry, doing dishes, making beds, and cooking dinner. I do everything for everyone else. Hell, I'm just a pilot fish." Lydia's voice was rising, but she couldn't help it.

James turned toward her. "You're a what?"

"The fish that suck off sharks"

"Lady sharks?"

She struck an invisible drum set. "Ba dump bump."

He rubbed the spot in between his eyes and sighed. "What do you want from me, Lydia?"

"I want you to tell me about your day."

"But there's nothing to tell."

Dr. Stein shared his dreams with Lydia. "The hardest thing about

climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro,” he said, “is the low oxygen. It’s beautiful, but it’s hard to breathe.”

At times, Lydia thought it was hard to breathe from all of life’s beauty too.

Lydia squeezed her fingers together, and he asked if she was okay. He took the instrument out of her mouth and touched her shoulder. Her heart hammered inside her chest from his proximity. He was holding a chisel in his hand. She had studied dental equipment in case she had the opportunity to impress him with her knowledge, but she didn’t compliment him on the tool or ask what model it was; she just swallowed, nodded again, and he went back to filling her cavity.

During Lydia’s cleaning, she had heard him speak casually to other people, but it was just a trivial conversation. It wasn’t like it was with the two of them. After a few minutes of chitchat, he seemed to grow weary of this idle talk. Instead of discussing his life with other patients, he whistled. He had a strong whistle.

Sometimes Lydia drove across town to a grocery store where she knew she wouldn’t see anyone she recognized, and she talked to him. She shared her day and was tempted to tease him and say, “Oh, Dr. Stein, you’re so silly.” Just so everyone knew who she was speaking to, but no wife would call her husband doctor unless they were roleplaying, and that felt cheap and silly to Lydia, so she just called him honey and love. She never bought cheese, but he told her once that he loved it, so she placed a large hunk in her cart. When she got back into her car, she continued speaking to him. He had other patients he could’ve been attending to, but she imagined him saying, “Yes. But no one else is you.”

She passed a gas station with an inflatable yellow bunny bouncing outside in the wind, a fruit stand offering cartons of strawberries for \$6.99, and a row of chain restaurants.

She said to the empty car, “Last year, my mother died. She was thrown from the car because she wasn’t wearing her seatbelt.” She tapped her hand against the wheel. “Can you believe that? My mom didn’t have any enemies that I knew of, but I was still sure that someone had sabotaged her car and made the seatbelt unclickable. That could’ve been the only reason, her only excuse for not wearing it, because mothers follow the rules they teach.” Lydia bit her lip. “My husband didn’t understand my obsession. Sometimes things just happen, Lydia. He said. Terrible things happen. No one ever said life is fair.” Lydia’s car traveled through puddles; the breeze shifted and picked up speed. The cold is coming to stay.

She said. “I don’t mean to be forward Dr. Stein, but I wonder why you and your wife never had any children. My husband and I had five. People teased us. “Haven’t you heard of birth control?” “Don’t you two do anything else?” And James would kiss my neck or my hand, pull me close, and say, “What can I say? My wife is irresistible.” Lydia touched her stomach, which wasn’t as flat as it once had been but wasn’t as soft as a lot of the mothers she saw in the park or around school. “I could’ve worked. James wouldn’t have minded. He probably would’ve liked the help, but our kids were needy. They required occupational therapists, dance classes, tutors, and psychiatrists, and instead of it getting easier as they got older, it just got harder, and I got busier. They forgot permission slips, tubas, inhalers, and tennis shoes. There was no time for a job outside of our home. Maybe you never wanted kids, or maybe Susan told you that if she did, your wife would ruin her body or that the two of you would never have sex again. People who try to get in between couples are always pointing out the things they should or shouldn’t do. Our youngest daughter, Lainey, sleeps between us. She sleeps like a clock. Every hour or so, she turns her body, and at two or three in the morning, when I’ve finally fallen asleep, my dog decides to take inventory to see if every part of his body is still there. He licks. He sniffs. He shakes,

and then I'm back up again. Do you have trouble sleeping? My husband snores like someone has pinched his nose. He coughs and spits like a car trying to start. I bet when you get home, even when you're tired, you tell your wife about your day because you know that it doesn't matter what you say; you know that sometimes the unimportant things unearth the more important stuff, and so you tell her that Mrs. So and So needed a root canal, and Mr. So and So recommended an Italian restaurant a half hour away that is supposed to be great!

When Lydia is five minutes away from home, the phone rings. It's the school. Laney fell off the slide on the playground and hurt her leg so she immediately turned her car around.

In urgent care, Lainey sat in a wheelchair with her left leg propped up, crying. Lydia stroked her hair. "It will be alright." She said.

When Dr. Stein walked in without his white coat and in casual jeans, Lydia was panicked. "What's wrong?"

His eyes scanned her. They fell over her eyes, down the slope of her nose, and over her top and bottom lips, like he was trying to place her. He rubbed his hand through his hair, and it flopped to the side. There was no sign of the gel he usually slicked it back with.

"It's fine." He said. "I think it's fine."

Lydia had forgotten how musical the sound of his voice was.

"But what happened? Why are you here?"

"Because Susan had chest pains."

She looked at him more closely. Dr. Stein's shirts were buttoned wrong, and the tails were untucked.

"We were working late." He covered his mouth, and Lydia imagined that when he removed his fingers, his teeth would be yellowed

and crooked.

Lydia said. "I bet."

He raised his eyebrows. "What?"

Lydia couldn't stand when she was walking down a hallway somewhere, and she smiled at a stranger and asked them how they were doing, and they responded with a "fine" or an "ok" and kept on walking. She wanted to yell. I'm fucking fine too. Thanks for asking, Your Highness. She stood there, counting in her head, waiting for him to ask what brought her to urgent care. She knew that if she reached fifty-seven seconds before he opened his mouth, she would walk away. The nurse called her daughter's name, and she lost track of her count, but she was sure it had been at least ten to fifteen seconds of him just rubbing his eyes and chin like he was the only person in the room.



MEMORY

MIKE HORAN

There was this girl when I was young,
 a redhead.
 It was so long ago,
 but not so long that the memories are
 sepia-toned.
 These memories are bright primary colors.
 On some days I can still smell the scent of her hair,
 Honeysuckle, and the taste
 of her,
 cigarettes & lust.
 I remember her laughter and her
 crying.
 I was the cause of both.
 By the end I had caused more
 tears than
 smiles.

Sometimes, bored the way the young get,
 we'd grab a 12 pack of cheap beer
 and drive to Nashville,
 Purposely losing ourselves on the back streets
 of the Eastside.
 This was before gentrification
 so it was dangerous
 and thrilling, even though nothing ever happened.

We were bullet-proof.
 We would drive and drink our beer,
 talking about everything until
 we would see a familiar street and
 make our lazy way home to our bed.

Other times, on hot summer days,
 we'd take beer & boombox & blanket
 to a secret spot she knew on the banks of
 Stones River and
 drink and listen to music
 and fuck
 the whole fuzzy day away.
 I wondered, sometimes, how she knew that spot
 but never asked.
 Some things, really, are best not known.

This was the only girl, of all the girls I ever
 brought home that
 my family, my sisters, loved
 and for me, she was the perfect combination of good girl
 and wanton woman, someone that reveled in her sensuousness.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her.
 I can't remember her name.



SYNTAX
VELIBOR BAĆO



DEBUG
ALYSSA HIGUERA

THE LAST AURORA

MARCO ETHERIDGE

The hotel room is cloaked in shadows that have not changed with the passage of a century. The dark room is perched above a darker cobblestone street. A single lamp casts a cone of golden light over an old man sitting in a worn armchair.

The man sits upright, gnarled hands in his lap, gray eyes alert in his head. Below the curtained windows, a taxi passes in front of the hotel. Loose cobbles shift under wet tires. The old man doesn't hear a taxi. He hears stones grinding on ancient seabeds. The taxi rounds a narrow corner. Its squelching passage fades to silence.

The seated man is as a statue, matching the stillness of the room. There is no television, no radio, nothing to disturb or distract. He waits in silence, but his mind is not stone.

How long have they kept me here? He searches his memory, tabulating the empty time of waiting. Ten days have passed. Yes, this is the eleventh night. And the others, the enemy, they arrived just behind you. They follow you like dogs on a scent.

And how much longer in this tomb? The man shifts, sighs, waves a stiff hand through the still air. A worthless question. Why do you bother? Have they ever deigned to tell you how long you will wait, or even why you must fight? No, never once in this endless passage of time.

Questions are for scholars, not warriors. The powers will contact you when the appointed hour is come. You have spent many hours waiting for battles to commence. This is only more of the same. And so you wait.

The old man is not one given to idle questions. Who will live?

Who will die? Why does he fight? These are mere distractions, and a distracted man can easily become a dead man. He does what he does because he must because he always has, always and always, back into the dimness of memory and forgetting.

And what lies at the beginning of memory, at the edge of forgetting? An image of a strong-limbed youth, a bright cold land of fjords, of stone cliffs and narrow skies. The image wavers, a vanishing mirage, and he is once more an old man in a musty room.

Beside the chair is a marble-topped table, and atop it a shaded lamp. A telephone of molded plastic squats on the marble surface. As if conjured by the man's thoughts, the telephone begins to pulse out an electronic chime. Two pulses, a beat of silence, pulsing again, the sound punctuating the shadows.

The man consults a silver wristwatch. He lowers his arm to the chair. He counts the pauses between the rings. After the ninth ring, the phone ceases. Nine tolls of the bell, a clear message. He knows it is the last message he will receive from those that command. The next will come from the enemy.

Minutes slide past. The man rises from his chair. He stands tall and lean, unbowed despite decades of toil and struggle. Silver hair falls past his shoulders, bound at his nape by a braided leather thong. The plait of silver spills down over a coarse wool shirt, gleaming against the dark weave.

He unbuttons the heavy shirt and peels it from his body. He drapes the shirt over a carved footboard at the near end of the bed, then pulls an undershirt over his head. The revealed flesh is pale, the frame beneath it muscled and hard.

