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antae

A Journal of Creative Writing



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Cover: "The Watering Can, Garden at Le Raincy", oil on canvas, Georges Seurat, most likely in 1883.

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Safety Stop: In Praise of Analog Boredom

by Bob Cowser, Jr.

I started and abandoned director Wong Kar-Wai's 2000 classic film *In the Mood for Love* three separate times last year before finally finishing it. It was at the top of every 'best films of the 21st Century' list and my most trusted film buff friends raved about it, but I couldn't "get into it". Not until I powered off my cellphone and gave the movie my full attention (required because it is a Cantonese/Shanghainese film subtitled in English) did I slip under its spell.

When people say 'I hate subtitles,' I suspect that what they are actually saying is that they resent that extra bit of concentration they must expend to focus on the film, resent the way a subtitled foreign film permits no distractions (sometimes art films made in our native language are just as demanding). We are resentful because we live distracted lives ("multitasking" is just a euphemism we have created to excuse ourselves). We are distracted viewers, distracted drivers, distracted lovers.

I am afraid I am even worse than most. I love my cellphone. It is 'too much with me,' John Keats would say. I have joked that if I could ride on it like a hovercraft, I wouldn't need another material possession. A few years ago, after my nephews and I had hurried off to a major league baseball game several hours' drive from their home, I realized I'd left my phone on the dresser in the room where I was sleeping. They teased me, but my panic almost made me nauseous.

I'm sure that part of my problem with *In the Mood...* was that I was trying to stream it on my television at home. What does it mean to "get into" a film, after all, but to surrender oneself to the collective hypnosis only truly possible in a traditional cinema? I grew up in a small town in rural Tennessee in the 70s and 80s, before streaming services, before multiplexes and home video even. My first movie experiences were animated Disney films like *Cinderella* on the big screen at The Varsity, an Art Deco/Art Moderne style theater built in the late 1940s. I remember standing in a line that wound around the block to see the original Star Wars film

there in 1977 and seeing the utterly mysterious title *Apocalypse Now* appear on the marquee a few years later.

Eventually my father would drop me there to meet friends and ultimately to see films alone (a habit I still enjoy, even perhaps prefer). Often, because he had 3 other children who of a given night might have 3 completely other places to be delivered, he would drop me at The Varsity as much as an hour before showtime. At least I was safe. Film's effect on human culture has been so profound that it has given rise to an entire branch of contemporary philosophy, but I think it is more those hours alone in that cavernous sanctuary I'm here to talk about than any movie I saw there.

The management seemed to own only one LP, Journey's 1981 album *Escape*, which seemed to play continuously for several years. Sometimes my father had a little extra money to give me for popcorn and soda but often he didn't. And even with popcorn to munch, boredom always found me. Proper, old-fashioned boredom. (What experts might today call 'analog boredom'). A sort I'm not sure my sons or any "kids these days" have ever experienced. I had nothing to worry me then, nothing to turn over in my head. What did I do? I remember trapping air in my cheek and seeing what noises I could produce by pressing against that pocket. I turned my fingers into animals which I tried to hold aloft so the lights in the back of the auditorium might project them on the big screen. I imagine I played a dozen other such games I've since forgotten. But I know in those hours I was doing more than just killing time. I was becoming acquainted with my own mind, honing the creative and imaginative power Keats warns technology threatens to lay waste to. I'm convinced that kind of boredom was formative.

The 9-year-old boy who wiled away hours in that movie house still haunts what Tobias Wolff called the 'great cathedral of [my] skull'. I've spent the better part of today working to conjure him, to access his impressions of that time, using the power of imagination honed there all those years ago. There may be an app which would allow me to eliminate some of this labor, but I fear it would eliminate any trace of him, too. And thus most of this writing's charm and appeal. When I suspect a student has used a technological shortcut to complete one of my assignments, I tell them it's the absences that are telltale— no signs of struggle, no missteps or tremor in the voice. No human trace.

Awash as we are in the sea of dopamine that is contemporary culture, I find it harder and harder to claw back to that boy and his generative boredom. For a time, airplanes were places where creative ideas rose to the surface of my consciousness — I wrote the first 500 words of a book on a short flight from Syracuse to Chicago, with my elbows in the ribs of passengers on either side of me. But that was 15 years ago, before even domestic flights were "wired".

Lately it's been scuba diving — specifically the 3-minute safety stops divers spend at 5 meters depth as their lungs adjust to surface pressure — when ideas have also risen to the surface. There are few experiences on Earth as stimulating as scuba diving, but those final 3 minutes are dead time, like those hours in The Varsity all those years ago (the theater is on the National Register of Historic Places, and I expect my curmudgeonly attitude qualifies me for a similar registry of anachronistic persons). I watch my wrist computer as the seconds unwind and the near-microscopic plankton stream past my mask like flashes and floaters across my eyelids.

But ideas like this one flow, too. One scientist I dived with recently suggested the enriched air or NITROX in our tanks — and thus the super-oxygenated blood circulating through our brains — would account for the surge in creativity, and maybe so. But my money's on the boredom.

— Bob Cowser, Jr. is Professor of English at St. Lawrence University. He is the author of Green Fields: Crime, Punishment, and a Boyhood Between *(2010),* Scorekeeping: Essays From Home *(2006), and* Dream Season *(2004), and editor, with Mario Aquilina and Nicole B Wallack, of* The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay *(2022) and* Why We're Here: New York Essayists on Living Upstate *(2010). He is advisory editor to the online journal* Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies. *He holds a PhD in American literature and creative writing from the University of Nebraska and has published and presented internationally on the work of Baldwin, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Cather, Wharton, and Joyce.*

Permanent Red O

by Clark Holtzman

O window, window, a night of new rain
that admonishes, *all right now, all right*.
In your dream a dog runs in the high grass,
leaps into the break in a garden wall.
You sleep with the pillow's faint reminder
of once upon a want, the clock in time
with the heart, the many sighs of midnight.
What if, through this same window cry dream

— Get out! Get out of here —

and what difference to the heart that it
skips a beat and time is just interlude
following upon interlude? Blood-tick,
blood-tock, the heart resumes its onward way,
the rain repeating those awful words,
there, awake, listening, and there, asleep.

House Hunting

by Christian Witmer

I dream of bodies
and their houses
Blue faced
Bloated
Staring vacant at popcorn ceilings
Hide
Income drain asbestos
Lead pipes pour sulfur
Yes, I dream of bodies
During my commute
With each bite of chemically processed bologna
I dream of bodies
Speaking a childish “hmm”
Or “how much would that be”
To my lender
Wax poetic to my real estate agent
She hovers fangs above my prediabetic neck
I dream of bodies
That I might step oe’r
Freshly laid tile
Start my life anew
Do you dream of bodies, too?
Does your apartment feel like home?

The High Life

by Freddie Obregón

I live the normal life
And I so desire
To live the high life
To win a Grammy
To win an Oscar
And I have no desire
To do any of the work for it
It is an awful feeling
One that I wish only on my enemies
Especially my ex
I still hurt from my ex
Maybe this is my way
To get back at him
Finally feeling validated
Finally feeling seen
Finally feeling heard
I honestly don't know what else to say
I sit here and write this
While his ass is up in Chicago
Chasing more tail
Getting more orgasms than me
These are words and thoughts coming from a broken, lost person
And all I want
Is for someone to tell me that I'm okay
That I have always been okay
That it will all be okay
I just want all of the love and validation that comes with being a child.

μ (mu)

by Jim Murdoch

Outside of a class- or an exam room I have never found a pressing need to calculate frictionality which is odd because, like height, weight, volume, and temperature, grippiness is all around us.

sticky willie clings
to the whortleberry bush
summer enfolds spring

Coefficient of friction: ratio of the frictional force resisting the motion of two surfaces in contact to the normal force pressing the two surfaces together. It is usually symbolized by the Greek letter mu (μ). Mathematically, μ = F/N, where F is the frictional force and N is the normal force. – *Britannica.com*

A Beckoning Cat Meets Karma

by Christopher Barnard

Moule-à-Chique was always known as simply 'Moule'. The name did cause him some inconvenience. But there was something that caused him greater inconvenience, the existence of which he only discovered in his mid-fifties in a backstreet of Copenhagen.

In an old curio shop, a sort of bric-a-brac place, a sweet old lady sat behind a battered old table that served as a counter.

On the table, a red and white plastic cat, no bigger than a man's hand, sat upright, with its left front paw raised, palm downwards, beckoning. The old lady said it was a maneki-neko, a beckoning or welcoming cat. Much favoured by shopkeepers and business owners in Japan for their role in attracting customers. She had bought it many years previously at a temple in Tokyo famous for maneki-neko.

It drew him closer. As he went to buy it, the old lady's face betrayed a reluctance to sell. He ventured to touch it, stroking its tiny raised paw, with his left hand, involuntarily, fondly.

As he did so, it no longer mattered that he could not buy it. Many years of disjointed and unconnected events fell into place with the clickety-clack of a giant slot machine, wheels all spinning, stopping, and lining up perfectly. His life now made better sense.

By touching this maneki-neko he had, in some mysterious way, been officially inducted into the fellowship of maneki-nekos. This maneki-neko had recognised him as a fellow soul; had opened the gate to maneki-nekodom.

He, Moule, was now a maneki-neko.

* * *

Moule, throughout his life, had strangers, just ordinary people, gather around him wherever he went. He would go into an empty shop, and customers soon trickled in. If he joined some club or society, the membership swelled.

He had noticed this from an early age, but neither could he explain it, nor exclude

the possibility of it being all in his mind, or simply a series of coincidences. Until he met the maneki-neko in Copenhagen.

Did this explain why his sadly deceased wife, and mother of his daughter, a woman widely renowned for her poise and beauty, had married a simple, homely, impecunious man like Moule? He had loved her, but was it mutual? Was it the maneki-neko inside him that she loved?

* * *

By being inducted into maneki-nekodom he had received a gift from the little Japanese cat. But what was he to do with it?

To be the bearer of such a gift carries with it the burden of using it wisely, for within the Universe there lies Karma. Moule knew this full well.

Although he could not imagine to what use the maneki-neko could be put, without doubt its purpose was beneficent. In the future it might be used to save people from an earthquake or hurricane, or a building collapse.

In the meantime, he reasoned, there was no harm in testing it. Just a bit. To get the feel of it, as it were. If he filled church pews, there could be no sin in that. If he drew crowds to a museum, that was for the good.

Temptation gnawed away at rectitude. It insistently insinuated itself into his thoughts. He placed a foot on what he knew should ever be the forbidden path.

A friend, whose restaurant was on the brink of bankruptcy, was dubious when Moule told him that his merely sitting in the restaurant would be enough to draw in customers. He agreed to give it a try. Moule's words proved true. Soon customers could not find a table without reservations. The business was saved and Moule received a nice little 'thank you' in a well-stuffed envelope.

However hard he tried to rationalise such actions, he knew he had crossed the line. By favouring one restaurant, he damaged others. Introducing unfair competition.

But once he started making considerable sums of money in this manner, the temptation seduced him.

Moule established his own retail business. There was never a shortage of customers.

By now, justification had become easy to him. He was not stealing from people. He was simply selling items they wanted.

* * *

The years passed. Moule expanded his business.

It is true that from time to time he used his maneki-neko power to tilt a local election to the candidate he favoured, make life difficult for an uncooperative bureaucrat, or to close down a rival business which intruded on what he regarded as his turf. But such events and results were within the bounds of what normally might occur in life.

He held to this view even when one of his business rivals declared bankruptcy and committed suicide. Suicide, he told himself, was by free choice. Nothing to do with Moule.

The horrific murder-suicide of a family, who had had all their possessions seized by bailiffs, did not change Moule's mind.

He saw the pain and anguish he was causing, but was willing to convince himself that such cases were rare. Far from questioning the morality of his actions, he congratulated himself on showing restraint.

This was how far Moule-à-Chique had fallen. It had taken five years.

* * *

But Karma does not sleep.

For many years, for reasons which are somewhat typical in modern families, he had little contact with his daughter, Ambrosia, whom he knew had grown into a fine young woman. He was pleased to receive an invitation to her wedding and happy to leave the role of father-of-the-bride to the man she now called 'father'.

Moule had met the future husband only once. He was a rather ordinary and uninteresting fellow, the type who used to be called a callow youth, but Moule was not in a position to object. Ambrosia had charted her own course in life for many years.

The ceremony was held at a beautiful lakeside venue. The wedding filled his heart with pride and joy, and the sight of his daughter, mixed with the memories of her mother, brought tears to his eyes.

After the speeches, he detached himself from the main party, and with a flute of champagne in one hand, he allowed himself to fall into a tipsy reverie as he walked to the lakeshore and onto a wooden jetty.

The sun was behind him, and on the horizon purple clouds of sunset darkened the sky. He could see the wide expanse of lake water, black as pitch, and behind rose a dark and gloomy forest of pine-trees.

Ambrosia and the groom had followed him onto the jetty, together with more than a dozen guests. The maneki-neko within him had attracted them, and continued to attract more and more. They crowded onto the wooden jetty. It was as if the maneki-neko was working at full power, and he could not control it.

The groom started prancing around, waving a bottle of champagne.

The sound of wood cracking was followed by a tilting of the jetty.

Ambrosia was thrown against the guardrail. The small of her back forcefully struck the rail and her body pivoted on it. She tumbled backwards, headfirst, into the water. As she was falling, her new husband leaned over to grab her. Instead, with both hands, she clutched his arm firmly and dragged him into the lake.

Half the wedding guests were in the lake, and half were precariously standing on the remaining wobbly parts of the jetty.

Ambrosia's head did not rise to the surface. But her wedding dress, spreading around her like the petals of a magnolia, buoyed up the lower part of her body.

The groom emerged on the surface, triumphantly holding aloft a bottle of champagne — proud to have not loosened his grip on it. It uncorked itself of its own accord, and emitted a vigorous effervescent fountain, which dwindled to a quiescent dribble. The groom look incuriously as the magnolia flower, its tucks and frills emitting their own bubbles, sank.

A couple of the groom's friends, more enterprising than the groom himself, jumped into the lake and pulled Ambrosia to the surface. Nothing could be done. A rusty iron bar, for some reason lying below the surface of the lake, was protruding from her left breast.

Moule's daughter, his only child, had married, disappeared beneath the water, been retrieved, and was now dead.

* * *

Moule had broken the Compact of The Fellowship of Maneki-nekos. He had tested Fate. Karma had spat out its answer. Not unsurprisingly, an unexpected answer. Which is what is expected of Karma.

There was something he had to do. Based on the information the old lady had given him those years ago, he easily ascertained that Gōtokuji Temple in Tokyo was the home of maneki-neko. He would go there and ask to be shriven of his sins.

He had shown himself unworthy. He would beg to be expelled from maneki-nekodom.

The Shibuya area of Tokyo was internationally famous for being intensely crowded, all and every day and night. When not at Gōtokuji Temple, he would limit his activities to that area.

* * *

In Tokyo, he felt at ease. It was a city with no shortage of people. He made his journey to Gōtokuji Temple on a couple of rush-hour trains.

When he explained to the monks that he wished to be unburdened of maneki-nekohood, they smiled sympathetically and knowingly, almost as if requests such as his were a daily occurrence. They sat him down, and said a short prayer. Invited him to put some money into the offertory box. And it was over! He was no longer a maneki-neko. He knew this, because on his way back to his hotel in Shibuya, no one gathered around him.

Now that he was free from the burden of maneki-nekodom, he would do some sightseeing in Japan. Nevertheless, there was a burden from which he could never be free. Every time he thought of Ambrosia he felt an iron spike in his left breast. He would be carrying that iron spike in his heart for the rest of his life.

* * *

Kyoto was a city he had always wanted to visit. He spent much time sightseeing.

Looking for souvenirs to take home, he entered a shop in a side-street. It was full of odds and ends, second-hand children's toys, old manga, and strange objects that Moule did not recognise. But he did recognise a maneki-neko. This was black, with its right paw raised. It was no bigger than a man's hand. He felt drawn to it, and as he unthinkingly reached out to touch it, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the old lady behind the battered old table that served as counter. Her head thrust forward in anticipation. A smile on her face, as if encouraging him to buy it. A sly smile.

Moule left the shop.

White Flags

by Christine Emmert

I am flying white flags today
along the horizons of my heart
in contrast to the banners of warriors
who march the centuries past and future.
White can stain easily with blood and gun powder
and the sweat of multitudes.
I keep washing them clean to start again
my private prayer against the funeral pyres.
White flags dancing in the wind
to signal closure
to suffering.

Foreign Language

by Christine Emmert

You spoke to me in a tongue
That brought on winter to my own palate.
Words that chilled deeply
Where once the sunshine lay.
Although I did not understand definitions,
The feel of them froze me in my steps.
I asked for translation,
But you shook your head and turned away.
In vain I followed you
As far as the parting river.
When you crossed,
I stood on the shoreline of my own life.
The ice was forming on the rushing waters.
I turned back
Towards my waning summer world.
It would have to suffice
As companion to my own words
Which I copy here without interpretation.

Recipe for a cult-like following

by Michelle Crowell

Ingredients:

- a batch of teens from dysfunctional homes
- an all-consuming fear of hellfire
- a few tablespoons of social awkwardness and bullying
- a handful of power-hungry adults

Instructions:

1. Put the teens together in the same room, isolated from their families.
2. Tell them that they are worthless, which they already know.
3. Give them a common enemy: Satan.
4. Give them a common goal: the conversion of the world's population.
5. Add countless fear-inspiring narratives of spiritual warfare being waged around them.
6. Add more than a pinch of humiliation; get them to feel that they are dirty. For extra flavor (optional but recommended), get them to hate their bodies.
7. Let them simmer for a few days. Then, mix gently.
8. Let them go back home and sit for a few weeks, enough time for the yeast to rise.
9. Preheat the oven, then pop them in. Cook those babies until they're a golden brown, but not too dark. Everyone knows Jesus was white.

It's Definitely a Day For Work, Not Play, So Don't Be Tempted

by Duane Anderson

What if playing was my work,
me, a professional baseball player,
or should that be baseball worker,
and instead of beginning the game
by stating, play ball,
they tell the players, get to work.
We throw strikes and balls,
catch fly balls, stop grounders,
hit pitches, run bases.
It's a game we definitely worked at.

Or, what if I was a professional violinist
playing in an orchestra.
I too am playing and working at the same time,
so what is the name for us,
working players, or playing workers?
So when we are working,
we are also playing,
and when we are playing,
we are also working.
For us, temptation is not a choice.

Entelechia

by Anselm Eme

I begin where the world ends,
With what I carry inside.
Because the earth does not decide my face.
My heart does.
What I plant there
Walks ahead of me,
Already shaping my shadow.

I tend this inner ground every day.
I pull out anger before it grows thorns.
I water mercy until it learns my name.
Not because I am good,
But because I know this law:
What stays inside
Will one day speak for me.

Do not ask the hands first.
Do not trust the mouth alone.
Ask the quiet place behind the ribs.
Wars begin there.
Peace also waits there.
The future listens closely
To what the heart rehearses.

Before the hand moves,
Something has already moved.
Before the mouth speaks,
A sentence has lived in the chest.

We never give the world anything new.
We only reveal
What has been living with us
All along.

I have seen faces that lie.
They smile while the heart is locked.
Such lives feel narrow, crowded, hard.
But when the heart is swept clean,
Even silence feels kind.
Strangers sense it
Before words arrive.

Anger does not start as cruelty.
It begins as a little heat,
Left alone too long.
Then the eyes sharpen.
The feet rush past pain.
The hands forget how to open.
The world names the ending,
But not the beginning.

Mercy also starts small.
A soft thought.
A pause before harm.
Then the voice lowers.
The steps slow down.
The hands remember giving.
The world calls it goodness,
But it was a choice,
Made unseen.

So I tend my heart like soil.
I pull out what poisons.
I water what heals.
Because I have learned this truth:
“As Within! So Without”.
The world only wears
What we give it.

Archives for Everyone(?)

by Carston Anderson

There are two debatable truths in academia in The United States of America. The first is that not all research is equally funded. The second is that not all researchers are equally funded. A tenured professor studying a high-needs field will, naturally, get more academic attention than a graduate student in a perceived low-interest humanities niche subject area. This niche subject area, chronically underfunded or under-perceived, exists in a twilight zone of institutional support. The university may exist. The materials may exist. The graduate student undeniably exists. But what pathways are provided to connect A to B for research that falls outside of the standard coursework and mentorship models?

The answer exists on a case-by-case and institution-by-institution basis. I can only write from personal experience as a graduate student with a niche subject area. That subject area is the under-preserved and now-defunct undergraduate student arts magazine *The Watermark* (1993-2023) on my campus, The University of Massachusetts Boston. And in the absence of funding, one must build their own functional models and systems.

I have found, and implemented parts of, one potential resource in the form of Peace Corps Manual *RE035: Libraries For All!*

It might be controversial to state, but niche research that is under or even unfunded operates similarly to other low-resource environments. This is not to say it is a perfect bridge from its intended environment to a university environment. But there is remarkable overlap in audience between the Peace Corps volunteer on a budget, and the grad student on a budget, where both are attempting to produce a working system in the absence of formal training in the fields of library science or archival studies.

I have had an increasing fascination with small-press ecosystems and micro-press publications for the longest time. How do books move around in the world, especially if only a few of them were made? This question is asked more often than not by medievalists and rare book historians. But I believe the question can also be applied to the modern micro-press.

My interest fell on the one micro-press environment I had the most direct

unmediated access to: *The Watermark*. According to previous editors, with whom I spoke extensively, most post-2016 volumes of *The Watermark* were printed in runs of under 1,000 copies. The established University Special Collections portion of the UMass system has roughly 25 of 35 volumes held. The rest were scattered, lost, privately held, or else circulating in grad lounges, hallway boxes, and other dusty forgotten corners of campus until I began to pull them together.

I have, at the time of writing, acquired roughly 32 volumes for my personal holdings. If we expand to include actual books from the duplicate to the variant, this number jumps astronomically higher. In some instances, I have up to eight copies of one volume, as many as 4 volumes and 2 variants unique within those 4 volumes, and copies that the archive itself does not hold. This is a collection numerically larger and at times chronologically more complete than the university's own, based on publicly available records and finding aids, digitized files, but does not take into account potentially unprocessed materials. It was, it would turn out, to be the easiest part of the entire project.

A passive donor-based acquisition model informed by funding constraints and staffing shortages means that the Special Collections Archivists are not going corner-to-corner looking for the missing 10 volumes they need to build out a complete print run. This is despite the fact that they, admittedly, have the best pre-existing infrastructure to support such an endeavor and would likely be able to do it remarkably quickly given perceived status and validity. I, as a grad student, do not have perceived status and validity. At times I was compared to a raccoon in a garbage can by my lovingly supportive peers in my graduate student cohort. I, clearly, do not have the same perceived validity as the university archivist.

Lamentably, I also have no infrastructure like the university does.

Rather than donate them to someone as equally underfunded in spirit if not scale on the vague promise of eventual digitization, I began to ask myself: what would it take to build a working system around those volumes? How would I go about building something more communally focused and accessible that takes into account copies past the duplicate but including the variant, minimal physical space, and a near $0 budget? To do so required even informal training, and now we circle back more fully to Peace Corps Manual RE035: *Libraries For All!*

The PDF is, still, freely available online when last I checked. One of its most clear-eyed early suggestions comes on page 2. Quote, 'build community support for the project [by creating] a public display.' This was attempted by the pursuit of independent grants, Summer Research Grants, and conference presentations. None

of these ideas quite panned out. Furthermore, the societal perception of the material's marginality is a serious barrier to success. If the institution itself does not value the materials enough to actively prioritize engagement with them, collect them, and promote them, can the broader public really be expected to independently recognize value to the degree required that they are going to fund it?

It is essentially a 3 step logic leap. Institutions inherently have legitimacy, and that legitimacy is tied to prestige. Prestige self-reinforces with prestige items. Student-produced ephemera is not prestigious within visible prestige economies, which is all that an institution really is.

More grassroots engagement could have been attempted at the level of community outreach, but this methodology failed even in the stabilization-phase when I approached my local UMB community to see who had copies of books they could spare, or else be willing to collaborate around via Discord, Reddit, and Facebook on top of peer-to-peer interaction. I received 0 responses, except from one former editor who did not have books to spare, but had great curiosity. There was, roughly 3 years after *The Watermark* stopped publishing in an environment built around a 3-5 year turnover, no on-campus community built around remembering it, and no real community of holders left in the community. It was essentially myself, and the pre-existing archive each holding bits and pieces, and our collective silence could not translate scattered awareness into action.

The conditions required to rebuild community knowledge and community trust on the level of library creation do not run through individuals in an environment like a commuter-college public university where students are siloing attention and effort into classes, work, and school work. Students came, and left. Even with the construction of dormitories and on-campus living, this intervention came almost parallel with the collapse of the journal, meaning it never had time to take root in the new audience.

Libraries for All! explicitly documents this issue with many sections on committees, funding, the creation of offices, and on the assumption of community-level buy-in already having been established. It assumes community infrastructure for general-interest libraries (which already existed), and not community support for niche libraries-archive hybrids dependent on memory. Luckily, in a grim way, the perceived marginality of *The Watermark* meant that no one was taking the copies which did exist on campus, meaning I was able to rapidly assemble a collection that no one else was interested in. Reconstruction of *copies of books* had been completed on the individual level but had not successfully translated into community-driven

reconstruction because no one outside of admin remembered it was a thing which existed. They said as much to me.

Hence the full shift from library, to library-archive hybrid, to total closed archive. The library-archive hybrid worked, for a time on the peer-to-peer trust level, until one copy of Volume #32 was given out. It was found 3 days later on top of a TV in a classroom we both had access to. I had originally begun with 4 copies. If I had not found it on top of the TV, I would have gone from 4 copies of this volume to 3. Events would compel me to finally flip through the chapter in *Libraries for All!* titled *Controlling Theft*. This is disappointing in a library context, to know your community program is not being respected or treated the way you want it to be treated. In an archival context, however, the loss of a full fourth of one's holdings is simply devastating.