He sheds clothing until he stands naked at the foot of the bed. He stoops to extinguish the lamp. The room is engulfed in darkness. He stalks the threadbare carpet. The floor creaks beneath the weight of his bare feet. He stops before a tall window, parts the heavy curtains that

block the view to the street. He is peering down through a narrow gap, seeing but unseen.

He squints through the ice-streaked glass. The city casts a feeble glow over tiled roofs. Below his room, light pools beneath two lamps that mark the entrance to the hotel. Sleet patters against the windowpanes and falls to the cobbles below. The stones glisten black or silver in the reflected wet.

There is a bar just across the narrow street. A sign above the barroom door spells out a name in an elegant script: Mimir's Place.

The old man makes careful note of everything he sees. The façade of the bar is cut sandstone stained with spattered graffiti. A tattered awning juts out above a Belgian block sidewalk. And in the shadows beneath the awning, he sees a solitary figure draped in black.

The watcher in the window is not surprised. He does not know the black-shrouded figure's identity, but he recognizes a sentry when he sees one.

The sentry leans against the stone wall, a shadow under shadow. He wears a long black coat, and his hands are hidden. A black hat is pulled low over the man's brow. No flesh is exposed to the prying eyes. The old man in the window watches and waits.

The door of the bar opens, and a huge silhouette fills the doorway. A giant steps into the night. His bald pate shines in the dim light. A thick black beard hides the lower half of his face. The massive head swivels from side to side, taking in the confines of the street.

This one the watcher knows, even from two storeys above. Willem Garm, the Black Dog, a foe to be respected if not feared. The big man approaches his minion. Steam rolls from Garm's mouth. His meaty hands weave emphatic gestures in the cold night air.

The cloaked servant leans against the stone wall, nodding his head without raising his face to his master. Garm grips his minion by the shoulder, shakes him once. Then the Black Dog turns and strides away.

His hulking shadow disappears through the doorway and the door closes behind him.

The watcher at the window eases the curtains closed. He retreats a step into the dark room. You watch them and they watch you. The forces of the night are gathering, the Black Dog and his demons. Knowing this, what will you do? He walks away from the window, stands naked in the center of the room.

Will this be the end of it all, alone in this dismal place? Where are the others, your allies, your kinfolk? You wait for them, but what if they do not come? You are not an old badger trapped in his den. You have more strength than that. There are other ways.

Aye, I could go into the street, take the fight to them. I could strike the first blow and wait for the dogs to pour out of the shadows. And then? Then end it, once and for all. Fight until the last of them falls, or you fall. Yes, and with either ending be at peace.

He shakes his head. No, that is the temptation of the easy way, peace bought with the coin of selfishness, without regard for your comrades and the larger fight. This cannot be.

The shadows of the room begin to deepen to absolute blackness. Night rises from the floor, from the corners of the room. Darkness flows over him where he stands, engulfing him, drowning him beneath the smothering tide.

* * *

You stand on a frozen lake. The ice is black beneath the soles of your bare feet, a frigid barrier between arctic night and bottomless deep. Snow crystals dance and whirl over your naked flesh, but you feel no cold. Where are you? Do you know this place?

The northern horizon is ablaze with a frigid fire. Shimmering curtains of electric green dance in a solar breeze shot through with

carmine and crimson. Sheets of color rise above the dark edge of the world, brilliant hues that swirl, fade, rise again.

You do know this place. You see more than just swirling color in the arctic night. You see the homeward path of the honored dead, illuminated by the shields and armor of those who guide them. Your heart floods with the desire to join them, to be on that same path, to put an end to the fight. Death seems a very small price to pay.

You begin to move, walking across the frozen surface of the lake, bare feet on black ice carrying you to the northern shore. Your pale flesh is illuminated in the alternating glow of the Aurora Borealis: The pale green of spring, the yellow of morning, the crimson of blood.

A snow-rimmed meadow runs down to the shore of the frozen lake. Beyond this tufted field, a black forest of fir covers all the world to the North.

You step from the dark ice and climb the loose shingle of the beach. The sole of one foot touches the barren meadow. Brittle skeletons of winter grasses crack beneath it.

That first step is your last step. Your foot is frozen in an instant, anchored to the snowy ground. You strain against the icy bonds but cannot raise your foot to take another step. Tendrils spring from the flesh of your feet. Hungry roots spring from your body, reaching down to penetrate the frozen ground. You are bound to the soil beneath the snow.

The roots push deep into the earth. You cannot move. The clinging wooden fingers intertwine, overlap, climb over the flesh of your naked legs. The creeping tendrils weave themselves into a sheath of coarse bark, encasing your legs, your hips, binding your torso. Your body becomes the trunk of a tree, your upraised arms the crooked limbs. The northern lights still beckon, but you cannot answer.

* * *

When the hotel room swims back into focus, he is standing on the threadbare carpet. The heavy curtains have been thrown aside. He is

naked, his body facing the sleet-smearred windows, his arms reaching for the shadowed ceiling. Neon light washes into the room from the blinking hotel sign outside, an alternating glow of green and red and yellow.

The man lowers his arms to his sides and stares out into the city night. He does not remember drawing back the curtains. He shakes his head to clear away the fog of fatigue and dread and grief. He turns, sees his clothing laid over the footboard of the bed. The sight of it nudges his memory, as a hunting dog pushing its head under his hand.

Don't be an old fool. You have not yet taken complete leave of your senses. You think they have abandoned you, but that is the voice of weakness. This is not abandonment. You are not alone. You are here, you are waiting, and this is what you must do.

They will summon you when the time is right. This is no different from past battles or battles yet to come. Yes, except this may be the last. Perhaps, but only as each fight may be the last if one does not survive the battle.

That is surely the way of it. Survival writes a fresh chapter in the saga. Death writes the epilogue. He laughs out loud and the sound of his laughter fills the room.

Still chuckling, the man steps to the windows and draws closed the heavy drapes. The room is once more swathed in darkness. His hand finds the table lamp and switches it on. The empty armchair appears in a pool of light, but he does not sit. He moves through the shadows to a paneled door.

A harsh fluorescent light flickers to life, glaring sickly white over white-and-black ceramic tile. A clawfoot bathtub squats on the floor and above it a stained vinyl shower curtain hangs from a chromium ring.

The man turns a porcelain knob. Water spurts into the tub and he tests the temperature of it with outstretched fingers.

Coarse towels hang from a rack on the wall. Block letters in faded blue proclaim the Hotel Vigrid. The man pulls a towel from the rack and waits for the gushing water to run hot.

When the water nears scalding, he steps under the stream of it. Steam rises from his flesh. The slimy curtain pushes in on him as if to wrap his body in a burial shroud. He fends it off while scrubbing the pale flesh that covers his ribs. Age has loosened the once taut skin, but the muscles beneath are still hard.

The steam becomes a heavy fog that fills the room. Eyes closed, he sucks the thick warm air into his lungs. Hot water beats against his chest, his back, his shoulders. Minutes pass and he thinks only of heat, of warmth, of the blood pulsing in his body.

When the water loses its scalding edge, he reaches for the porcelain knob. He flings aside the mildewed vinyl shroud and towels himself dry. The rough towel chafes his skin pink. He laughs to himself and rubs harder.

Rubbed dry and raw, the man walks naked from the bathroom. His body is warmed to the core, and in that warmth, he feels the kindling of a familiar spark.

He crosses the dark room, feels the gritty carpet through the soles of his bare feet. He halts before the tall windows, flings the curtains aside. The room shimmers under a sheen of neon blues and greens. He dresses himself by the eerie light.

His ears catch a noise outside the room's paneled door, a furtive sound from the hallway beyond. His fingers freeze on the buttons of his woolen shirt. There it is again, the creak of a floorboard under a slow footstep, movement more sensed than heard.

The man drops his hands to his side, turns to face the closed and bolted door. The hallway is silent, but he can sense the presence of another. There is no knock, no summons, yet he knows that someone or something is standing on the other side of the wooden barrier.

Heartbeats pulse in the silence and waiting, and with the heartbeats a flame rises, a fire kindled from one small spark. Come now at last in the final need, the flame burns away fear, torches weakness. The wait

is over, and the time is now. He is ready. The heat of blood rage boils within him and the darkened room goes red with it.

* * *

The Aurora Borealis flares crimson across the arctic night. You strain against the wooden sheath that imprisons your body. Your eyes search across the frost-rimed field. You see yellow eyes gleaming from beneath the black wall of the forest. The eyes glow bright, grow dim, reappear under another dark bough.

This is the time. This is the place. You will not be bound. They cannot bind you. You wrench your arms downward and feel the crucifying bark crack beneath your strength. You suck in a breath of cold air, look to the shining light, squeeze your arms together with all the strength you have within you. The wood splinters, breaks asunder, and your arms are freed.

You flex the muscles of your body, strain against the enclosing bark, rip at it with your loosened fingers. The shell cracks and shatters. With a roar in your throat, you break free and leap out of the broken wooden shards.

More yellow eyes gleam out of the midnight darkness beneath the fir trees. You reach a mighty hand to the frozen ground, seize the largest fragment of broken wood. Swinging the weapon aloft, you send a battle cry thundering into the night.

From up and down the rocky shore, your cry is answered, again and again, rebounding across the frozen field. Your heart leaps in your chest, sending hot blood surging through your veins. They have heard the call, your sisters and brothers. You are not alone. Now is the time. Let the battle be joined!

You stride forward across the frozen ground, raising crystalline clouds around your pounding feet. You see the others, on your left and

your right, weapons raised above their heads, a wave of reckoning on this last night. You charge ahead, joy coursing through you, the joy and lust for battle. Under the blackness of the forest, the yellow eyes await the onslaught.

Public Announcement: Thursday 29 October.

Oslo Police are seeking information regarding the identity of an elderly man found dead at a local hotel. The dead man was found in a room at Hotel Vigrid in the Brugata area. The deceased man was approximately 75 years of age. No cause of death has yet been established.

The Hotel Vigrid register lists the dead man as one Lars Torson, but Oslo Police report that documents found with the dead man are believed to be forgeries. Police are seeking any information that might positively identify the dead man.

Police ask citizens with any knowledge of this individual to call the number listed below. Callers may remain anonymous if they so desire.