Grants were, once again, sought for the construction of an interactive pop-up museum based on my now extensive collection. Once again, this failed. And this combination of events finally forced a pivot in behavior away from engagement.

Where section one of this book details acquiring books and building networks, Section two of *Libraries For All!* proved to be rather significantly more interesting with chapters titled along the lines of *Creating Your Own System For Sorting Books*, and *Taking Care of the Books*. A previous archival intervention is documented in my publically available essay titled *The Archeology of A Bookshelf*, and this goes into some deep detail on how books are collected and organized in the system I developed. Generally, it begins with the year of acquisition, followed by an item number, followed by a variant number. This looks something like:

Item Number 2026.010.003

When checking the associated provenance notes, one can learn that this theoretical book was found in 2026, is item #10 in the archival system, and is one of three copies of that item. It is nonstandard, but effective and almost infinitely scalable. But what I prize the most about it is that it is easily understandable so that, should this community ever develop around *The Watermark* like I had initially hoped, someone can look at a book and go year→item→ item variation. It does not require specialized training, knowledge, or degrees, which is a real theme of *Libraries For All!* We cannot, and should not, assume specialized training, but should adapt systems to be readable while still doing our best to ensure the long term preservation and the stability of that system. It is adding unnecessary complexity in low-resource, niche contexts and just becomes exclusionary. I hope the people most likely to one day engage with any *Watermark* archive are not archivists, but students curious about

their history, literary culture, and environment. We are not at that stage yet, but not from lack of effort.

The system is in place the exact same way some time capsules are in place. Or else some kind of bunker is in place. While the research is being conducted, and the books written on (primarily by myself), and the books continue to be tracked, organized, and cataloged, and the supporting infrastructure in place to preserve them as best one can on a graduate student stipend, it lacks the most critical element: users. Which begs the question: what is an archive without an audience?

Wringing Out Loud

by Rich Murphy

Laundering vocabulary to clean
language that bureaucrats,
influencers, and advertisers dirty
and stain, the poet washes by hand.

Four and foul letter groupings
litter into disgust and distrust.

AI spot removers and patches
and machine agitators spin about
mob screams and fixers in a bind
but sheets come out soiled in pixels
and cliche emojis and Gifs.

With a pen clenched in lather
wit scrubs until paper nears
through woven storyline threads
and hints that etymologies hold.
The ink dries on the breath.

Words hung, clothes-pinned
to a computer wire or spread
around cover up hacked pockets.

Pros in the shadow sciences
masquerade to mug the temporary
human who needs no help
wearing out metaphor and symbol.

Resolution

by Rachel May Ferriman

Three days into January:
Lost days.
Should have been sober days.
Dry January: A wet dream.
“Should” is a waste of time:
Denial of reality, of what is.
But why did I deny him thrice? I should have been braver.
Why did he say he loved me, he loved me, he loved me?
Father, Son, Holy Spirit.
Why: W
H
And Why.
Because
Because
Because
I myself am not one.
Not one for questions.
Not one for second chances.

Heaven or Las Vegas

by Martha Bird

Sunlight through eyelids
Closed – all Rothko, all light,
All space, all colour,
Shifting, haze and glow
All silver pink and gold
All the way to the corner of my mind's eye
– No, wait,
Front and centre now
Front row seat to the baseball stadium
Sunset's purest speck
Fire crackle pop and snap,
Not to speak of the air
– Oh, how you spoke of the air,
Crisp or clear, thick and heavy
You wound it round your syllables
Sucked it through your glottal stops
Billowed lungs as bellows stoke kindling flames
Breathing all of it in and out and in again
And down and out and through the tip
Of your tongue
On the roof
Of your mouth
Pushed past teeth,
Chipped cracked and twisted
Spit on lips coloured cherry funk
Lips licked and kissed and cracked dry in that winter air you loved
– Oh, how you spoke of the air…
But here the light is golden blue
And kissed lips lie still by other lover's beds

As the sunsets over lands of dream and nod
In the place where the air glows bright
Silver pink and gold
All Rothko,
All space,
All light,
All colour of another lover,
Who does not speak of the air.

Molly Bloom Goes to The Beach

by Eve Naden

I once knew a woman who set her hair on fire. Don't worry, it was an accident. I mean, she did it on purpose but it wasn't her fault. She thought her hair was made of snakes. My Mum says this is not the best story to tell at a party, but it's the only one I know.

* * *

I stand on the threshold of a stranger's house. Smile like my mouth's full of water. Water inside me and water behind me. A strip of ocean. The meat of the headland, cut by holiday lets and overpriced cafes.

I'm not supposed to be here. My flatmate said I should stop by, but I'm not sure if 'stop by' means small-talk for ten minutes or rave till dawn.

"You didn't have to come." My flatmate opens the door mid-sentence. He's tall and speaks with an easy confidence that makes me want to vomit. He cradles his beer like it's an infant. I can picture him as a father. Building cots and buying toys and phoning friends, complaining he can't go out tonight, he's got to babysit. Yes, in my mind, he's the kind of man who refers to parenting his own child as babysitting. I invent futures for people I'll never understand. I think it's a form of masochism but I can't be sure because most days I feel like a sadist.

"You going to stand there all night?"

This must be a trick question. He laughs as I step inside.

"Can't believe you made it. Drinks are over there." He throws a hand towards the kitchen. "Don't go upstairs though. Bit of a ding dong."

"What's happening upstairs?"

He shrugs.

“Lover’s quarrel. I think. Not sure. Makes no sense to me anyway. I think she’s just a bit sensitive. One of those, y’know?” I don’t know but I nod like I know and he assumes I agree but when he leaves I rub my skin, feeling dirty.

The house is big and sparse. An unsued film set, complete with wandering extras. Everyone’s drunk. Perhaps this is the only way they can enjoy the house. The sofa is grey leather, and in the half-light, it looks like a washed-up seal. White tiles on the floor. Whalebone chairs. Chairs strewn about, bodies strewn on chairs. A woman spills wine on her dress and giggles. I watch two men kiss on the balcony. Two men with box-shaped bodies, and the box-shaped speakers blare Drumcode-techno. The waves are drowned by the pounding bassline. I decide this isn’t much of a beach house.

I search the room for stories. Peel back my skin to soak myself in other people’s lives. I leave every conversation like a thief. Someone’s mother is dying. Someone else is pregnant, perhaps. They’re not entirely sure. My beer becomes a prop. I don’t drink but I hold my drink because I can’t hold my liquor. I’m not a fun drunk, I’ve been told. I become morbid and philosophical and no one wants me around. This would make sense if I wasn’t also like that sober. I’m not sure what this means for my relationships.

“You’re Joe’s friend right?” I turn and there’s a woman at my elbow. On my elbow. She hangs off me like a trapeze artist. I want her to jump and fly away; her hands are sticky.

“We live together.” I have no idea who Joe is.

“You think you’re so special.” She’s slurring. “But he’s mine, y’know. He’s mine.”

“You can have him,” I say. “He’s terrible in bed.” She clings to me. Drunk, she resembles a toddler and I’m glad of this because most women intimidate me. I feel like a girl. Perhaps I feel this way because I’m still a virgin which becomes an insult once you’re past a certain age. Perhaps it’s because I’m just that insecure. At work, it’s the same. I’m a girl playing dress up in my father’s suit. Playing at being an

adult. And in this beach house, I play at being a guest, at being the kind of person others want to invite places.

The woman steps away to vomit and I walk to the kitchen. It's all glass and marble. There's an island with bowls of lemons and limes. Black metal stools; they look uncomfortable. I sit anyway and the man beside me frowns. He's blonde and tanned and I can't tell if it's fake.

"You enjoying the party?" he asks.

"Not really."

"You here with someone?"

"I'm here with you."

"I mean, on a date." I'm not sure who'd bring a date here but it seems like a genuine question so I tell him I'm Rick's flatmate.

"Oh, it's you."

I frown.

"What do you mean?"

"Just thought you'd be different." I'm still not sure what he means but I'm afraid to ask again in case his answer upsets me. I'm afraid to talk people as my real self in case halfway through I forget what I'm doing and make a mistake and then they hate me. But the man is tipsy - red-cheeks like a gnome - so it doesn't matter if I ruin things because he won't remember.

"I work up the road. At the bar," he clarifies. "It's a steady job. I need something just to keep me busy, y'know. I'm starting at my Dad's company this September, so I need a break. He keeps phoning me. I don't think he knows how to text." I nod along. He doesn't ask me what I do for a living. He doesn't ask if I have a father. I'm sure I do somewhere. Perhaps I could borrow his.

"You want another drink? I make good drinks," he says. My bums hurts from sitting on this stool. I ask if his bum hurts and he laughs.

“You just want me to talk about my ass.”

“Yes. Does it hurt?” He laughs again. Apparently, I’m hilarious. He pours me another beer and I sit with two plastic cups, feeling like a waitress too frightened to serve my own table. He mixes vodka and orange and then pours it out because the orange is too orange and just sits with the vodka bottle instead. I look around for Rick, but I’m not sure why. We didn’t arrive together. I brought my own car. I brought my own car so I could leave when I wanted but I can’t bare to leave this early in case people comment on it. I’m scared of being found out, even if I don’t know what that means.

The man squints. It’s pitch black outside. My face aches even though I haven’t been putting on any particular expression.

“You one of them old school girls?” he asks. “You want me to ask about your star sign? Your favourite colour?” He laughs and his lips curl up like dead leaves. I feel like I’m on a quest but I’m stuck at the tavern miles from the dragon’s keep, talking to the innkeeper.

“Well, I’m very busy these days.” I haven’t asked a question but he goes on,

“It’s just one thing after another. And my sister’s just had a baby, can you believe that? I mean, good for her or whatever but I can’t imagine bringing kids into this shitshow. You know what I mean?” It’s not a question - he’s asking for agreement, not an opinion. I know this but I’m disappointed anyway and tell him I’m feeling sick and I need the toilet.

“Jesus. Can’t you hold it?”

“Not really how it works.” He tells me it’s in the hallway, on the left. I slide off the stool. Walk to the entryway where I stand staring up at the ceiling. Staring up at the ceiling and the ceiling is teal, flecked with white. I’m sure if I stood on a chair and licked it I’d taste peppermint. I’m still standing there when Rick comes down. One arm around a younger man with a tattoo on his chest. Someone’s name, or a proverb, I can’t tell. He’s checking his phone, refreshing his messages again and again.

“Where’s your girl?” asks Rick. He’s smiling. “She bailed already?”

.

“Christ man. She’s batshit. Just leave it, yeah?”

“Doesn’t get how lucky she is,” Rick says. He rubs the man’s shoulders and I see the longing in his eyes. He catches me staring and looks away.

“You seen the way she was dancing? Trying to make me jealous. Now she’s run off. Just because I called her on it.”

“She left?” Rick’s frowning. He stares at the door. “Where’d she go?” The man shrugs. Rick stops touching him. He looks to me for help but I’ve seen those safety videos. Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

I enter the loo. I don’t need it but the locked door feels like a victory.

* * *

I leave the party and walk to the beach. The dark becomes an animal. Its mouth closes shut around my body and I am devoured. Hot and sticky but also safe and warm. I cross the rocks onto the sand. There’s a sign about rip currents but it’s too faded to read properly.

The tide’s right in and it’s not long before I see her. She’s standing like a mermaid who’s spent too long on land. On her feet are those house slippers – the kind that look cheap but cost half a paycheque. She throws her phone into the water. She’s sobbing but the wind’s up, so it’s carried away, and I’m glad of this because her sobs soon turn to wails and the sound is grating. She wails and her face is ugly. Full-coverage make-up, dislodged and disjointed. Two faces, one melting down her chin.

She steps into the sea. She’s still sobbing and I think this is wrong; her face should be serene. I head over and grab her arm to pull her back. She doesn’t fight me but she calls me a bitch, but I don’t mind because a bitch I what I wish I could be – bitch makes me sound interesting.

She loses one of her slippers. I drag her back onto the sand, right back to where the benches are. Sit her down amongst the litter. She’s still crying but not as hard now. Her cheeks are tinged pink. I offer her my jacket but she says it looks awful and we laugh.

“I’m sorry,” she says. I shrug.

“It’s okay. I don’t really like that jacket either.”

“No, I mean I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re drunk,” I point out. “Lots of people are drunk tonight.” She apologises again and I tell her it’s alright because I’m a little drunk too. I drank the beers before I left the party, too afraid to discard them in case someone might find the cups the next day and link them back to me and call me ungrateful.

“I can’t believe I… I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” I tell her. “You’re very drunk. And ill too, probably.”

“He left me,” she says. I nod. “We were going to be a team.”

She sobers up around midnight. Starts crying again, saying she’s stupid.

“I don’t understand what’s wrong with me. Normal people don’t do these things, do they? I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. And it’s completely normal. People do this kind of stuff all the time. I set my hair on fire once. Don’t worry,” I say. “It grew back.”