THE CITATION

CLIVE AARON GILL

“James,” my fiancée, Dolores, said to me in a Seattle nightclub, “our marriage is going to last. Not like so many other marriages.”

“I agree.”

“I want a huge bash.”

Eleven months later, in Hawaii, three minibusses shuttled our fifty guests to a church for our wedding. Two days of celebrations followed with lunches, dinners and entertainment.

*

During the following fifteen years of marriage, we had been happy. Except that Dolores complained I didn’t compliment her appearance. She also told me, “You are not a good listener.”

Every two years, we took vacations to Europe or South America, visiting art museums and archeological sites. Eighteen months after our previous vacation, Dolores agreed with my suggestion that we take a four-day summer trip on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State and hike through the lush, green rainforest.

*

I enjoyed driving near the wild coastline and seeing the snow-capped mountains, but Dolores said, “I’m bored.”

Looking in my rearview mirror, I saw red flashing lights on a State Patrol vehicle. I pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. A tall,

broad-shouldered officer climbed out of his car and approached me with a deliberate walk, his boots crunching the gravel. A cold sweat cooled my back, and my throat tensed.

“Good afternoon, officer,” I said.

“Good afternoon, sir. Your ID, registration and proof of insurance, please.”

He examined my documents.

“Do you know the speed limit?”

I squirmed in my seat. “No, Officer.”

“What speed were you going?”

“I don’t know.”

The officer sighed and opened a citation book.

“James,” Dolores yelled, her brow knitted into a frown, “tell him we’ll take this to court. You hear me, James?”

The officer stepped back, looked at Dolores and snorted.

“That your wife?” the officer asked in a low tone.

“Yes.”

“I ain’t giving you a citation.”

He closed the citation book, and I lifted my hand to hide a satisfied smile.

“Thank you, Officer. I really appreciate it.”

“You got enough problems, sir.”

Dolores’ jaw tightened, her eyes bulged and her hands shook.

*

Seven months later, Dolores and I divorced.



HEAT STROKE

JARED PEARCE

She says the curling leaves are
signs the tree's thirsty, angling
so if any drops fall they'll drop
down directly to the licking roots.

She's not sure if the science will
back her theory, but it seems
reasonable to me: if the water's
regular, the leaves can hold it

a while, let it down slowly, but
when it's hot and the tree's been
out in the sun working all day,

it wants to drop its tools, charge
in, bare its feet, and gulp
as much and as fast as it can.

ACROSS THE HIGH SEAS WE ALL SOMEDAY GO

LU LIU

(On studying abroad)

Across the high seas we all someday go,
On a plane, past the looming clouds and sky.
Visions of homeland in our dreams do glow.

Though gentle winds in the phoenix trees blow,
Not to let the world pass before our eyes,
Across the high seas we all someday go.

Yet when sun sets at four in towns where slow
Traffic yields craving for warmth and for light,
Visions of homeland in our dreams do glow.

"Why," they ask, "leave the country where you grow?"
Sneers, ridicules, yet after tears have dried
Across the high seas we all someday go.

On foreign grounds we tread, hearts overflown
With duty, honour, weights we carry by;
Visions of homeland in our dreams do glow.

And you, dear alma mater, don't you know,
To Oxbridge you send them, and there they sigh?
Across the high seas we all someday go.
Visions of homeland in our dreams do glow.





BACK THEN
KELSEY ERICA TRAN

PEACH PIT
AMANDA VOGT

I remembered her, Benny Warner — I remembered Benny Warner was peach. Not a peach — Benny Warner was just peach. In painted cheeks and skin and flush and tone. In pearlescent pigment on dance floors. Benny Warner was savored and slobbered over like peach. Candied sweet to the pit like peach. Benny Warner took on silver tipped teeth one tongue flick at time — peeled like peach. Sloshing nectar. I remembered her, Benny Warner, drowning in her taste — too thick to suck up through a straw.



ON TIMES GONE BY

J.D. LANCASTER


We all look back on times gone by;
 These fading paintings in our mind,
 Tears of joy, and of elation—
 The last blackboard generation.

Acetate placed by hand-picked tyke
 On overhead projector light,
Give me oil in my lamp, I pray!
 Was belt out flawlessly each day.

Gravel beneath capering feet;
 Thrust to dust in summer-tide heat,
 An upright game of *Duck, Duck Goose*,
 Had eager infants on the loose.

With eyes on afters, first the mains,
 Running nowhere with an arm raised,
 Waiting on teachers to bid grace,
 On the sapid side of our plate.

Then it would be quarter past three
 With coats ripped off their racks with glee,
 Scooped into prudent hands where we—
 The best days of our lives, you see.



ABSTRACTION #1

CYRUS CARLSON



FALLEN MAN AND STANDING CARYATIDS

TERRY TROWBRIDGE

*Embrace, in the dead of night, my freakish glooms.
-Emile Nelligan, (2017). Ship of Gold, 56.*

*Refined sadomasochism can ruin art...The idea of suffering confuses the
mind, and in certain contexts...can masquerade as a purification.
-Iris Murdoch, (1971). The Sovereignty of Good, 66.*

The barely-clothed caryatids holding up an altar
are fascinating because the altar is pressing down.
For a certain kind of front-row parishioner

who chooses the front pew so he kneels on bare floor,
bruises his meditations, cannot lean his clasped hands
on the back of his neighbour's pew: the isolationist

who still reaches out in community
and lines up for communion.

He looks at the sanctuary floor for red wine droplets;

wanting them to be scabs. Offering himself to himself
while his thoughts wander from the sermon deafly to Judea,
his lookless eyes below the carried altar

mirror the Son's blind stare on the cross.

Neither penitent nor Penitent sees the priest between them,
but they do both embrace pressure, wounds, breathe sepulchral air.

HUSBAND FOR SALE

CALEB JAMES STEWART

Clarice had another door slammed into her face. She sighed in disappointment, but not surprise. She glanced down at her paper, made a note, and then marked out the name on the address. *We'll see how you like it when you're alone until you die, Janice*, she thought as she turned to the hulking iron man behind her.

"Come on, Simon, let's go home." The robot turned 180 degrees in place before beginning his march to the sidewalk. She shook her head at the robot, wondering how she'll sell any Husbands with Simon as her partner.

Clarice had signed up for Husband For Sale as a part time job when she dropped out of college four years prior. She needed some money while she thought about what she was going to do next and ended up falling in love with the job. As part of the job, she was given a chance to take home a Husband of her own, and she named him Simon, a name she had read in a history book or maybe the Bible back when her mothers made her go to church, she couldn't remember.

Her first few years she had great sales. Simon, being the newest Husband 3, was an easy sale. Now that Husband 5 was out, it was harder to sale such a product without a good example. Simon had what most in the industry would consider "normal wear and tear," which meant that he was slowly falling apart.

Simon opened the back door to the minivan and climbed into back seat. Clarice shook her head again as the side door slammed, and she turned down the street to see two women on an evening walk, looking up at the robot in amazement and a little terror.

“You gals like the looks of my Husband?” Even after years of saying that it never quite felt natural. She had never seen a man before; they died off long before she was born.

“Husband, huh?” The two gave each other a look.

“Yeah, he’s not a great conversationalist, but man can he cook,” she lied, giving her best sales pitch. The two gave each other another look before turning around and walking the other way. Clarice cursed to herself as she got into the car.

They got home, and she ordered Simon to go into the house. He followed the order, but when he opened the front door, he insisted that she enter the house before him. She walked in, annoyed every time. She once again wondered if they really programmed the Husbands to be just like the men of the past. Her thoughts were interrupted by the slamming of the door.

Simon walked to the back office where he plugged himself in and powered down, while Clarice went to pour herself a glass of wine and turn on the TV. A live version of Macbeth was playing on the TV, with a very burly woman playing the title role. There had been a push in the past year or so to do live TV of old classics, a way of remembering the men they had lost.

Clarice wondered what there was to miss as she changed the channel to a more modern soap opera and sipped her wine. She flipped through a magazine on the table that she was automatically subscribed to when she signed up for Husband For Sale. This specific one was showcasing the Husband 5. It looked closer to what men actually looked like, and there was a new function; you could download blueprints onto it, and it would build whatever you wanted.

Clarice thought about Simon; he couldn’t build things, heck, he could barely do any of the things he was originally programmed to do. She pulled up the Husbands website on her computer, ordering for herself a Husband 5.

It arrived just a week later in a large cardboard box. The postwoman knocked on the door and had Clarice signed for it. As the postwoman wheeled in the box, Clarice tried to give her a sales pitch, but the woman took the clipboard and walked back to her truck. Clarice didn’t really care. She ran into the kitchen and grabbed her scissors before ripping into the box.

Carl was a god. Or at least, that’s what he reminded her of. She saw the statues of the Greek gods in books, and Carl definitely looked like one. Carl came prenamed, but honestly, she thought it fit him perfectly. Clarice walked around him a few times, examining her new Husband. As she grabbed the instruction manual for him, her old Husband walked into the room.

Clarice didn’t move her eyes from her paper, “Simon, this is Carl. He’s a Husband 5. He’s going to be helping me with work now. Can you go make me some food?”

Simon walked to the kitchen without sound as Clarice started trying out the new Husband, “Carl, open the door,” “Carl, lift the sofa,” “Carl, go cook me a burger.”

Carl walked into the kitchen as Simon was walking out with a single hot dog resting on a white Styrofoam plate. “Oh, you can throw that away, Simon. Carl is cooking for me.” After he did what he was told, Simon was ordered to his room.

Clarice enjoyed her new Husband, and with that work began to become easier. Suddenly, with the newest model, sales began to get better. Even a few women who already had wives ordered one, just to have an extra hand around the house.

Clarice’s favorite feature was the building feature and loved to show it off. She kept the supplies for a birdhouse in the car, so Carl didn’t have to run to the store to grab them, and she often left the birdhouse with the women she tried to sell too. Everything started getting better, that is, except Simon.

Simon was just in the way most of the time. And she couldn't just get rid of him; no one would buy him since there were newer models to buy instead, and Clarice felt too much of an attachment with the Husband to just throw him away. Simon was just a harmless gnat for now, who could be ordered to go to his room whenever.