We sit on the beach. The tide nips at our heels. We move off the sand onto the coastal path, and walk till we’re fully awake and sober and can no longer talk to each other honestly. She borrows my phone and calls for a taxi and does a half-wave from the window. When she’s gone, I walk back to the beach. The sand absorbs my aches and pains. The beach house stares down at me; I can see the men on the balcony, women dancing.

I amble along, a cow with four stomachs. Four stomachs and it’s still not enough to stomach the the sight of the beach house, all lit up.

(In the Distance)

by Rick K. Reut

...while it changes like
a woman. Another rain-
coat hangs on the skyline,
dripping down the drain.
Colors seem to collide
in the distance between
two words you try to hide
from. Somebody is seen
coming in a long, dark
gown that covers the back
of what looks like a park
alley painted black
and blue. Red lanterns light
up the face of the night...

...while it changes like a woman. Another raincoat hangs on the skyline, dripping down the drain. Colors seem to collide in the distance between two words you try to hide from. Somebody is seen coming in a long, dark gown that covers the back of what looks like a park alley painted black and blue. Red lanterns light up the face of the night...

(Space of Time)

by Rick K. Reut

...deep in the past.
It seems less tense
now. Few things last
when there's no sense
in it. A lot
of words in a space
of time are lost
upon the face
of the earth. There
is almost no one
who's left to stare
at a setting sun...

...deep in the past. It seems less tense now. Few things last when there's no sense in it. A lot of words in a space of time are lost upon the face of the earth. There is almost no one who's left to stare at a setting sun...

Erasing Peace

by Clarence Allan Ebert

I couldn't sleep, my dear, thinking of the many
wars we never started. The sunny miles of peaceful beaches.
Where the souls of dead soldiers long ago departed.
Where mad poems were written with their blood.

By sea from the sands our words sailed to rile
up the enemies who wanted our land. I reminded
our one-eyed nightwatchman to scour vacant
seashores with his flickering flashlight in search

of patience, dear, it won't be long before
we blow the heads off those sons-
of-bitches on the other side of the world.
We've had a bone to pick with them

since Scheherazade fled the capital.
If we put our heads together we can devise
a method to make poisoned darts trend again.
But, are these not modern times? We can wage war

from the comfort of our rec rooms – stock the bar!
"The sky is a perilous grey," she said.
"Just history trimming its split ends," I replied.
We are grim. Are we not enlightened at all?
Once we set our course for total annihilation
charging downhill with our erasers will be easy.

Moments Beyond

by David James

'...doing the ordinary work of living—'

Dennis Hinrichsen, 'Poem in which I Walk Away in Slow Motion as if from an Explosion'

but I don't need
ordinary or usual/the normal/the same

something greater gathers up underneath
my feet/lifting me/carrying this one little life
above the trees/into the clouds

touching the basement of heaven like a plea
for forgiveness or a grace
no one deserves//today I want
to deserve everything/magic at my fingertips

miracles pouring out of the woodwork
man-made or God's/moments that feed
my heart/that throw the ordinary
out the window and out of sight/
moments of living that open my eyes

to the glorious/that sail through my ears to soothe
my dreams/that fill my belly with so many joyful seeds

A Good, Simple Life

by David James

‘Shackled by Lust?’
- a billboard on U.S. 23

Are you
frightened
by the dark?
Tied up in
knots about
the future?
Are you through
with love
and heartache,
your confidence
and self-worth
dissolving into
mildew?
Are you afraid
to fall asleep
and not wake up?
Do you dream
of burning ugly
tattoos
on your face?
Will you
ever settle down,
your lust unshackled,
to find a little joy
in what’s mundane
and true?

Business Plan

by Trevor Conway

I'm not the kind of man who'd blackmail an old lady, but if I were, there's a certain way I'd go about it. Seeing an advert for a room in a suburban house, I'd phone the number. The owner'd be waiting at the front of the house, dressed in a baggy woollen jumper.

"I'll show you the room," she'd say, after some inane small talk. The house would need repair, the bathroom ceiling with crumbling paint that might remind me of an eighty-year-old's face. I might even remark on it.

"I must do something with that," she'd say. I wouldn't be the first person she'd said it to.

As we'd stand in the bedroom, she'd ask me to repeat myself. I tend to mumble my way into sentences. People understand my general point, but they often miss pertinent details at the beginning.

"Do you work, apart from renting the house?" I'd ask.

"I'm a clairvoyant," she'd tell me.

"Oh," I'd say, "you can hear dead people… spirits?"

She'd smile. I'd notice her receding gums.

"I just have to ask all my tenants to make sure there's no books and junk left on the window sill," she'd say.

"Why?"

"It just makes the place look… rented… or cheap. Don't you think?"

The slight sense of alarm on her face – a nervous smile, tightness about the eyes – would give off the whiff of some kind of wrongdoing.

"You don't want it to look rented?" I'd say.

"Yeah. The neighbours, they like to have things looking nice. It's good to have things looking nice, isn't it?"

"I guess," I'd say. "So, the rent is three hundred?"

"That's right."

"I have some forms to be signed," I'd lie.

"What kind of forms?"

"Just welfare stuff."

Her thin smile would widen to something beyond alarm, but not quite panic.

"I don't like signing those forms," she'd say.

"Why not? They're just–"

"I'll tell you what," she'd interrupt: "two-eighty for the room, and you won't need any forms."

"That's not worth my while," I'd tell her. "I'm better off if you sign the forms."

"Two-sixty. I can't go any lower than that, or I might as well give it to someone else."

"Two-thirty," I'd say.

"I'm afraid not. You know, maybe it isn't for you."

I'd have a phrase in my head. I wouldn't be sure I'd say it. Until, that is, I'd hear the words come from my mouth:

"How about *you* pay *me*?"

"What? What are you talking about?" There'd be confusion, her lips twisted to a shape Picasso might've painted.

"Not declaring your income is a crime," I'd say.

"What income?"

"Your rental income."

"I don't know what you mean. I do declare it." She'd say it in such a half-hearted way that I wouldn't even need to contradict her.

"I'm leaving," I'd say.

"Don't."

"You won't be hearing from me again," I'd tell her.

"What do you mean?" she'd ask.

"I think you'll get a nice letter from the IRS instead. Or maybe some lovely police officers are gonna knock on your door."

"Please don't." I'd finally get to see panic, shining in her wild eyes. "They'll send me to jail," she'd say.

"One-fifty. Per month," I'd say.

"Fifty?"

"One-fifty."

"You want the room for that much?"

"I don't want the room," I'd tell her. "I want one-fifty per month."

"I can't afford that. I have bills to pay. My son needs help from time to time."

"With what?"

"He has problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"Gambling. He can't help himself."

"One-twenty," I'd say, writing my bank details on an envelope I'd find on the desk. "That's less than you'd pay in taxes."

"I don't think I'll be able to cope." She'd shake her head over and back. "Please don't do this to me," she'd plead.

I'd feel a shot of pity go through me:

"One hundred," I'd say. "You have one week. Any less, you can expect the IRS to get very interested in you."

I'd hand her the envelope and leave.

Walking home, I'd consider whether my humble studio apartment might actually be the perfect dwelling for someone like me. Small talk with co-tenants is not a thing I relish. And while I'm perfectly happy surrounded by my own mess, the unwashed dishes of others tend to infuriate me.

Five days would pass, and still no change in my bank balance. The next day, I'd see it – an increase of one hundred dollars. Of course, I'd feel sorry for the old lady. But that might pass. I'd reason that she'd pay more to the government if she was honest. I'd remind myself that morality is relative, no more real or absolute than other manmade inventions, like time, language or law.

Occasionally, I'd see her on the street. As long as my bank balance rose at a steady rate, we'd have no need to communicate. I might consider following her. I might even come to suspect that the son she spoke of was fictional. (What kind of son would never visit his mother?). I'd bore of this quickly, though. I don't have enough interest in others.

I view life as something to be shaped and perfected over time. The ultimate aim, I suppose, is happiness. That's something I've always struggled with. I've always felt there was something lacking. And I've always aspired to better things. It's not that I don't want to work; I'd love to be able, but work depresses me to the point of incapacitation. By not working, I'd have time for more worthy pursuits. For example, I'd be able to re-read the entire works of Samuel Beckett. He and I are similar, I feel. We both believe – if I can speak for Sam – that life is quite pointless. We all live and strive, but end up dying anyway. And we all end up forgotten, eventually. Okay, historical figures might be remembered for a long time, but does that really matter? Would Julius Caesar care that some student is studying him for an exam two thousand years after his death?

My father died at fifty-one. Numerous uncles, my grandfather and "great" relations have ended suddenly, most from heart complaints. Clearly, we share curdling blood.

My father died poor. Had he been a more patient man, he would have been more comfortable. He might not have been so "jumpy", as my mother called it. I, with whatever portion of life I have left, will not allow myself to descend into poverty. If my father were alive to see how I live, I believe he'd be proud. That might seem naïve, but I really believe it's true. My father respected money. He respected intelligence, but even more than that, he smiled with wonder at what he called "street smarts".

Old lady at 135 Maple Park: 100
Mr. Roberts, 222 Kennedy Avenue: 60
Woman, about age 50, house opposite fire station: 100
Sarah Little, "Musgrove" house: 80
Doctor, Crescent Way: 150

The above list would refer to the various people funding my existence – all lords and ladies of the land, so to speak. Further details would be laid out on a computer spreadsheet. At the convenience of a click, I could add details or jog my memory (since memories need exercise, apparently).

These owners would deny their indiscretions at first. Once I made it clear I'd speak to the authorities, however, denial would soon give way to acceptance. On one occasion (Mr. Roberts), it would become clear that my fee was too high, that I'd overestimated his means.

"But I've just bought a car," he'd protest. "My daughter's starting college next year."

"What college?"

"Berkeley, California."

"What kind of car?"

"A Ford."

Thus, the fee would be lowered according to Mr. Roberts's circumstances.

The ultimate goal of this enterprise, beyond survival, would be to afford a house of my own. (I might even put up a room for rent.)

By the end of the year, I'd have opened four bank accounts, spreading payments to avoid suspicion. I might even purchase a metal case, place money inside it and bury it under a stone wall in a field. At some stage, I'd most likely ponder the possibility of hell. But I'd never truly believe in it.

One evening, I'd be reading in my apartment. I might have developed an interest in Russian poetry. A knock would come on the door. Quick and sharp.

"Hello. My name is Officer Jenkins," the man would say, holding his badge up to my face. He'd be skinny, with bright orange hair, a thick moustache – making me think of how I'd loved marmalade as a child.

"What can I do for you?" I'd ask.

"Can I come in?"

"Do you have a warrant or something?"

"No," he say. "But it's in your best interest to let me in and speak in private."

"What's this about?" I'd ask.

"I think you might have some idea," he'd say. We'd share a look, and I'd step aside to let him in. "You've been blackmailing someone, a friend of mine – Anthony Roberts." He'd say it in such a casual tone that he might as well be describing the weather.

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

"I think you do. And you'll stop harassing him. Instead, you'll write down what I tell you." He'd hand me a pen and a page, tell me his bank account details and how much to transfer.

"Five hundred dollars – you're mad," I'd say, the pen shaking in my hand.

"Just write. You're in no position to give me attitude."

I'd look down, at his gun. His shoulders would tense, like he expected me to lunge for the weapon. I'd have too much sense for something like that.

After writing his details, I'd tell him I couldn't afford to pay so much. He'd ask me to repeat myself. In fact, he'd do this a number of times throughout. I'd speculate that it wasn't because my speech was unclear, but rather to feel more dominant.

Oddly, he'd shake my hand before leaving, as though we were partners of some sort. Once I'd make the first lodgement, three days later, the thought would strike me: *What if he isn't a cop?* And I'd recall how he'd put away his badge very quickly.

Hours outside the police station, over the course of a week, and still, I'd never see the man. I'd eventually walk to the desk inside, intending to ask for Officer Jenkins, expecting to discover he didn't exist. Through the various sounds of talking, walking, keyboard tapping, doors opening and closing, I'd hear a familiar voice. Then, to my utter surprise, Officer Jenkins would walk in from the corridor, perhaps on his way to lunch.

The woman at the desk, with bushy hair ten years out of date, would ask me, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to speak to Officer Jenkins."

"Hello. I'll help you," Jenkins would say, leading me away. Still within earshot of the woman at the desk, he'd ask: "What have you come here for?"

"Come here for?"

"Yes. Has there been a crime, or are you looking for information?"

"I… was looking for *you*," I'd explain, quite confused.

"How can I help you?"

"Well, I…"

"Maybe we should step outside," he'd suggest. "It's very warm in here."

Once we'd get beyond the front door, he'd ask me:

"What are you trying to do?" He'd grind his teeth.

"I just wanted to see you," I'd say.

"See me about what?"

I'd struggle to answer, making sounds rather than words.

"You thought I lied to you," he'd say.

I'd nod.

"If you come back here, I'll be waiting for you," he said.

"Waiting?"

"Where you live. It'll look like suicide. It isn't hard, you know."

I'd leave feeling quite numb. I'd wander for hours. It'd be dark as I'd walk home, a shine on the road highlighting its roughness.

Over the course of three weeks, I'd discover where Officer Jenkins lived, where his wife worked, where his children attended school. I'd write these on a piece of paper. At the end of the page, I'd write: "Leave me alone". Then, I'd place it in a stamped envelope addressed to him, but I'd slide it through his letterbox in the evening, so he'd know I'd delivered it personally.

I'd pay no more to the man's account. Weeks would pass, and I'd be satisfied to see an end to our dealings.

Without warning, the old lady's payments would stop. I'd phone her several times, send her messages. I'd wonder if she'd passed away. She'd reply eventually, telling me she was having financial trouble. She'd ask if she could explain in person.

The next evening, I'd go to see her outside the house where I'd met her first. I'd plan to remind her the authorities were only a phone call away. At the end of the alley beside the house, two men with eastern European accents would take hold of me. They'd push me against the wall, punch me in the stomach and face until I collapsed. They'd move aside to let the old lady through.

"Get up," she'd say. I'd struggle to stand. The two men would lift me by the arms.

"If you think you're gonna get any more of my money, you're a damn fool," she'd say. "I've beaten cancer. You think I'm gonna let a twerp like you bleed me dry?"

"I'm sorry," I'd say. "I just thought, since you weren't paying taxes…"

"I have nothing left to give you, so don't expect anything more from me."

"Sure," I'd say.

"Is that a promise? You won't go to the cops? Or the IRS?"

"No. I'll leave you alone."

"Don't you feel ashamed?" she'd shout.

"I'm charging you less than if you were paying taxes." I'd have the words out before considering the consequences.

"Hold him," she'd say. They'd grab my arms. "His legs too," she'd tell them. They'd stand on my feet. She'd kick me in the balls.

I'd try to bend over, but they'd hold me. I'd feel like vomiting.

"You're gonna leave town," she'd say. "If not…" She'd look at the one to my right, who'd pull out a knife and hold it to my throat. "You understand?" she'd say.

I'd nod. They'd push me to the ground. The other one would give me a kick in the ribs for good measure.

I'd mull over the possibility of leaving town. Where would I go? If I simply left the old lady alone, she'd hardly pursue the matter, I thought. I'd remain at home, rarely leaving the house, just in case she saw me and decided to act on it. One morning, I'd open an envelope dropped through my letterbox. I'd open it. A bullet inside. Somehow, I'd know it was Officer Jenkins. *A bullet*, I'd sigh, *what a cliché*.

Soon, I'd see him more often. He'd follow me. I'd look behind every few seconds, scan the dark occupants of parked cars.

I'd purchase tickets to Canada. After a week spent in hostels, I'd look up accommodation. I'd view the rooms, ask the usual questions. The temptation would be too much. I'd ask about signing forms. I'd suggest they pay me to keep quiet.

Over a period of months, I'd expand my operation. I'd be careful not to mess with anyone who might have a violent streak. Only the nervous ones, I'd tell myself. With the right decisions, I'd make a success of it. A quiet success, but I'd be proud of the things I'd do. And we define ourselves by our acts, don't we? I'm pretty sure Sam Beckett would agree.

I'd feel happy, fulfilled – if I did these things, I mean. But as I said, I'm not that kind of man.

The Stranger

by John Martin

Here in your fairground island,
jewel of the famous sea,
a stranger waits. Born out of stars,
the light of his understanding
travels towards you,
out of his reach.
Hurtling to earth, unnoticed,
poetry drops in some opulent desert,
stray specks of dust
that do not show up
on your brightly lit screens.

Bewildered by the illusion of slogans.
Multiple spoken tongues
compound the confusion.
Vaguely familiar roots,
with a history of shifting vowels,
echoes of antique speech,
traces of prayer,
pulled by a maelstrom of words
into a meaningless void.
Like petals refurling at dusk
you shut out the truth.

Taught how not to transgress,
he grew up in a cage of strict rules,
which have now been discarded,
litter akin to the packing of food.
You pay no attention,

appearing as insects
to mouth behind glass,
gestures
dissecting refractions of time.

Alone in a hall of mirrors,
deforming, his body no longer his own,
the nightmare distorting what he has been.
Always the same:
lost in those cities
which once he knew well.

He cannot get home.
Spaces there are
in some of your towns
where ghosts of becoming can gather,
here he belongs, at one with the shadows,
away from the clamorous babble
of what's said by kings.
He chews the cud of his dreams
while fields from the past
give forth a full harvest,
mausoleums of concrete,
the derelict temples of now.

This fictional sea,
described to allure,
is only a body of water.
Soon it will rise
to clean the disposable world.

Everyone drowned,
the air that's breathed out,
bubbles of cartoon speech,
but no voice,
as all drifts away.

The Little Boy With No Eyes

by John Tustin

The little boy with no eyes
comes to me in my dreams.
His mouth is sewn shut, crudely.
His hair is always in need of combing.
A fine thread of snot
bubbles and then trickles
from the left nostril.

He must not have
a father or a mother.

Sometimes in my dreams
I am sitting
at the edge of a pool
and he swims up to me;
sometimes I am sitting
in my car at a red light
and he comes up
to the driver's side window
without knocking
but I know he's there.

Most often he sits
on the edge of my bed
while I lie there,
unable to sleep
in my dreams

and it's strange
how he looks at me
even though he has
no eyes.
I know he wants to tell me things
but, of course,
there is no way for him to do it.
Did I mention he wears mittens
that are sewn to his wrists
just as crudely as the stitch-job
on his mouth?

The little boy with no eyes
comes to me in my dreams.
I lie awake in my sweat,
in my tears –
in my dreams I lie there,
trying to sleep.
I look at the little boy
as he looks at me
without looking at me
and I finally tell him
all of the things
he probably wants to be telling me

and his scarecrow face
contorts a bit
and I am not sure
if he's being prevented from smiling
or crying
or what.

I let him swim up
walk up
sit at the corner of my bed
and I tell him
everything, I think,
that he longs to tell me.
I hope that when I am awake
he has a peaceful sleep.

Nucleus

by Karina Fiorini

We travel across blades of grass
from one child to another:

juniper galbulus to maple raisin
every day

We travel across blades of grass
from one gift to another:

blue-grey sickle eucalyptus to yucca-flamed sentinels
every day

We travel across blades of grass
from one offspring to another:

sea-lips rosemary to marbled flamingo willow
every day

We visit family; arpeggios on grass
bit fast, bit slow

The Friend

by Jenny Chu

I ask how K is doing & he says he is a failure
for failing his freshman English class.
He asks me how the chase of poetry is going &
I tell him I am a failure, but in a more condemnable way:
I cannot wield metaphors to shield the simple desperation of *I miss you*.
In French, it's *you are missing from me*. He laughs & I feel smarter than yesterday.
We walk to the concrete mall, talking about adults we knew, how wrongly we thought
they loved their American children. The sky: an allowance of gray.
Behind us, a woman screams at her boyfriend
for leaving their baby. A man approaches
& asks if he can show us around the greasy map.
Sorry, no thank you. The decline slips out too easily,
humming of repetition & starched polo shirts.
We pause to think about our next move, how to
dent Iowa City. Eventually, we start speedwalking again.
It's easier to blame boarding school for the stretch marks of space between us.
He asks me for advice, something I can't WeChat him on time,
but not about love. He's swept through that wringer
once but meaningfully. Both of us
have spent so much time recollecting
our bodies after people discover the beauty of
a life without us.
I spend thirty minutes telling him
what we have already made known.
I say he is a beautiful boy. Too soon,
I watch a shadow follow his apology for returning home,

tracing the steps of someone so removed from the kiss of smog.
And yet he was real. Fuller than a circle,
if only for a few hundred minutes.
His limbs, there & then not.
Our silence, coalescing into hot sparks of light.

A Perfectly Wrapped Up Mess

by Benjamin Ebert

That evening she lay in a bed in a room that looked across to the window and the people outside of it. On the bed there was a sheet, clean and white on top of her over her legs, and under her another, damp and changing color and red now in the space between her legs. Men in white went by the windows and down the hall and the noise they made came quietly into the room. The room was anything but quiet and the light shone bright from above and she saw the men rush past the window and heard the noise they made coming into the room and their voices muffled and soft and then later gone and the room quiet and calm until she would scream again.

She had laid there for what seemed like an hour on her own and her voice when it came sounded strange and from far away. There was a sound in her voice she did not recognize and she could hear it when she stopped and the echo was still there. For this time there was the feeling of someone else in the room, but it was fleeting and then would be gone and there would be left only her own voice and the reality of being truly, deafeningly alone.

Then she screamed and this time she heard and recognized every part of it as herself, and the door next to the window opened.

"I'll do it," the woman heard from her husband. Next to him was the doctor.

They knocked against each other as they came forward to her bed. The doctor stopped at the foot of the bed while the husband came and kneeled at the bedside.

"Poor dear," the husband said. He took her hand. "Don't you know you're going to be alright?"

"I hate you," she said.

"That's alright. You don't mean it." Then, "I have to tell you."

"Tell me what? Get out. Get. Out."

A hand appeared on her husband's shoulder and he rose and left the room. The doctor took his place. He had nice combed black hair and was very handsome.

"It's bad," she said. She liked him.

"It is as bad as you say," the doctor said. "Can you say?"

He kneeled there next to her. Sometimes, during that time that had seemed like an hour, when she screamed, she thought of him, and thought that perhaps his was the

sound in her voice she did not recognize. But she knew this was impossible. He was in the hallway all during that time, and so was her husband. She had seen them by the window, and there was much movement behind them in the light and she saw many racks wheeled past with small lights and boxes and containers of medical things and uncovered beds that carried people, and other covered beds that moved more slowly past the window.

Seeing them, she cried.

"It is bad."

The doctor dabbed her face with a handkerchief. He rose and went over to a table to her right. He flipped through a stack of papers. Those would be about her. He would know that and would not learn anything new from them. She could trust him. As she watched his hands flipping through the papers she heard a voice. It was his.

"Then there's not much more to ask," he said. Of course, she could trust him.

Having selected the top piece of paper, the doctor came over and kneeled beside the bed again. He reached into the pocket where he had pulled the handkerchief from, but removed a pen. She was disappointed. The tears began to come back. He looked at her.

"Did you lose it?"

"What is that for?" the woman asked. She dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief.

"It's a consent form."

"Consent?"

"Yes. Consent."

"What's consent for?" she asked.

"The operation," said the doctor. "Your husband has signed here."

The woman saw her husband's signature on the bottom of the paper. The tears rolled down her cheeks.

When she cried the doctor's eyes closed.

"Come, ma'am," he said. "There's no time for that."

"Let me see him," the woman said.

The woman watched as the doctor left the room and appeared on the other side of the window. And her husband was there, and she watched them next to each other, arms moving, pointing at each other, at her, somewhere beyond the two, and sometimes she heard them there behind the window. There was fighting. They were fighting, but neither looked successful, and when the men in white passed and the racks of medical things and the beds carrying sheets bulging in the middle they fought as though they could not see any of it, nor, especially, her.

Then there was a big movement all at once and she went. And then she came back. There was her husband again kneeling beside the bed. There was a nurse over to the left. Her back was turned. There was the sound of running water.

"You see, dear, it's just not gone how it was supposed to. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. It's just, when it doesn't it can be a mess for everyone."

"Does that mean anything to you?" the woman said to her husband. "Tell me, does that mean anything?"

"Yes," he said. "It means I love you and there won't be a mess. I promise."

The water had stopped. The nurse was unrolling something on the counter to the left.

"What's going to happen?" the woman said.

"He said it's not all that complicated," said her husband.

"Does it hurt much?"

"He said they have something for that."

"What do they have? What is it?"

"It's easy. They just numb you there and you wake up and it's all over."

"It hurts now."

"Soon it won't, dear."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happens after?"

"Nothing. We go on home."

"Oh," the woman said.

"What is it, dear? What's wrong?"

"Isn't that very fast?"

"Advances," was all he said.

"I thought it was days in bed here."

"He said it can be. He said if it's the other way it can be. But since it has to be this way, he said it's much faster these days."

"Oh, that's lovely, isn't it?" the woman's face was contorted. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, dear. It's very lovely."

"And there won't be any mess?"

"No mess. All perfectly wrapped up."

"Good," the woman tried a smile.

Her husband did not say anything. The woman watched as the door opened and the doctor returned to the room. He went over to the nurse, said something, and then came over to the bed. Her husband rose and they stood beside each other above

her. The woman smiled up at them from the bed.

"Did your husband explain to you?" the doctor asked.

"Oh, yes," the woman said. "It's all very easy. I'm excited."

"You will have to sign the form."

"Of course. I almost forgot."

The woman's husband produced the form and handed it to her. The doctor handed her the pen she had seen before. At the bottom of the page she saw her husband's signature. She was in much pain. She signed.

The doctor took the paper over to the pile and laid it on top. He went over to the nurse and they began pulling on rubber gloves.

The woman's husband made to move and she grabbed his hand.

"No mess?" she said, looking up at him.

"No mess."

"Oh, how I want it."

Her husband said nothing.

The woman watched the doctor and the nurse come over.

"Pull it back, will you?" the doctor said.

The sheet was pulled back and she felt something cold between her legs.