It was about a month after Carl arrived that Simon disappeared. Clarice had barely even noticed at first, but she soon noticed all the empty space and the saved breath. She walked back to the office to find it empty. She called her neighbors and asked them if they had seen him, but they assumed she was calling trying to sell something and hung up.

It was getting dark, so Clarice decided to go ahead and go to bed so she could get up early and go search for him. She tried to think of what order she could've given him to make him disappear, but nothing came to mind.

She went out searching for him the next day, but he was nowhere. She ordered Carl to go search for him, but his searches came up empty too. It was another week before Simon showed back up, dirty, with a few leaves sticking out of various joints. Clarice didn't know why, but she was relieved. She gave the robot a hug and order him to stay at home. He tilted his head, a mannerism he didn't have before.

The next morning Carl went missing. Clarice thought she was going crazy when her first Husband disappeared, but when the second one did, she went into a full panic. She climbed into her car and drove around the entire block searching for him. Just like her previous search, it yielded no results. She returned home that night, disappointed, and found that Simon had food ready for her, burgers and fries. At least he could do one thing right.

Carl never showed back up, but overtime Clarice didn't notice, Simon started stepping up his game. He started being able to clean better, started cooking better, she even once asked him to build a birdhouse and he was able to. It wasn't until a few months later that she

thought of Carl again, not until she saw the hand.

Simons right hand was a bit more polished than usual, in fact, it looked almost brand new. She was taken aback when she saw it, because, she could swear, it looked like Carl's. She didn't say anything, what was she to say? Was she going to ask Simon if that was Carl's hand on his body? No. She dismissed the thought, perhaps he had just polished it up the previous night.

A week later the other hand was shining like the first one, and Clarice began thinking the worst. She didn't know how, but it appeared that Simon was slowly replacing his parts with... No. It was too terrible to think of, right?

She had to be sure.

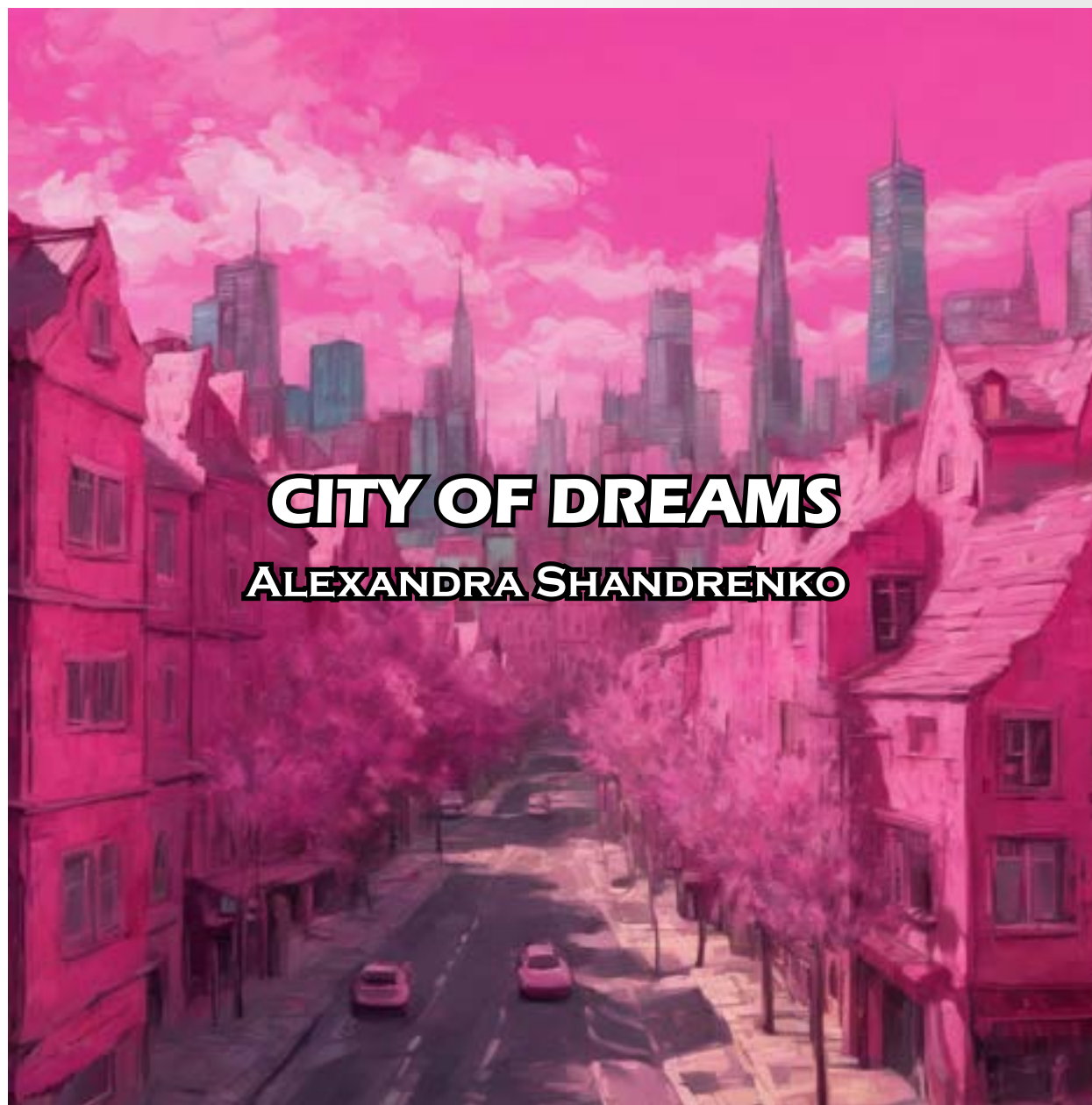
"Simon, run to the store and grab these things," she placed a yellow note in the shining hand, holding it briefly. Simon walked out the door and down the road. In that time he was gone, Clarice began looking in every place in the house that she could think of hiding a body. It wasn't in the closet, it wasn't in the attic, she even began checking places that could only hold a screw or two. Nothing.

She about gave up the search when she remembered another place. The place where the exterminator had to pull a dead raccoon out of because it was stinking too bad. Simon had assisted her. She walked out to the backyard and moved the grate to access the underneath of the house. She grabbed her flashlight and began looking around.

She was about to crawl deeper in when her flashlight light caught the gleam of something metallic. She held her hand over her mouth as she saw a hump of silver like a body beneath the house. She could see the groove marks of something that was constantly crawling in and out from this place.

She ran inside as the front door opened and closed. Simon stood at the front door, holding a series of plastic bags in the silver hand and staring intently at her. She stood unmoving as he walked over to the

table to set down the groceries. He walked over to her. She began crying. And then, he hugged her, and she cried in his shoulder, and he petted the back of her head. She could've sworn the gears inside of him were making a hushing sound, calming her down and warming old steel of the front of his body. Steel, she knew, Simon would soon replace.



RESPONSIBLE

ANGELA TOWNSEND

I worry that the cats are going to get Pine-Sol on their paws and die, and I will be responsible.

I worry that I'm more worried about my responsibility than my beloveds' death by Pine-Sol.

I worry that my worries are wrapped around my ego like twine, the kind that my jaunty pink desk scissors will take 18 tortured cuts to snip, and then I will still have to give it a final tug.

I worry that I am responsible for everything, but little of lasting value.

I worry that the things I value doing are incapable of staying done.

I worry what would happen if they did stay done.

My mother worries that, if I go to the park alone, I will be murdered repeatedly. She assiduously blames this, and its many sibling fears (we shall not treat the terror that flies by night if I trot to Target after sundown), on the fact that my grandfather was a policeman. I will not question that narrative, although I want to, because I worry about my mother's colon health enough to know that worries are cowbell-clanging coots without couth.

I worry that I am a head on a stick, more enthused by opportunities to use the word "couth" than by the wind in my hair or the sun on my skin. I worry that I don't worry about this at all, chuffed to be a professional indoorswoman since ere I first gulped air.

I worry that many worries are getting weak and gauzy with age, unleashing an unworried woman into a world that welcomes no such creature.

I worry that the slippery slopes of my youth are looking much more like Slip 'n Slides these days.

I worry that my capitalist capillaries are claiming rest and play.

I worry that I can sleep through worries of wasting my life, making God cluck and chuck me, and losing my improbably groovy job.

I worry that I hear my own voice yelling “cowabunga!”

I worry that all my fears are waiting at the bottom, loss and obscurity and faithlessness and retinopathy and poisoned cats.

I worry less when I have a cat in my lap or a Mom on the Zoom or a keyboard kittering under my fingers.

I worry less when mercy’s hand joins mine on the plow handle of my competence.

I worry less when I meet God over my crochet hook, plying the only stitch I know, sundown after sundown, making blankets for no one in particular.

I worry less when I remember I am God’s particular.

I worry less when I see the whole sea of particulars and peculiars, my lifetime of loved lions and sea lions, slipping and sliding down the rocks into each other’s whiskers.

I worry less when I see my whisp of moonlight, safe across from the sun.

I worry less.



THE COLOR IN PAIN (SERIES)
K. RYAN GREGORY

EAGLE EYE

THADDEUS RUTKOWSKI

My grandmother on my father's side was a slender woman with gray hair. She was also a neat person. Everything in her house was where it was supposed to be. Her rule was "A place for everything, and everything in its place." One time, I saw her pick up a piece of lint from the carpet—it was not something I would have noticed, or cared about if I'd noticed. She bent down to grab the piece of fuzz, stepped away to throw it out, then returned to scan the carpet again.

Another time, my parents dropped me off to visit with her. Maybe she thought she hadn't spent enough time with me. Or maybe she thought she'd give my parents a break from child-caring. Once there, I sat at a small table in her bright kitchen and ate chicken soup. The soup was good, but I didn't know how to eat it properly. I sucked the liquid from the spoon with a slurping sound. She showed me how to use the spoon properly—not to stick it directly into my mouth, but to hold it sideways, then approach the loaded spoon gently, as if going in for a kiss, and sip from the side of the utensil. "I don't know what you'll do when you grow up," she said, "but at least you'll have good manners."

That day, I had brought pills for my allergies. I didn't really see the difference between taking them and not taking them. I preferred to live with the allergies—to sneeze and cough—but I had no choice. I put the pills on the table, and while I was eating I lost one. I looked around and saw it on the floor but made no move to pick it up. I didn't want to be seen swallowing something from the floor. I thought that, if I ignored it, the pill would not be noticed, but I should have known better. My grandmother, with her eagle eye, saw the pill and picked it up. She didn't

ask if it was mine. She just threw it away in the trash.

I wanted to say, "That was my allergy pill!" but it was too late. I didn't want her to know whose pill it was, and I didn't expect, if she learned it was mine, that she would dig it out of the garbage and give it back to me.

But if we couldn't talk about the pill, we had little to talk about. The lunch passed mostly in silence. I didn't even say that I liked the soup.



THOSE WORTHY ENOUGH

DAVID M. ALPER

In the depths of winter's solitude,
a becalmed wintry song resonates
through the barren landscape

with an eerie flair. Soft whispers
on the icy wind, it floats in obscurity,
only to be heard by those willing

to listen closely. This secretive melody
carries melancholy and mystery,
haunting the hearts of listeners who

stumble upon its hidden treasures.
Its delicate notes weave a tapestry
of forgotten tales and hidden desires,

evoking a sense of longing that lingers
long after it fades into silence.
Like a clandestine message whispered

among shadows, this wintry song
fills the air with an enigmatic presence,
leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions

and deep introspection. It is known only to those
who seek solace in solitude, revealing its secrets
to those worthy enough to embrace its cryptic allure.



THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

SHAYLA DODGE



THE CORLISS EFFECT

RYAN C. EUBANK

Marty tensed up a bit when Shane made his move, instinctively gripping the armrest and bracing his knees against the glove compartment. In doing so, he inched up in his seat just enough to have his presumptively unshakable faith called into question. With a sharp elbow jab to Marty's ribs, Shane downshifted and the Maverick wailed and bucked. Shane squealed,

“You chicken shit er sumthin? Jump out ‘n walk if ya is!”

Shane Cecil Pate had no tolerance for the meek or for those who exhibited any trace of sensitivity or forethought. Without waiting for a response, he whipped into the opposite lane and sped around the dim silhouette of a log truck as it crested a hill, oncoming traffic be damned. The future could have gone up in flames before they'd cleared the oily red rag nailed to the longest of the bobbing pines, but there was a good quarter mile separating them from an approaching station wagon as it sagged along on a paper route. Shane's dumb luck prevailed. Again. Spontaneity wasn't in his vocabulary, but it was all he really knew. Marty flicked his ash on Shane's lap in disapproval and snuck a muted sigh of relief. Tattered upholstery danced with Shane and Marty's peroxide-tweaked Caesar bangs as they fueled their joyriding predawn commute with pork rinds and clove cigarettes. The Twiggs County twins were loud and lanky and managed to get by without an ounce of self-awareness between the two of them. No worries. No regrets. Everything made perfect sense. Through a cracked windshield smeared with splattered bugs, the desolate miles of roadkill dotted asphalt beneath a

pinkish-gray sky gave way to a junkyard, a seedy motel, public housing blocks and storefront churches as the Pate brothers reached Fort Hill at Macon's scruffy side door and daybreak ushered in a hazy view of downtown. Just beyond the coliseum, the first sliver of sunshine burnished the corners of blocky office buildings and the tops of scattered steeples that peeked out from the surrounding thicket. Ghostly orange street lights snuffed out in a cascade like dominoes falling alongside their '74 Ford Maverick as it backfired repeatedly, causing a trash crew slinging cans beside a liquor store to duck for cover. Mactown, as they called it, was the biggest city they'd ever seen, and their breakneck passage through the gritty toward the genteel infused the unfolding day with a touch of optimistic energy. Shane's primer-gray chariot, proudly dubbed, “Raw Dog” across the hood in brown spray paint, left a trail of billowing smoke that traced their course over the sepia-toned Ocmulgee River and past the lush furrows of Rose Hill Cemetery.

“Of all the places they coulda went, the Allman Brothers is buried right over there somewhere,”

Marty proclaimed as he motioned toward the graveyard, rubbing his fingers free of greasy crumbs.

Despite having been made aware a dozen times, Shane fished a cassette tape from the console and weighed in.

“And they wasn't even from Georgia. They was from Florida, just like these boys,”

he said, wiggling Molly Hatchet's sophomore release for emphasis before nudging it into the deck. After a buildup of driving power chords and a noodling lead guitar riff culminating in a horse

whinny, Danny Joe's gravelly vocals kicked in to remind Shane that he was "flirtin' with disaster." The guys looked like they were fresh from an overnight demolition derby as they rolled into town from the rundown double-wide they shared with their grandmother next to an abandoned chalk mine east of Dry Branch. In their wake, drivers carried on with puzzled smirks as they yielded to the sputtering mess weaving through traffic with one jaundiced headlight leading the way. Shane was carefree and drumming on the steering wheel, rocking to the treble from the sun bleached and blown speakers that flopped across the rear sill when they skidded into the back lot of Garland's Nursery Yard. Like they did six days a week, the duo (pronounced Shine and Morty in their tongue) clocked in at seven sharp and made their rounds along the fence line, unlatching padlocks and throwing open gates in a flurry of clinking and scraping before receiving their marching orders from Mr. Perry Garland, the shop's imperious owner.

Facing a forecast high of nearly one hundred muggy degrees, co-workers Corliss Dugger and Barlowe Goddard slogged their way in separately by foot on a patchwork of paths from ramshackle duplexes in the most unpleasant corner of Pleasant Hill, known as "The Bucket of Blood." Corliss worked aloud through some of his new bars, numb to the whirl of traffic an arm's length away,

"I'm an interlocutor, provocateur, purveyor of irrefutable facts. A counter of large denomination bills in high stacks..."

as he arrived at the shop and dialed back his mojo a notch. Donning a du-rag and threadbare sweatpants, he blotted his forehead with the towel that hung around his neck as he thumbed through the timecards, and was as enthusiastic about being paired with the Pates

as he was about the unfinished straw and sod job that awaited them in the lily-white enclave of Idle Hour. He mumbled a continuation of the flow, bobbing to an imaginary beat, as he shelved his card and found Barlowe's,

"Braggadocious, not coy. All man. No boy. You know what I'm finna do..."

Barlowe, who was hobbled by a limp, trusted the young and wiry Corliss to punch his card for him, since he was able to get in and out of the cramped office more efficiently. Neither politely acquiesced to the expectation that they "remember their place," and be duly constrained by the tendrils of the Jim Crow era that still gripped the nursery yard. Both men made a concerted effort to steer clear of the boss, who ran the place like a chain gang. But, like Shane and Marty, they needed work and for very different reasons, had few options available to them. While bursting with botanical splendor on all sides, Garland's Nursery wasn't exactly fertile ground for cognitive growth. Shane saw himself as a cut above the average cracker, though. He'd taken a few night classes at Macon Junior College years back and bailed, but didn't need a degree to bring down the house with zingers like,

"Y'all working hard, or hardly working?"

The banter so seldom strayed from "cans of whoop-ass" and who "got some" the night before that his apt for double entendre and sarcastic wordplay earned him the handle, "Shane the Brain." In an environment where he alone held a high school diploma, he reveled in his wit, but wasn't afraid to take part in Marty's kindergarten antics. With Shane cheering him on, Marty pelted the arriving greenhouse staff with clusters of blaze-red berries plucked from between the thorns of a

pyracantha bush and dodged sucker punches. It was a near repeat of the day before. And the day before that.

Mr. Garland, clad in pastels and a plaid driver cap, tolerated about two minutes of nonsense before leaning out the side door to get things moving. Waving a handful of folded invoices, he cleared his throat as a cue and croaked in his slithering drawl,

“That goddamn straw ain’t gonna spread itself, gentlemen!”

The chatter went quiet as it did whenever the old man spoke. A melodic refrain of a mourning dove’s coo atop the clockwork ticking of a sprinkler filled the slack-jawed void. Shane stepped forward, squared up and assured him that they had it covered, then took hold of the papers with the pride of an Olympic torchbearer. Any confirmation of his fledgling command sent his swagger into overdrive.

“Let’s turn and burn, fellas!” Shane barked,

“Look alive!”

With that, the crunch of wet gravel underfoot trailed off as Mr. Garland eased back to his stool behind the cash register. Getting out on the road meant escaping the boss man’s watchful eye, not coddling the permed and persnickety garden club members who meandered the leafy aisles and, most importantly, sitting down and enjoying the breeze while on the clock. Corliss and Barlowe also had contraband refreshments they were eager to ingest.

Garland relied on Shane to keep the operation on track. His boy

was a go-getter, too, at least when compared to his brother and some of the other hired hands. The prevalence of suspended and revoked licenses had long since placed Shane at the helm of the shop’s crew cab pickup, which was so covered in scratches and rust that scant evidence of its original white paint survived. Like its occupants, it wasn’t pretty but it got the job done. Marty ran ahead and took shotgun, leaving Corliss and Barlowe to pile into the back seat, where tufts of foam squirmed through rips in the blue vinyl. It took a few cranks, but the truck grudgingly fired up with a sooty belch and set their daily dose of liberty into motion. They hitched up to a load of sod and baled pine straw and were off. With the trailer squeaking and groaning, Shane rounded the corner onto Vineville Avenue and when they were out of Garland’s sight, he floored it, knowing the boss was half-deaf. Out came a twangy,

“Hell fuckin’ yeah!”

and a giddyap door spank from Marty. It never got old. Barlowe cracked a warm Schlitz he took from his lunch bag and Corliss rooted around in his sock for the crumpled cellophane that usually housed enough weed to roll a joint. Paychecks were a day away, though, and all he had left of his last buy was a resin-soaked roach. Its pitiful size was all the more reason to guard it. To no one in particular, he hissed,

“Don’t y’all even think about me passin’ this li’l mawfuckah, a’ight,”

as he cupped it with his left hand, hunched forward and began flicking his lighter.