The nurse left and returned with a basin and placed it between her legs. The woman could not see it for the sheet.

"All ready?" the doctor said.

The woman looked up at her husband. He was looking at the window to the hallway. She looked back at the doctor.

"I've never been so ready," she said.

A mask came down over her face and covered her mouth. The tears returned. She looked up at her husband through the tears.

"Oh, how I want. I want it. I want to be a mother."

The doctor was handed a pair of forceps, and just as the woman was slipping into unconsciousness, her husband's hand left hers.

Night Haiku

by Joshua St Claire

---

circumpolar stars
through the hedgerow
wild roses

starburst
along the nightroad
buck blood

stratus night
nothing
is what it seems

3:00AM jitters
more stars
than should be possible

Draconids
the sound of falling
catalpa pods

Merak and Dubhe
poncirus peeking
through thorns

Susquehanna ice
a child's rock cracks
the night sky

while the stones
turn to sand
Zubenelhakrabi

boneset
I whisper the name
of an autumn star

stratocumulus night
bits of myself become visible
as they disappear

a spray of crows
from the boscage
night begins

The Death of Leonidas

by Craig Dobson

When I was a kid, in the late nineteen seventies,
we lived in southern England, near to the sea.
I read the Greek myths and some of their history –
hoplites, triremes, the Spartans at Thermopylae.

My Dad's long hair went with his flares
and his *Best of Country* tapes and his Barron Knights LP.
He worked in hotels, drove a second-hand Cortina,
drank at a strip club and a grubby Irish bar,
bought my mother a teasmade and a hostess trolley,
moved *his* mother into the flat downstairs,
where she ate charcoal biscuits and read Pam Ayres.

On Sunday mornings, when Gran went to church,
I fished in the town park or collected frogs' spawn,
while Mum cooked a roast and Dad, hungover, mowed the lawn.
Later, we'd watch a film on TV – me with a Coke,
Granny with her tea, Mum with a small glass of wine
and Dad with a beer or three.

Gone each morning when I left for school,
he was sometimes back from the pub to kiss me good night.
On Fridays, when I could stay up late,
he brought home take-outs to start *his* weekend.
Took us on holiday: one year, to Margate, one to Southend,
but he didn't like to venture too far and didn't like to spend.
He never quite trusted what life might try –
"glass half full man" he'd say of himself,
"because you drank the other half" Mum would reply,

laughing, though it bled their love dry
and drained everything from them as the years went by.

Arguments, redundancy, poor health and debt;
she couldn't forgive how he drank to forget.
The divorce, when it came, came as no surprise,
though it drowned the last of the light in his eyes.
Losing Gran to cancer and me to Mum,
he moved into a bedsit where he downed
can after can in a self-pity I grew to dread
till my visits stopped and the ghosting began.

In the time that was left,
he haunted the past that so haunted him.
Slurred phone calls suggesting Sunday roasts
or a family trip to the seaside fell on ears
more deaf to than moved by how he tried,
till to the end, to obey
those same rituals he'd helped to destroy –
as if seeking some desperate relic protection
from what the future might send.

And, now that it has, they've left him where –
obedient to their laws – I find he still lies:
drunk, mistrusting, impossibly young,
the years paused above him, darkening the skies.

Anatomy of Distance

by Ibrar Sami

After the night ends,
I write your name
beneath a broken streetlight—
light falls across my body,
and I hesitate.
In the water gathered along the road,
our faces appear—
split,
into two.
You tell me:
distance is not only a road,
it is something unseen
that grows inside the body.
I press my ear to the wall
and hear
the faint echo of your breath—
like a broken window
in an abandoned room.
When the wind rises,
the words scatter.
We stand side by side,
our shadows leaning
in opposite directions.
In your eyes,
an unfinished goodbye rehearses itself—
I reach out my hand,
but just before touch,
everything stops.

At last, we understand:
distance is not a measure.
It is a decision
we never speak.

Sometimes if we are lucky

by Phil Madden

Sometimes, if we are lucky, after the bombs,
there will be bodies to find. Perhaps even names.
And a place to bury them, and time enough,
according to our customs.

Sometimes, our customs have to change
(the memory of this in our bones),
though our hearts do not.
Then we scramble to cover
shallow graves with a handful of rocks.

And if there is no one to bury,
only rubble and their void,
we build cenotaphs in our heads.
The least we can do. And the most.
Then say a quick prayer. And plant revenge.

Don't think we haven't noticed
that picture on your phones.
You've taken it so many times.
Knowing you, we're surprised you're not bored.
The one of the man carrying a child,
floppy and wrapped like a carp.
The catch of the day.

If Language Be The Food Of Love

by Ron McFarland

He'd always thought of himself as "good with languages," maybe not "spectacular" or "gifted," but good in the sense of engaged and curious. Fascinated. Maybe he had a "knack" or even a "flair" for languages, and it was just like him to zip to the dictionary searching for the etymology of those snappy words, which volume advises that "knack" popped up in fourteenth-century Middle English and seems to connect with "trick" and might derive from a sharp sound of some sort, as if one might not "snap" but "knack" one's fingers. "Flair" also crossed the channel in that century from French for "scent" via the verb *flairier*, "to reek," ultimately derived from Latin.

His fascination with language began, he suspected, when he was about ten with Mrs. MacDonald's Latin I textbook, issued to her under her maiden name, Whitlock, at Meridian High School, in eastern Mississippi, a town General Sherman gloated he had erased from existence in early 1864 as he contemplated his March to the Sea. The MacDonalds were their friendliest neighbors and the first on their block to own a television set. They invited Larry, his younger brother, and parents frequently, to the point that his mother felt they were "taking advantage," but when asked over, they always came. Mrs. MacDonald was younger than his mother and very pretty. Her husband Mac was an engineer who worked at Cape Canaveral on guided missiles, ICBMs. Top secret projects. The name Wernher von Braun was whispered with reverence.

But while his parents and brother glued themselves to *I've Got a Secret, What's My Line?*, and *Amos 'n' Andy*, Larry was distracted by the dark green cover of *Elementary Latin: "Britannia est insula. Italia non est insula. Italia paene insula est."* Also *"Agricola puellam amat."* The farmer loves the girl. Yes, what wasn't to love? Mrs. MacDonald insisted he keep the book. She had no use for it. She was blissfully pregnant. He'd worked his way through half the text before signing up for Latin I his freshman year at Cocoa High. The course was a snap. He'd enjoyed an advantage, had an edge.

Latin II, however, was another matter, a bit of a grind, really, as he got bogged down in declensions and conjugations. Larry fancied himself near the top of the class, which

had lost several students after the first-year course. He was always present, "adsum." He quietly helped Mike and Dan with their translations. Both were popular, Mike being regarded as "the brain" and Dan the four-letter athlete who also did well in class, at least well enough to make Beta Club. They aced the course while he scraped through with a low B. Mike would graduate valedictorian. What would Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom, have said?

Larry did all he could to impress the aging Latin teacher, Miss Primus, joining Junior Classical League, *"Ad Astra Per Aspera"* (To the Stars through Difficulty), and belting out *"Gaudeamus Igitur"* when the occasion arose, that boisterous anthem to the joys of youth, the opening stanza of which ended with the promise not simply of a noisome old age and death, but with burial under sod, literally *"humus."* In class he raised his hand at every opportunity, but if his were the only digits (Latin, *digitus*) to be flailing the air, Miss Primus would wince and invariably call on someone else, whose answer would almost invariably be erroneous (Latin, *errare,* to wander, to err). Maybe she knew he had the translation down but wanted to expose the delinquent (*delinquo*). But it was deeply frustrating (*frustratio*).

Also frustrating was the JCL toga party at the end of his sophomore year, when he was struck by the sight, "vision" was the more applicable term, of honey blonde Sherry Harper in her knee-length, off-shoulder toga. She wore a red rose corsage and was convincingly intended to represent Venus, the goddess of love. Or "lust," Dan whispered quite loud enough to be heard by all around, including Venus who smiled seductively. They were dating. A senior from one of the town's country club families, she had taken Latin III along with only three or four others. Their togas were trimmed in patrician purple. Everyone else was plebian. When he got home, Larry looked up "lust" in the English-Latin section of his dictionary (*dictum*) and discovered the word he would later encounter in a psychology class, *libido*.

The "difficulties" embedded in the *aspera* of the JCL motto (hence the little used English word "asperity") propelled him away from Latin his junior year into the welcoming arms of Mr. Ashburn and Spanish I: "*¡Bienvenido muchacho!*" He felt some mild satisfaction from learning that Latin III failed to attract a soul, and a year later Miss Primus retired. By this time, Larry had signed on with the Spanish Club, "*Los Castigados*" ("the punished ones," as Mr. Ashburn playfully put it). Of course, Larry's spadework in Latin proved helpful, so he thrived in Spanish and happily signed up for Spanish II, where Mister A rewarded him with the star role in a year-end skit that spun off the confusion between *dolores* and *dólares*, sorrows and dollars.

Mr. Ashburn was a popular teacher. It was known he'd been in the FBI during the war, and there were rumors he was a commie. It was the era of HUAC and Senator Joe McCarthy, and the Russkis had the A-bomb and were moving toward acquiring ICBM technology. Sputnik was looming on the horizon. Somehow, the combination made Mister A even more popular. He introduced his classes to films in Spanish and to Cuban newspapers that attacked Fidel Castro, who was carrying on guerilla warfare against the dictator Batista and was rumored to be a commie. Mister A smoked Cuban cigars. He played recordings of "*Guantanamera*" and they sang along to revolutionary poet José Martí's poem and translated the lyrics. Un *poco peligroso*, he confessed. He introduced them to Pablo Neruda's *Odas Elementales* with "Ode to the Tomato," and to the first poem of the Chilean poet's early *Veinte poemas de amor*, "Body of a Woman" ("*Cuerpo de mujer*"), which got him in trouble with Donny Phelps's mother, who claimed it was too risqué. But nothing came of her complaint to the principal. Neruda was also suspected of being a commie.

His senior year Larry went to Havana with the high school marching band, in which he played trumpet without notable flair. They visited a cigar factory, a perfumery, a sugar cane field, the old Moro Castle, the national cathedral, the *Catedral de San Cristóbal*. He bought a lottery ticket, which he kept as a souvenir, and a pair of maracas for his mother. Everywhere, it seemed, he heard the strains of "*Guantanamera*". He fell in love with Ginny, a cute sophomore majorette, and he dazzled her with his supposed mastery of Spanish, even as he promptly discovered how far he was from anything approaching fluency. She was taking first-year French.

He loved the simple lyrics about a peasant girl, *una guajira*, a Spanish-Caribbean word, from Guantanamo: "*Yo soy un hombre sincero, / De donde crecen las palmas*." I am a truthful man / From where the palms grow." But he preferred the cognate, "sincere." Ginny was his *guajira*, and he was her sincere man pouring out his soul, his *versos del alma*.

Larry whispered, "Te amo."

Ginny whispered back, "Je t'aime."

Larry's first love did not survive his first year at Florida State, where he abandoned Spanish for Russian. "*¡Ay, que lástima!*" He imagined Mr. Ashburn lamenting. He'd worked for a couple of years and taken a few courses at a junior college, and with the aid of two scholarships, one of which provided residency in a scholarship house, he entered in the fall of 1962. One of his housemates excited him about Russian and introduced him to the mysteries of the Cyrillic alphabet. The downing of the CIA's

U-2 spy plane over the USSR and the capture of its pilot Gary Powers had stirred even more interest in the language than Sputnik (*Спутник*). He was intrigued. The professor had been a translator for the United Nations.

The class was small, intimate, a dozen students, three of whom dropped out before midterm. Among the survivors was an attractive girl from Sarasota named Lara Krasivovna, accent on the i, whose grandmother had fled the Russian Revolution in 1919 and had written poems. Bright and witty and blonde as a Swede, a Slavic Venus, Lara had picked up a little of the language from her grandmother and clearly stood at the head of the class. She planned to major in Russian. Inevitably, Larry fell in love with her as he was falling in love with the language. Maybe it was only an infatuation in both cases; nevertheless, he changed his major from English to Russian and developed a taste for borscht that Lara worked up using her grandmother's recipe and fresh beets, only fresh beets. He'd never cared for beets, but he discovered a craving for them that would last the rest of his life.

There being no Russian restaurant in Tallahassee at the time, they tried an Indian place optimistically named Karma as the nearest exotic option and discovered they both enjoyed a chicken dish called "Nirvana." Good linguistic omens, they agreed.

The next year Professor Verbinsky (he was Polish) enlisted ten Души (dushi), souls, a fraught word in the atheistic Soviet Union complicated by Gogol's remarkable novel, *Мёртвые души* (myortviye dushi), *Dead Souls*, where the term applied to serfs. Untenured in his fourth year at the university, Mr. Verbinsky (he lacked the vital PhD) was concerned about keeping his job, and he went out of his way to provide smooth sailing for those willing to give Russian a try. This time two dropped the course, so the intimacy of second-year Russian proved even greater than in first. An international student from Iran and a woman majoring in French who wanted to use Russian as her second language eloped to Thomasville, Georgia, soon after midterm.