Before they could start bickering about whether the dial would land on the classic rock or hip hop station, Shane announced that they needed

to head downtown and prune the hedges at the Cannonball House Museum on Mulberry Street when they finished with the straw and sod. Marty exploded with excitement. He twirled in his seat and squawked,

“Damned if we ain’t going on a cannonball run! I heard that joker done got hit with ordnance durin’ da war.”

Barlowe wiped suds from his chin and quipped,

“The fuck an *or*-dinance is?”

“Cannonballs, bruh,” Marty sneered.

Corliss popped up from his wind-breaking huddle.

“You think dat might be why it called the Cannonball House, dumbass?”

“Awww, shit!” Shane cackled.

“Homeboy’s gonna school you on the war ‘tween the stites!”

Marty snapped over his shoulder,

“What the hell d’you know ‘bout it?”

as they sped past the old Payne City textile mill.

Corliss finally got a toke and could only muster a purse-lipped, cheek-puffing cough as he shook his head dismissively. Barlowe pointed

with his beer and said with a tsk,

“I know you rednecks damn sho loss.”

“Love it or leave it, cuz!” an unamused Shane fired back.

Corliss’s skunky medicine was little relief in such company.

“We didn’t ax ta come here in the first place, white bwai!”

“Easy, hoss! You know the war didn’t have nothin’ to do with slavery, don’tcha?”

Shane yelled, genuinely offended. Barreling down Vineville with his elbow out the window, he amped up to compete with the engine and buffeting wind,

“We didn’t pick no fight with the Yanks. The South jus’ wanted ta *succeed*. Shit, we *voted* ta succeed! They even called it, uh... succession.”

The light at Forest Hill Road turned yellow and Shane floored it to beat the red, turning heads at the Starvin’ Marvin’ gas pumps. His raspy lecture was punctuated by the diesel’s piercing howl and the clang of wheelbarrows and pitchforks shifting in the bed. Marty slapped the litter-strewn dash and yelped,

“Shine’s walkin’ tha scalded dog, y’all!”

Corliss detonated. He stomped his foot and roared,

“I’m tryna hurry up an get this goddamn jernt smoked fo we get dare if you slow yo ass down!”

Marty flinched when saliva flecked across his bare shoulder, but Shane felt the real impact. Rather than playing back one of his canned retorts, he batted the concept around in his head repeatedly.

Slow down, so he can speed up?

What kinda shit is that?

Corliss, meanwhile, thought nothing more of it. He’d made himself clear and, hearing no resistance, resumed sparking his near-spent lighter with increasing urgency once Shane backed off the throttle. Marty and Barlowe were puzzled by Shane’s apparent obedience. They shared a sidelong glance, then shrugged it off and turned back to the passing scenery. Unaware of their concern, Shane drove on with his mouth agape as analytical assessment rushed at him like Budweiser spewing from a dropped can.

He mused to himself,

“What’s how fast I’m drivin’ got to do with how quick he can burn that doob?”

He was seized by a primal compulsion to square the relationship between the speed of the truck and the activity inside it. Again and again, he whispered the conundrum under his breath until he reached his philosophical ceiling and began to strain past it. If those two seemingly independent acts were intrinsically linked or even mutually exclusive, what else, Shane wondered, might he be missing? Neither he nor Marty had ever questioned much beyond why the fish weren’t biting

or why chicks had to be eighteen to fool around with. Everything else simply was what it was. But this insistence by Corliss, however petty, penetrated a lonely corner of Shane’s psyche that had gone untapped for twenty-nine and a half years.

His mind darted back to ninth grade math class and the word problems that always resulted in margin doodles of dragsters and rebel flags capped off with terribly wrong guesses. Again, he thought to himself, his inner dialogue now taking on the tone and cadence of a backwoods exam proctor,

“The net yield of a vehicle’s deceleration is the extent of intoxication achieved by the passenger whose consumption of marijuana is accelerating in pace. Render the causal relationship as a graphic equation and explain.”

This time, he was going to get it right. Through a jumble of receipts, crushed cigarette packs and candy wrappers, he began studying the speedometer needle. It was dead center at fifty and perfectly modeled the arrow-straight, double yellow-lined blacktop stretching out to the north before him. Kudzu tumbled down the hillside by the train trestle, a green blur in the corner of Shane’s eye. His concentration narrowed. Just ahead, the shiny rear end of a big rig petroleum tanker tapped out blinding pinpoint reflections like Morse code as it slowed for a turn: three short flashes followed by three longer ones, repeating with the undulations of the road. The invoices on the dashboard were flapping and fluttering like clumsy birds threatening to fledge the nest. Barlowe’s trick knee sent a sharp coil stabbing through Shane’s seat. Every distraction was downgraded and ignored. Corliss and his gripe, their rattling tools and the bulging spring in his back all retreated into the pale periphery. Even a voluptuous young woman in leggings and a sports bra jogging in the distance, who ordinarily would have dominated his

attention, escaped him.

Marty's priorities remained more conventional, however. He was busy examining the jogger's backside, mesmerized by the pendulum-like wagging of her auburn ponytail and rhythmic bouncing of her plump buttocks. The lesser twin was lost in a fog of assumptions about the figure who'd soon be within earshot. He pegged her as the rich and snobby type, given that she was romping about in fancy garb on a weekday morning instead of working. She *was* running toward the country club after all, so it was easy to connect the dots. A name like Becca seemed fitting. There was probably a chiseled boyfriend who played professional tennis and drove a spotless BMW who would come between them, though. His entrance lent an unforgiving contrast to the fantasy and the odds weren't in Marty's favor. But there was no harm in looking, he thought. Marty was so wrapped up in the soap opera that he neglected to poke his brother and ask if he'd "hit that," as was customary when a female of presumed reproductive age was spotted. Shane had already transcended such trifles, though.

High overhead, a wispy cloud drifted by and softened Shane's overbite-baring squint. In the fleeting absence of complicating glints, glares and shadows, his face relaxed and his pupils dilated. He leaned in and absorbed the scene with childlike wonder as the vectors of the roadway and speedometer needle converged into one, pointing to a solution. The vanishing point on the horizon ceased to be a nearing destination and instead presented itself as the outer limit of a translucent graph representing their truck's trajectory relative to the passage of time. Shane was electrified. A chill streaked from the top of his head to his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel as a neural shockwave blasted through the dusty corridors of his prefrontal cortex like the leading edge of a supernova. The private cataclysm peeled back the grimy veneer

of his world and revealed a substrate of grand designs and their inner workings. In a schematic that arose from a shimmering mirage near the Dairy Queen, Shane visualized the fourth dimension as an elongated cone, its base being the initialization of any given object's motion, with the rate of that motion dictating the degree at which the cone tapers to a concentrated peak: the present. On a stretch of Highway 41 he'd driven for years, he found himself in uncharted territory. He was literally the tip of the spear hurtling forward!

Perhaps visionary reasoning and scientific discovery weren't the sole domain of the geeks at big name universities after all. Shane sensed that he was on the brink of democratizing for the common man what he had once dismissed as, "science bullshit." Would it be such a stretch to imagine history's great thinkers blazing their trails in crusty high-tops with fluorescent yellow laces just like his? Epiphanies are nothing if not unpredictable, and have never been bound to a predestined set of conditions or means. Newton had his apple, right? Well, Shane had a speedometer and a frustrated colleague trying to catch a buzz. Suddenly, the world's luminaries were more relatable, like old drinking buddies. Did Hawking tease out his black hole theories while hooking up with a former Deep Purple groupie in the parking lot of a bowling alley? Could Einstein have stumbled upon special relativity while puking on a Victrola at an Oktoberfest? Sure. Why not?

Shane closed his eyes in silent, weightless meditation and it hit him like a trophy bass striking his lure,

"Fluctuations in the velocity of an object create pockets of kinetic potential whose boundaries only affect the outcome of the activity within when an imbalance in collateral forces brings either to a..."

“Stop, fool!”

Corliss screamed, when he looked up and saw the gap between them and the tractor-trailer shrinking fast.

Just as Shane was poised to slip the surly bonds of stupidity for good, Corliss backhanded him in the jaw, still holding the lit roach, and jolted him back to reality. Embers went flying as Shane dug both feet into the brake pedal and cut the wheel hard in a panicked reflex. Eyes widened and visions of worst-case scenarios strobed at lightning speed for Shane, Corliss and Barlowe, but Marty was still spellbound and constructing more elaborate hypotheticals with the jogging girl’s every rippling, ultra slow-motion footfall. While Shane rocketed into his academic quantum leap, Marty was pondering the likelihood of their pine straw being bound for the borders around her backyard swimming pool. Call it a boost from twin telepathy or contagious inspiration, but since he was aiming high, why not hope that she’d come home overheated from her run, kick off her shoes and sneak a skinny dip before her sorority sisters returned from their morning putting practice? He indulged, full bore. Golden sunbeams streamed through the thick, perfumed air and caressed Becca’s alabaster curves as she let down her hair, freed herself from her top and shimmied out of her tights. For a luscious moment, she stood angelic in the dappled light that filtered through the sprawling canopy of a flowering magnolia, confident that the coast was clear. Marty would never lay eyes upon a Botticelli, Rubens, or Bouguereau, but the sumptuous scene that took shape before him was more than apt compensation. The flawless nude in contrapposto stance against a rustic wall draped with ivy was idyllic and timeless perfection: a masterpiece. He was smitten. The mother of all daydreams reached a crescendo just as the brake pedal hit the floor and hydraulic pressure was

sent rushing to the calipers. Leering through a jasmine-fringed trellis as she waded into the pool and gracefully skimmed her outstretched hands across the water’s twinkling surface, Marty couldn’t contain his excitement. Boyfriend or not, it was time for an introduction. He licked his lips, thrust his face into the wind and catcalled just as the signal from Shane’s feet locked up the wheels and their truck and trailer went sliding diagonally with a menacing pitch. The whole shitstorm played out in the polished panorama of the tanker’s aluminum skin as they jackknifed toward Marty’s glistening phantasm. The thrashing of gravity swept away all momentum outside and in, obliterating the glorious intangibles that had transfixed both brothers. Like a cinematic crossfade, Becca’s clothing reappeared and the sultry oasis morphed back into a typical suburban roadside cluttered with plastic signs hawking tune-ups, chainsaw repair and banana splits. Marty’s whistle and the screeching tires gave her a split-second shot to turn and react. The leap to safety was derailed by a guy-wire, though, and she went down hard in a grassy patch behind a telephone pole. By the time their truck came to a stuttering halt inches from the warning placards on the tanker, Shane’s enlightenment had gone the way of Corliss’s taste of tranquility and the new bulge in Marty’s cutoff jean shorts. Time slowed further still. Shane sat stunned in the strange intrusion of silence, the rapture of epiphany fizzling into a faint echo of his favorite Molly Hatchet song. He’d *lived* it. He’d flirted with disaster. They all had. The frozen expressions of terrified bewilderment trained upon him told of the magnitude of his blunder and left Shane once again uncharacteristically short for words. With a deferential nod to Corliss for saving their asses, a proxy acknowledgment of a lifetime of prejudice and years of dismissal and underestimation of both he and Barlowe, he muttered a breathy,

“My bad,”

as he slowly reached for the Djarum stashed behind his ear.