"Души is rhyming with груши (grushi), pears," the Professor said, laughing at his little joke. Larry wondered about his translations for the UN.

But second-year Russian was delightful. The Professor introduced them to a brief folk tale involving a chicken that laid a golden egg, which the old couple tried to break without success only to have a mouse come by and sweep it off the table, breaking it. The old folks wept, but their chicken promised to lay them a new egg,

not a golden one though, just a plain one. "You must memorize tale," he said, and they did with no trouble. Larry would remember those forty or so words the rest of his life. And Mr. Verbinsky also had them memorize a little poem by Lermontov, "Парус" (paroos), "Sail." Then they set about translating Lermontov's short novel, sometimes considered the first real novel in Russian, *Герой нашего времени* (geroy nashyevo vremyeni), *A Hero of Our Time*.

Larry and Lara labored over that novel, a labor of love, and they fell in love more deeply on account of Павел Александрович Строганов (Pavel Aleksandrovich Stroganov), Count Stroganov of beef stroganoff fame (1774-1817), the strikingly handsome lieutenant general close friend of Tsar Alexander I and successful military commander in the wars against Napoleon. At the end of their second-year course, Lara and Larry prepared a sumptuous Russian dinner for their classmates and Professor Verbinsky, the main course being predictably *бефстроганов*. The Professor admired Tsar Alexander I as a reformer who would have freed the serfs if he could, and as a Slavophile committed to turning Russia away from its "inferiority complex" when it came to Western socio-political and cultural values. Vodka (*водка*), also predictably, flowed freely.

Predictably, too, Larry demonstrated that a high tolerance for American beer did not necessarily equate with a high tolerance for Russian vodka, and he compounded his ill performance by spraining his ankle trying to execute the squat-and-kick dance movement called the "prisiadka" (*присядка*). "*Какой дурак*!" (kakoy durak) someone exclaimed. What a fool! Almost everyone laughed, even Larry, but not Lara.

When third-year Russian got underway, Mr. Verbinsky was gone, his scholarly productivity having fallen below par, and that combined with the lack of a doctorate rendered him dispensable. He was replaced by a temporary instructor, an elderly White Russian a few years older than Lara's grandmother. Madame Kornilova claimed descent from a tsarist general of the Whites faction that battled the Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution. She would tolerate no word of English in her class, which by then had dwindled to only half a dozen, and some doubted that she spoke English fluently, if at all. Larry and Lara sat at opposite ends of the table, and the intimacy that had defined Professor Verbinsky's small classes was gone along with his delightful buffoonery.

Despite his embarrassment at the evening party *вечеринка* (vyecherinka), Larry retained warm memories of leading the class, along with Prof V, as he was now fondly remembered, in singing "*Катюша*" (Katyusha), that sweet folk song from the Second World War. Katyusha strolls through apple and pear trees in bloom and walks down a steep bank to the river singing of her soldier lover far away. How like the Russians, Larry thought, to name a WW2 rocket launcher after her. By the time they reached the third of the four verses only Mr. Verbinsky was singing in his deep baritone as tears swept down his cheeks.

Madame Kornilova was apparently devoid of sentiment. When one of their classmates stumbled over a difficult verb of motion, quite complex in Russian (Larry purchased a small booklet devoted to that topic alone), she reprimanded sharply: "*вы просто болван*" (vi prosto bolvan), "You're simply a blockhead." The class promptly declined by approximately 16.6%. Larry dragged himself through the remainder of the semester, but his love affair with Russian was as defunct as Lara's was for him. *Очень грустно* (ochen grustnuh), very sad.

There were other affairs, more flings than affairs or "relationships", Larry would confess. Three semesters of French, enough for him to humiliate himself in Paris on more than one memorable occasion. Two reading knowledge courses in German, with enough phonics for him to speak or sing his way decently through Heinrich Heine's "Lorelei" at a Bierfest in München. He renewed his major in English and was embarked on his master's when he fell in love again. Flavia Morgan, a would-be poet in the creative writing program. How had her parents come up with that moniker, he wondered? Her mother had taught Latin at a prep school. The name was derived from *flavus* (gold), so Flavia should have been a blonde, but she wasn't. She had assiduously avoided Latin, she said, and "wasn't good at foreign languages. Witness my C- in high school Spanish."

But after all, Larry reasoned, they shared native fluency in this very agreeable English language with its outsized vocabulary and near universality. Hadn't it replaced Latin as the *lingua franca* of their contemporary world? There was no career for an international airlines pilot without some command of English. And as his quasi-literate coalminer grandfather liked to say, "It's God's language, the language of the Bible."

But was it an adequate language for a lover? Latin had taught him *Amor vincit omnia*; Spanish offered simply *te amo*; French, of course, yielded *je t'aime* or *je t'adore*; Russian, dear Russian, *Я тебя люблю* (ya tebya lyublyu), a bit of a mouthful; surely German was the worst, the hardest on the ears, *Ich liebe dich*. Though he would be haunted forever by his infatuation with other tongues, Larry would be obliged to make love in English.

The Martyrdom of Njal

by Christopher Heise

A beardless man in a time
when beards were de rigueur,
great warriors spent their free time
farming, & blood vengeance
was a perfectly reasonable way
to right a wrong, Njal
shone as a beacon of reason
& wisdom among men who loved
glory & gold more than good living.
He could see into the future,
they say, but proud Gunnar,
god-like warrior ("He swam
like a seal ... it was said
that no man was his match"[1]),
didn't heed his warning
& so died in his home,
fending off his enemies
on his own, his hag-hearted wife
betraying him at the last.
But if Njal could foresee
his fast-friend's end
then why couldn't he do so
for himself? They burned him alive
(along with his wife & grandson!)
in his farmhouse at Bergthorshvol,
his stout & heroic sons
obliging him by moving inside
from the superior defensive position
without, all of them (save Karl,

to carry out the necessary
revenge killings – 15 hunted down!)
eventually perishing in the flames
(the toughest of all – grimly grinning
Skarpehedin – even tearing up
in the suffocating smoke clouds).
Was he simply resigned
to his own fate, seeming
to cause it himself
by giving arch-enemy Flosi
a womanish robe as an anonymous gift
(to which he promptly took offense),
a sort of ancient Icelandic martyr,
well-aware that the lesson –
violence can't solve violence –
was worth even the expense
of all he loved & treasured?
Or maybe he was just tired –
tired of people not heeding
his incisive, well-intentioned
advice… tired of the endless
feuds & foreign raids… tired of being
the only clean-shaven soul
among the hairy barbarian hordes.

[1] Quoted from *Njal's Saga*, translated by Robert Cook

Iron and Sap

by Martin Fisher

Chain
We are chains,
forged from heat and light,
everyone burned into shape.
A shimmer murmurs, “All metal remembers its ore.”

Vine
We are vines,
born from warmth and shadow,
the sun calling us back to soil.
The weevil snorts, “Gnaw like you’re alive.”

Chain
Some stay. Others link.
A scrape chuckles, “Every link dreams of solitude.”

Chain
We hold down freedoms,
torture thoughts that tilt worlds.
A shadow mutters, “Worlds burn anyway.”

Vine
We loosen stone thoughts
grown rootbound and rising.
A grin sighs, “Roots don’t mean boots.”

Chain
We do not bend
around a casket of hope
thrown into deep water.
A ripple sprite whispers, “Hope sinks only until it is pulled.”

Chain
We are swung through sour cellars,
biting wrists that never fought us,
kept oiled so our grip never forgets.
A giggle croaks, “Even iron bites itself in the dark.”

Vine
We free wrists,
sap tasting of rain.
Woodworm laughs, “hee-haw”.

Chain
We are dragged across borders,
Struck around ankles,
teaching the body how small it can be made.

Vine
We are carried across borders,
unlooped from ankles,
teaching the body how wide it can become.

Chain
We rust,
flake back to earth.

Vine
We soften, blacken,
fall to earth.
A green glimmer whispers, “We fall and rot and rise again.”

The Walnut

by Huina Zheng

When my phone started vibrating, I was on a bus, cracking a walnut. I dug my fingernail into the seam between the two halves of the shell. With a twist, it split open, and the kernel sprang out, whole, like a miniature brain. I paused. The motion felt exactly like something my mother would do. She always said that you nourish what resembles. Walnuts for the brain. Eat them and you will grow smarter.

When I was little, I loved watching her grind walnuts into powder, mixing them with flour, sugar, lard, and egg yolk, kneading the mixture into small dough balls. I would press my index finger into the center of each one, making a small dent. I asked her why, and she said otherwise the walnut pastry would puff up in the middle when baked, like a little hill.

I stared at her right thumb, still dusted with flour. It had no nail, flattened entirely. When she was a child, she had accidentally stuck it into a rice-threshing machine and crushed it. Her parents wrapped the wound in tobacco to stop the bleeding. She cried for nights before it healed, leaving her thumb a shapeless mass of flesh. With that hand, she found endless ways to cook for me. Walnut porridge, red date walnut cake, steamed egg custard with walnuts, walnut toffee.

My phone was still vibrating. I glanced at the number. The last three digits were 112, my mother's birthday. I was about to hang up, as I usually did with unknown numbers, but those digits made me hesitate.

By the time I answered, the bus had stopped at a red light. A woman's voice came through. "Hello, this is the Memory Service Center. We can provide the services you urgently need."

I asked her what she meant. It reminded me of a game my mother and I used to play, story chaining. We would take turns beginning a story. My mother might say, "Once upon a time, there was a little girl. Her mother walked a very long way, for three days and three nights." And I would continue, "She went to pick walnuts for the girl, the kind that only grow in the deepest forest." Then she would add, "Her feet were worn raw, covered in blisters." We would keep going until we were both satisfied with the ending. My mother said telling stories was like morning exercise for the brain, making it

soft and flexible. Our stories blended everything. Her regret at never having gone to school, a father who had been swept into the sea during a typhoon and never returned, ghost stories her grandmother had told her.

The woman on the phone said something else, but the bus announcement drowned her out, and I did not catch it. I remembered a time later, when I had eaten a dish called country-style walnut stir-fry at a restaurant and described it to her. Walnuts stir-fried with whatever vegetables were left in the fridge, anything you had on hand. She said, "Why does that need a name." Then she used her nail-less thumb to pat my head and said, "It is thanks to walnuts that you got into a good university."

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" I said to the woman on the phone.

"We offer a service. Based on your needs, we can generate memory powder. It is colorless and tasteless. Once you consume it, you will possess that memory."

"Memory powder?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "You can revisit past memories, the happy ones, the joyful ones. You can also implant memories you wish you had, or modify the unpleasant ones." Seeing that I did not interrupt, she continued, "For example, if you lost patience with your mother's nagging and kept hanging up on her calls, you could change it so that you always spoke to her patiently."

But I had never hung up on my mother. I simply chose not to answer her calls. While the novel I spent three years writing was being rejected again and again, every time her name appeared on my screen, I slipped the phone into my bag. I did not want to deceive myself. I did not want to feel justified in thinking I was a good, dutiful daughter. That would be self-deception.

"You can not only create beautiful memories for yourself," the woman said, "you can also give these memories to loved ones who have lost theirs."

My mother always said, if you do not look back at the past, how can you look toward the future. When she began forgetting things, I kept returning to our shared past, trying to get closer to her. When I wanted to share joy or confide my troubles, I would begin, "Once upon a time, there was a girl." My mother would pour me a cup of walnut tea, place it in front of me, and smile. "She walked and walked through the forest, just to find a tree hollow where she could tell her secrets." And I would continue: "When she finally found it, even though she knew no one was around, she still cupped her hands over her mouth and lowered her voice, afraid the other trees might be listening."

"For just 888 yuan, you can customize your own memory powder," the woman said.

The inside of my cheek suddenly itched. I bit down, imagining two small dents forming on my face. She said they were offering an unprecedented promotional package this month, not to be missed.

"I want to know," I said, "how did you find out about my mother's condition?"

Maybe someone at the hospital had sold patient family information to a company. Maybe it was those salespeople who wandered into hospital rooms. Maybe my mother's memory had briefly returned, and she had spoken to them, the mother who remembered every walnut recipe. But the woman did not answer my question. She continued talking about pricing. The bus announcement sounded, "Lingnan Road." I did not catch the rest. The doors opened. I hung up and stood.

When I stepped into Leyijia, the care home where my mother stayed, the smell hit me immediately. Cold. Sharp. Disinfected. My mother had once told me how to choose walnuts. Good ones smell like wood. If they smell like chemicals, do not buy them. They have been soaked in hydrogen peroxide. Now she was surrounded by that very smell.

Holding my still-warm phone, I wondered if I should order a memory to fill what I had lost. The first sign something was wrong was when she started calling me repeatedly, asking if I would come home for the May Day holiday. I told her I could not be sure. It depended on work. Within an hour, she called three times, asking the same question.

"Mom, you do not have to ask me over and over," I said. "If you want me to come back, just say so."

"Did I?" she said.

Ten minutes later, she asked again.

In the stories I later told myself, the girl always returned to her mother at once, catching the escaping memories in a net.

I walked to my mother's room. Her name and photo were posted on the door. She smiled awkwardly in the picture, her temples streaked with gray. Sometimes I would look at it and whisper, "Once upon a time, there was a girl."