He looked down at his weather-beaten digital watch, then desperately back at the speedometer, grasping for a glimmer of his exquisite thought experiment. Ripped from its crucible, though, it had disintegrated. There was nothing. The revelation had dissolved back into the murk like a largemouth bass wriggling free just shy of the net. Having showered his lap with backwash in the commotion, Barlowe blindly flung his dented beer can out the window and over the roof, striking the downed girl, whose actual name was Tabitha Umphlett, in the thigh and splashing one last ounce of insult onto her injury. The dumbstruck redhead who'd been trying to shake off a few pounds before her big summer trip to Myrtle Beach, as Marty had also imagined, steadied herself against a transformer box as she fought to catch her breath. Flushed and spitting out grass clippings, she heaved an operatic middle finger at the oblivious crew, unable to deliver the verbal counterpart as Shane straightened out and took off again. The message didn't connect. She searched her surroundings in vain for a sympathetic witness, the indifference stinging worse than the initial affront, worse than the throbbing abrasion on her left shin.

Shane had his own stuff to work through. As the commonplace descended on him with an unforgivable rudeness, he began to question the purpose of his thankless vocation, and by extension, his entire being. Why was he doomed to sweat all day, tormented by fire ants in the broiling sun, only to put more pine needles on top of what was already there? And why on Earth was he still single, making minimum wage and living with his grandma at nearly thirty years old? Shane did possess a natural flair for raking tidy border hummocks and tucked-edge flower bed islands, and he knew it. But where was the greater contribution to society? A sobering realization welled up: he would leave no legacy in

mulch. Someone would inevitably come along and cover up his life's work. Every endeavor. He was left hollow and concussed. Shane's humble universe was cast in a new, unsettling light. From the dust and smoke swirling in the air to the zigzags of dry clay sprung from the soles of his shoes that jittered on the floorboard, everything and everyone else remained unchanged. He lit up, glanced around as he took a deep drag, and despite the years of comfort he'd enjoyed in his routine, felt jarringly separate, unbelonging and alone.

As Shane carefully guided the truck through the country club gates, withering beneath the new payload on his shoulders, he feared there would be no reset, no return to simplicity. He didn't want to be "The Brain" anymore. He just wanted to be content. Content to hold court as the big fish in Mr. Garland's little pond. Content to run his mouth for hours about taxidermy, drag racing and the South "rising again" while spreading acres of itchy, prickly pine straw and Bermuda sod. Content to ogle a spandex-wrapped posterior instead of tackling the mysteries of time and space. Content to strut into the Red & White for the same six pack of watery beer every day on the way home. Content to wake up the next morning, serve Meemaw her potted meat and instant coffee in front of the TV, then go out and do it all over again. Sadly, nothing was spared the indictment of ignorant triviality. He was amazed by his sudden capacity to envision something more fanciful than a Waffle House with a drive-thru or how badass his Maverick would look with a blower and a wheelie bar, but anguished over the unflattering perspective wrought by his brush with brilliance. Even the sweet rush of his crackling clove had fallen flat. He tossed it into the gutter after another lackluster puff, where it would slowly smolder out against a wad of moist pine straw and cones gathered by recent storms. Shane had no one to confide in, no one who could empathize. Not even Marty. Hell, he couldn't even explain what his problem was to begin with. Not that his other half would

have understood, anyway. Corliss, with his love of language and verse and Barlowe with his snappy sarcasm and encyclopedic knowledge of plants and fertilizers, would likewise be of no service. They'd been downplayed and harassed far too long to appreciate any sudden change of heart toward them.

To Marty's momentary diversion, Tabitha, what had ruined the day was nothing more than a big, dumb, shitty work truck filled with nameless, soulless and worthless assholes being stupid lowlife assholes, and she had every right to think that as she limped back to her stuffy dorm room at Wesleyan College that morning. She would never get an apology from the Garland crew, nor would she ever know that in the seconds leading up to their unfortunate encounter, something truly profound had happened.

Or almost had.

BUCKET HAT

RICH GLINNEN

For Ali

You should've heard
what came out of my wife
when I told her
I was thinking of getting a bucket hat.

No, Rich, that's so embarrassing
was the gist of it,
and that's ok.
I wasn't dead set about getting a bucket hat anyway.
Just thought it would be good
to keep the sun off my face and neck.

But I could use a little color,
a little kiss from
the nicotine-stained lips of the sun,
telling me with her gravelly voice,
You look gorgeous, darling,
summer after summer,

even after they chip off
the tip of my nose
and toss it into a yellow biohazard bag,
which is where cancerous noses belong,
along with bucket hats,
if you ask my wife.



WHY I CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

ROBYN BASHAW

My dad kicked me out after he caught me in Mom's heels. At least, I think it was because of the heels. It could have been the tights, or the bra. Whichever it was, he hauled me out by the scruff of the neck and dropped me on the doorstep, yelling at me the whole time. I'm not sure exactly what he said – I was too focused on trying to walk in the heels. He locked the door though, so I knew he wasn't going to let me back in. I went around and tried the back door, but it was locked too.

I felt embarrassed to be standing outside in Mom's underclothes, but I didn't want to be naked, so I kept them on as I started walking down the street. Have you ever walked in heels? They hurt your feet after a while, but, a few miles in, I felt like I was getting the hang of it. Cars passed and I saw drivers leaning near their windows to see me better. I kept thinking about how Justin, who had dared me to put on the clothes and take a picture as proof, would have a good laugh. This had to be even better than trading the pictures as planned. My cell was sitting on the dresser still though so he would have to wait to hear the story.

When the car pulled over beside me, the lady said something too fast for me to catch. She looked at me expectantly and I stood frozen. She waved an arm, said something about come, and opened the passenger door. My feet ached, the air was cold, and the sun was sinking, so I climbed in and shut the door. I'm not sure how far we went, because I fell asleep on the way, but she woke me when the car stopped.

She seemed to know I couldn't hear her because she led me without a word. She pointed to a chair, and I sat as she walked away. A few minutes later, she returned with a drink and pizza bites. After

I'd eaten, she took me to another room, gesturing at a leather chair that looked comfier than the first. I sunk into it with the leather sticking awkwardly to my bare thighs.

I jumped when she put her hand on my leg, forcing it to bend until my foot rested on the chair. She proceeded to position the rest of my body the way she wanted before finally stepped back, hand out in warning not to move. I stayed put while she retrieved a large black camera. It looked like the kind that took actual film. When she started taking pictures, I wondered how I could get one for Justin, but, when I tried to reach my hand out, she swatted it and pointed for me to rest it back on my kneecap. After she snapped a series of photos, she left with the camera, so I waited, scared to move from her placement.

Eventually, she returned and showed me to a bedroom that I now call my own. She comes and brings me out at times. I don't always wear Mom's clothes – sometimes she dresses me in other outfits, ladies' and men's. She positions me for new pictures, but, when she leaves the room, I'm allowed to put on whatever I like from the closet and return to my room. Sometimes, I think about going home.

I don't really care if I ever see my dad again – I rub my neck in memory every time I think of him – but I miss Mom from time to time. And my old room with my space sheets, the stars shining overhead, and the alarm that buzzed my bed to wake me. It was bigger than my current one with a nice large window with a set of solar system curtains that were lit by the sun outside. But I can't go home. I don't know which way to go, and I don't have a way to ask.



CONTRIBUTORS

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract painter from the Midwest.

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine, who creates a unique range of artworks that are both visually striking and entertaining. He produces oil paintings, illustrations, ceramic pieces and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries across Maine. His online portfolio is donaldpatten.newgrounds.com/art

Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of seven books, most recently *Tricks of Light*, a poetry collection. He teaches at Medgar Evers College and Columbia University and received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Angela Townsend is Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary, where she bears witness to mercy for all beings. She has an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and B.A. from Vassar College. She has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 33 years, giggles with her mother every morning, and delights in cats and the moon. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Braided Way*, *Cagibi*, *Fathom Magazine*, *LEON Literary Review*, and *The Razor*, among others. Angie loves life dearly.

David M. Alper's forthcoming poetry collection is *Hush*. His work appears in *Variant Literature*, *Washington Square Review*, *Oxford Magazine*, and elsewhere. He is an educator in New York City. dearly.

Marco Etheridge is a writer of prose, an occasional playwright, and a part-time poet. He lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His work has been featured in over one hundred reviews and journals across Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. "The Wrong Name" is Marco's latest collection of short fiction. When he isn't crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor for a new 'Zine called *Hotch Potch*.

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Alyssa Higuera, from Central Valley, California, melds self-expression, identity, and digital coding in her art, drawing from personal experiences to interpret life's digital 'bugs'. Her work bridges real and digital worlds, emphasizing technology's role in connecting life and identity. Through digital and sculptural pieces, Higuera invites viewers to explore the interwoven fabric of our online and offline selves, offering a distinctive view of the World Wide Web.

Caleb James Stewart is a graduate student in the English/Creative Writing program at Stephen F. Austin State University. Their work has been featured in the literary journal *HUMID*, as well as in the *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Santa Ana River Review*, *Gingerbread House*, and *Penumbra*. Additionally, they are a past winner of the *Piney Dark* horror story contest.

Clive Aaron Gill's stories have been widely published in literary journals and anthologies. He tells his stories at public and private gatherings. Born in Zimbabwe, Clive has lived and worked in Southern Africa, North America and Europe. He received a degree in Economics from the University of California, Los Angeles and lives in San Diego.

Lu Liu is originally from Shenzhen, China. She attended Shenzhen College of International Education and is currently studying Sociology at University of Manchester in the UK. Passionate about creative writing as well as food, she is an aspiring educator hoping to transform the education landscape after graduation. Her favourite authors include Wang Zengqi, Shi Tiesheng, Milan Kundera, Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Frances Fish's passion lies behind a camera. She has dabbled as an abstract painter and often shoot hundreds of photographs a day. Her friends call her a 'preservationist' photographer, as her images are of the abandoned places in the desert, covered in graffiti, which change day by day. Some of the images Frances shoots can never be replicated, as the art is painted over, sometimes immediately.

Mike Horan lives with his family in the desert outside Palm Springs, California. He is a teacher by day, a dad by night, writes and practices martial arts in the ever so tiny spaces that are left.

Rich Glinnen, a distinguished Best of the Net nominee, is renowned for his poetry that has graced Rich Vos's and Bonnie McFarlane's podcast, *My Wife Hates Me*, and is a regular at the Nuyorican Poets Café. His works are accessible in numerous print and online journals, as well as on his personal Tumblr and Instagram pages. Glinnen's personal life includes a family of two cats, two children, and a wife.

Amanda Vogt is a Copywriter living in Buffalo, New York. She has studied Fashion and Creative Writing in college, her work reflecting her love and fascination for the beautifully bizarre. More of her pieces including poetry and short fiction can be found in *Bridge Eight Press* and *Ignatian Literary Magazine*. In her free time, Amanda loves a reality show binge watch and going on walks with her Chihuahua.

Zoe Huot-Link was born and raised in Maplewood, Minnesota. An artist of many hats: she makes graphite drawings, illustrations, and watercolor paintings; sings and plays guitar; and writes poetry. She is a winner of the Manitou Creative Writing Fellowship of the Literary Arts Institute at the College of Saint Benedict. She studied ancient calligraphy and martial arts in China at Southwest University. Her work has been published by For Women Who Roar, The Anonym, and Grim & Gilded; among others. Find her work at <https://zoemae.art>, and at @zoemae.art on instagram

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He came to the States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H. S. he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997). He worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender. Take care and be well,

Robyn Bashaw graduated with a BFA in Creative Writing from Stephen F. Austin State University. She is previously published in HUMID, The Piney Dark, Worlds of Words Review, and Friday Flash Fiction. As an author, she aims to wade into the despairs of humanity and dwell in the deluges a while. Check out her full list of work at: <https://robynbashaw.wordpress.com/>.

Somdeep Datta hails from the city of Kolkata, India. His works are heavily influenced by experience from time spent in Shillong. A computer science engineer, Somdeep has a passion for travel, writing and photography. His poems have been published in anthologies by Wingless Dreamer Publisher and Poets Choice. His photographs have featured in The Wire, Thomas Cook India & Times Travel among others.

Velibor Baćo, born in 1985 in Bosnia, embarked on an academic journey at the University of Salzburg, where he studied law. Post-graduation, he ventured into the professional realm as a Distressed Capital Restructuring manager. In 2016, Baćo took a transformative turn towards the arts, dedicating himself to writing poetry and painting. Currently, he extends his compassion and skills by working with homeless individuals.

Heidi Speth earned a MA in English, a MA in Secondary Education, and a BA in English from Truman State University. She is currently a first year high school English teacher in St. Louis, Missouri. Speth has had a handful of poems published both in-print and online. Some of her most notable publications include the *Route 7 Review* and *Havik Literary Magazine*. She never would have pegged herself as a published poet, but is ecstatic to see where this journey, and her words, continue to take her.

Whitney Weisenberg's work has appeared in Paper Dragon, Dead Skunk Magazine, NUNUM-Done in a Hundred Anthology, Nine Cloud Journal, and Poet's Choice. She is a writer, an artist, a teacher, a Master Educator, a mother of two daughters, and a member of SCBWI. You can see more of her work @ www.instagram.com/w_whitney

Terry Trowbridge is a Canadian who is grateful for a writing grant from the Ontario Arts Council.

Peter Rustin and his wife Leslie recently moved from Los Angeles to Peter's native Connecticut, with their three rather intelligent cats. Peter is an attorney practicing remotely with his firm in Los Angeles. He plays guitar badly and drums decently. His work has been published in the Arboreal Literary Journal; Free Spirit; Assignment Literary Magazine; and the South Florida Poetry Journal.

T.M. Thomson is co-author of *Frame & Mount the Sky* (2017), a chapbook of ekphrastic poetry, as well the author as *Strum and Lull* (2019) and *The Profusion* (2019). She is a lover of animals, art, trees, surrealism, black and white movies, walking in autumn rains, feeding wild birds in winter, playing in spring mud, & bat-watching in summer. Her first full-length collection of poems, *Plunge*, has just been published by Uncollected Press.

Will Neuenfeldt (He/Him) studied English at Gustavus Adolphus College and his poems are published in Capsule Stories, Months to Years, and Red Flag Poetry. He lives in Cottage Grove, MN, home of the dude who played Steven Stifler in those American Pie movies and a house Teddy Roosevelt slept in. Instagram.com/wjnpoeems.

J.D. Lancaster is passionate about art, literature and music. Born in the North-East of England, Lancaster features the people and places of the North-East heavily within his writing, aiming to elevate the everyday mundane and to capture its humour and poignancy. Lancaster has a degree in Illustration and Design and is currently working as a Graphic Designer in Ireland.

Jared Pearce grew up in California and now lives in Iowa. Web: <https://jaredpearcepoetry.weebly.com>.

Adeyemi Adebayo is an MFA student at UMASS currently focusing on photography. They consider landscapes, migration, and their home in their work.

K. Ryan Gregory is a Portland, Oregon based photographer and artist. He enjoys exploring all things camera and seeks new ways to evoke emotion through art and photography. His current series starts with an original digital photograph that is edited in numerous editing programs to add effects and compositing. His work explores the trappings of anger with the barbed wire representing the emotional barrier that anger can place us in. This series represents the beauty in our world while dealing with searing anger.

Kelsey Erica Tran is a photographer. Her work can be seen on Instagram @boredlittlescorpio.

dN eQ is an artist.

Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning photographer and travel writer based out of Southern California. His travels have taken him to over a hundred countries and territories spread across six continents. His photography has been published internationally and exhibited worldwide. He is the author of three travel books, including *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel* and *From Tibet to Egypt: Early Travels After a Late Start*. His most recent, *On to Plan C: A Return to Travel*, documents his return to travel in a post-pandemic world and is the first to include his photography.

Alexandra Shandrenko is a University Student in New Market, Maryland.

Ryo Kajitani is a queer artist and art model based in Tokyo, Japan. They identify as transgender and asexual. During their time at Tama Art University (2010-2014), they specialized in oil-based woodcut printmaking. In the doctoral program (2016-2019), they studied under the late MOTOE Kunio (art historian, 1948-2019) and Nakamura Yutaka (cultural anthropologist). Their research focused on implementing the ontological aesthetics method in exhibition spaces with the artistic activities therein and proposed tentative logical models based on Heidegger's art theory. After graduating, they returned to work as an art model and Graphic designer in Tokyo. Currently, they are experimenting with mixed analog and computational photography, combining printmaking techniques and partial machine learning (Python library, etc.). They also use their experience of being assaulted to provide international humanitarian aid and support orphans and others who wish to reintegrate into society. Official Website: <https://www.ryokajitani.com>

Shayla Dodge hails from Argentina, where she immerses herself in the world of art, her true passion. As an artist, her deepest affection lies in the realm of writing.

Ryan C. Eubank is a regional Emmy award-winning television producer/director, visual artist and writer based in Richmond, Virginia. His work can be found in Whitefish Review, VCU Health's Medical Literary Messenger and his storytelling has been featured on NPR's All Things Considered.

STAFF

Sage Delio might be considered a modern day renaissance woman, with her diverse interests and talents spanning across the fields of creative writing, computer science, music, and the arts. In May 2022, she published her debut poetry collection, *Blue Confessional: Poetry and Prose*. A second edition of the collection is being adapted with Sage's own art and illustrations. For *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, Sage holds the roles of Editor-In-Chief and Poetry & Prose Editor.

Sharon Fremont is a multifaceted artist and avid book enthusiast. Her artistic journey spans across various mediums, with a particular fondness for the captivating realms of watercolor painting and sketching. Her passion for the written word is equally profound, evident in her dual roles as Managing Editor and Fiction Editor for *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*.

Karen Porterfield has spent over 24 years working in design. She has established herself as a talented artisan jewelry designer, crafting one-of-a-kind pieces that are highly sought after. Karen's passion for creating beautiful and innovative designs has led her to achieve a great deal of success in the field. She serves as the Art & Illustrations Editor for *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*.

Matthew Evan is an accomplished photographer and passionate car enthusiast. He has developed a sharp eye for capturing the beauty and essence of his subjects through his lens. He leads *Gabby & Min's Literary Review* as the publication's Photography Editor.

BRIDGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE POWER OF WORDS

As *Gabby & Min's Literary Review* unfolds its third chapter, we reflect on the transformative power of writing to bridge diverse communities, fostering a sense of unity and shared understanding. Beyond its artistic expression, writing is a communal bridge, linking diverse cultures and experiences through shared stories. It's through these narratives that writers empower voices, fostering understanding and empathy across the vast tapestry of human society.

Writers are not just scribes but architects of community, crafting tales that reflect our collective experiences and challenges. Their stories act as mirrors and windows, offering glimpses into different lives while highlighting our shared humanity. In doing so, they nurture a sense of belonging and understanding, making the world a smaller, more connected place.

As we continue our journey with *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, we honor the power of the written word to unite and inspire. We look forward to exploring and celebrating the myriad ways in which writing binds individuals into communities, turning individual whispers into a chorus of shared human experience.

END