I opened the door. My mother was squatting by a cabinet, unrolling a sock she had twisted into a mushroom shape, placing it on the floor, then picking up another and doing the same.

"Mom," I said.

She looked up at me, her eyes blank, then lowered her head and continued.

I thought those veined hands did not belong to her, but to another old woman. Yet that thumb, collapsed and without a nail, was the same. I remembered its texture against my face, slightly rough, like sandpaper.

My phone vibrated again. I answered. The woman said that if I placed an order today, I would get their lowest price ever, half off, and the memory powder would be ready in three days. For just 888 yuan, I could bring happiness to myself and the ones I loved. Before she finishes, I hung up. I did not want to alter any memory, not even the ones where I snapped at her when she brought me walnut porridge and said I only wanted toast, or the night I walked for more than three hours just to find her.

In the end, I found her sitting on a bench by the lake in a park near our home, clutching a bag of walnuts.

"Mom," I ran over, breathless. "Why are you here?"

She looked up at me. Her eyes brightened, then dimmed again. "I am waiting for someone."

"Who?"

"I do not know," she said. "Someone important."

We cannot change the past, she once said, but we can change how we see it. The same story can mean different things to different people.

I crouched down, took her hand, and stroked that thumb without a nail.

"Once upon a time," I said, "there was a girl. She carried a walnut as big as a watermelon to visit her mother."

I described how she passed a weeping willow, how the tree asked what she was carrying, how she said it was a walnut. The tree told her to put it down. It was too heavy. She said no. It was for her mother. She never strayed from the path home, until she reached a house shaped like half a walnut and knocked on the door.

"Mom," she called, excited. "Mom, I have come to see you. I missed you."

When I finished, she did not speak. But her flattened thumb moved back and forth in my palm, as if she were cracking an invisible walnut.

Atone

by Marisa Atha

Nearly spring, we half-sorrowfully but brave-facedly celebrated a February birthday without the birthday boy who will forever remain seventy-five.

Time is passing, and those people around me who have experienced and lived through a deep loss assure me that time changes things, lessens things. They don't so much guarantee the truth of the old adage, "Time heals all wounds," but they do offer some reassuring solace along the lines of something my dad, ironically, would say every now and then: "This too shall pass."

And so, time is moving. It's true that I can sometimes now visit my childhood home without tears, but the knotting in my stomach registers the absence that will greet me—the fifty percent lack in a parental unit that had always been steadfastly welcoming.

The other evening, Mom, now in her seventies, accidentally deleted all of our text messaging history on her phone. She was distressed about "losing" all the pictures that I'd sent her over the years, pictures that she'd meant to save and organize when she got around to it. I reassured her that the pictures weren't "lost," that any pictures I'd sent her were pictures I still had in possession. But to Mom, it meant that she couldn't scroll to find some photo I'd taken of a bundled grandchild in the snow, or a cute and messy grandchild in the midst of an art project.

So that night, while brushing my teeth, I poked around my phone settings to determine whether I could save all images I'd sent her into a tidy album that I could send onward. The phone did cooperate in compiling the images into a bundle that I could either "save" or "cancel." I scrolled, thinking I'd surely just be seeing a heap of cute kiddos; I hadn't been prepared for the fact that not only were the images *I'd* sent my mom showing up, but also the images that *she'd* sent me. This meant that a photo of

Dad popped up. The images were scrolling in reverse chronological order, meaning that the first one to arrive was the photo she'd sent me closest to his death.

He was so pale, thin-haired, and skinny. He'd been sitting at some kind of medical appointment — probably one of the day-long intravenous treatments he'd put himself through right up until his last week. His skin was hanging off his upper arm, the muscle atrophied and small. The crinkle in his eye was still there, but he was depleted of strength and physical presence.

I scrolled further, witnessing his decline in reverse order. The images took me from his last week, to a month earlier when he'd had more hair with more gray pigment rather than the ending's white, to another month earlier when his face was fuller, to another month earlier when he was entirely plumper with life and laughter. It was such a shock to my system to walk into this backwards trip unknowingly. Even though I was terrified, I couldn't get off the ride.

I just kept thinking, over and over, as my eyes bubbled over with fast, aggressive tears, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry..."

How did I *not* know he was going to die?

I could see it right before my eyes now. How could I not believe it at the time? Why did I waste so much time, just carrying on living my life while he was dying? Why did I think he would make it through, and we'd all carry on together? Why did I think it was important to continue on with all the pieces of my life that make up my one-day, one-week, and one-year plan when all of his plans were slowly being cast aside and laid to rest right before my eyes?

As he'd wasted, I'd wasted. His was bodily; mine was time.

And now, I'm only left with the atonement. And I wonder if it will ever come to an end. When you say, "I'm sorry" over and over, but hear no response, when do you consider yourself forgiven? Will I ever forgive myself for not learning the grand lesson of mortality before I'd had an experience that provided me with the knowledge? Will I have to wait until I'm dead and gone from this earth, and perhaps my spirit has joined that of my father's, before I'll finally feel whole and forgiven? Or

will I emerge during my lifetime with a strong enough sense of spirituality that I will truly feel my dad's forgiveness sooner, rather than later?

Knowing my dad, the forgiving, wise, patient, and kind person that he was, of course he would forgive me. Of course he does.

But I still must say "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Dad." Because I just don't forgive myself yet.

Sometimes writing helps work all this through. Sometimes it makes everything hurt bigger because every microscopic element has been magnified.

Last night I was reading the passage I'd written earlier in the day, and rather than feeling satisfied at the day's work, I unraveled into the sense of loss within the words. I suppose that while we are writing the words, even though we are remembering and reflecting, the process of searching for just the right word is so tasking that it allows our brain to access its rational, logical regions simultaneously with the creative and emotional. Reading, it takes nothing but the rhythmic movement of the eyes moving across a page. We become fully immersed in story, character, and place. And so, when I read yesterday's passage about letting go of my dad, I felt it all over again.

What began as tears morphed into a full-on ugly cry — snot, sounds, liquid, face into palms, feeling the slick smear of my cheeks. This cry had been building all week but, always nagging at the wrong moment, never had its way with me until last night, locked in the bathroom alone, brushing my teeth and reading black words on the white screen of my phone. Once I opened into it and loss broke me down and did what it must, I realized that, with no trail of bread crumbs, I'd lost my way back.

More tears came as I thought, "How will this stop? I know this won't go on forever, but I don't know how to make it stop hurting."

I unrolled some toilet paper, and began blowing, wiping, cleaning.

"Help," I thought. "Please help me." I was talking to him, the person on the other side, who would never reply, and never lend his helping hand again, after thirty-nine years of helping his daughter.

I leaned into my hand, rubbing my forefinger, middle finger, and thumb across my forehead. I massaged the tension that had gathered there, creasing into wrinkles on the skin, and cinching tightness below.

It felt nice. When did I even have the thought to start rubbing my forehead? I kept rubbing while I considered the new idea that this was my dad's reply to me.

"Help," I'd said. Maybe, or maybe not, he guided my hands to my head, rubbing my forehead how he used to rub it when I was a kid and first started getting headaches, like he did when I was a teenager and tension migraines were a regularity for me — dark rooms, cool cloths, and loving hands helping to ease the pains until they ceased. Massage was a loving act offered by him to those he loved.

The last week I'd spent with him, there was so little I could do. Just sitting by his side filled most of the days. When he woke for little snips, so much pain came with him into consciousness. Another dose of morphine, another slip into dreaming away the remaining precious hours here with us.

One of those afternoons, I walked around the hospice bed to where his upper half was propped against pillows. While he slept, I rubbed his forehead. I couldn't take away the sharp knifing of cancer in his pancreas and liver, his surely aching belly and bowels that hadn't seen food for several days now, his once toned and now half-wasted muscles that gave way to cachexia, the itch of skin unreachable and the surety of impending sorrow soon to be cast upon all those he loved. But maybe, even while he slept, I could provide just the tiniest amount of ease.

I massaged his forehead, his temples, the bones beneath his eyebrows, and around the sockets to the cheekbones below. I swept in motions from the center, outward and down, applying pressure that would release but not startle. I followed my own memories of all the times he offered this gift to me.

My mother was doing dishes in the kitchen, and she glanced up. "I bet that feels nice."

I nodded, not able to offer any words in reply, or my voice would crack. It was hard enough for me to just offer this love without breaking down. He slept still, and

as there was no reply, I stopped after a while, kissed his forehead, and sat back down in the chair next to him, taking his hand.

Back in my bathroom last night, I thanked him. I remembered what I'd done so many other times in response to moments of intolerable grief. I said, "I love you. I miss you. I thank you."

And I moved on. I stepped out of that moment that seemed like it would go on forever, with no way of knowing how to exit. I threw away the toilet paper. I walked to my closet and changed into my pajamas, and I went to bed.

When I lay down, I found myself wishing this could all be finished. Could we stop playing the game yet? Take off our costumes and return to real life where he is alive, and I can tell him every damn thing I've learned in the past eleven months about how to love him? Remembering that this is the new state of always, I sighed into resignation. I recalled the dream I'd had last week, when I got to hug him, and smell him, and be with him. That would have to be enough.

Viewing Unions

by Ken Poyner

Our clowns have organized. I suspect now there will be ordered wages, limited show times, approved retirement age, pensions, all the things a subject class thinks it can force from its masters by collectively withholding services. What they wrest from the superior class will depend on how much pain they are willing to endure. We can go awhile without pratfalls and exploding cigars, giant clown shoes and water ejecting daisies. They may be essential entertainment, but entertainment they are. We will see who can hold out the longest. But what if they have organized not for themselves, but against us?

Zoom

by Ken Poyner

When Quibble learned that the end of the world had been scheduled for Friday at six a.m. he wondered: why so early, and why at the gateway to the weekend? Normally, Fridays he would oversleep, be excusably late for work, sit fathoming how late he would sleep Saturday. Now, he supposed, he would need to set his alarm to five to complete his morning toiletries, prepare for whatever will happen. What will happen? He had not read deep enough in the memo to know. Maybe he should look at the memo again, see if he can get away with casual.

Notes on Contributors

Anderson, Carston
Carston's prior work on student publishing at UMass Boston and grassroots archival work has been published in *Esoterica Magazine*, as well as *The American Printing History Association*. He is, at the time of writing, pursuing a Masters of English Education from the University of Massachusetts Boston. He is a fan of literary magazines and maintains an extensive 400-volume private collection.

Anderson, Duane
Duane Anderson currently lives in Olathe, Kansas. He has had poems published in *Fine Lines*, *Cholla Needles*, and several other publications. He is the author of 'On the Corner of Walk and Don't Walk,' 'Conquer the Mountains,' 'Family Portraits,' 'The Life of an Ordinary Man,' and 'In the Eyes Of.'

Atha, Marisa
Marisa Gray Atha is a writer and teacher. With degrees in English, Music, and Psychology, Marisa continues to express her lifelong curiosity about inspiration, art, narrative, and the thread that connects people to one another. Her work can be found in the *Journal of Singing*, *NATS Inter Nos*, *OM Yoga & Lifestyle Magazine*, *Months to Years Literary Journal*, *Sad Girl Diaries Literary Magazine*, *Commuter Lit*, and *Speakeasy Cooperative*. Her novel *Written on the Wall* was published in 2025. Marisa lives with her family in Northern California.

Barnard, Christopher
Christopher Barnard worked for a good number of years in the field of English/Japanese linguistics and lexicography. Now he is an independent jewellery designer working in Tokyo. For the past two years he has been writing short stories, and has met with some small success.

Bird, Martha
Martha Bird is a 27 year old writer, filmmaker and political activist originally from the north of England, currently based in Rome, Italy. Her work addresses themes of gender and the body; place and borders; poverty and wealth. Her poetry has been published in *H0 Magazine*, *Indefinite Space*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *filling Station*, *Mnemotope* and the *Stony Thursday Book*. As well as poetry, she has written on film, culture and politics for a range of publications including *The Lead*, *Overdose*, *Flux*, *High on Films* and *FilmFest Report*.

Notes on Contributors

Chu, Jenny
Jenny Chu writes from Dallas, Texas. Her work is forthcoming from or appears in *Pithead Chapel*, *The Shore*, and *Gone Lawn*, and she is editor-in-chief of two literary magazines and reads poetry for *Okay Donkey*. She really loves Swedish Fish.

Conway, Trevor
Trevor Conway, from Ireland, writes poetry, fiction and songs. His short fiction has been published widely in the US, the UK, Ireland, India and Australia. He has published three collections of poetry: *Evidence of Freewheeling* (Salmon Poetry, 2015), *Breeding Monsters* (2018) and *No Small Thing* (2023). Also available from Amazon is his guide to writing poetry, aimed at child/young adult poets, *Nurturing the Creative Child: A Guide to Writing Poetry*. He is currently revising a collection of short fiction. Publishers, interested?

Crowell, Michelle
Originally from the United States, Michelle Crowell (she/her) is based in Nantes, France. Currently finishing a PhD in American literature, her work has appeared in *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Discretionary Love*, and *New2theScene*. She is now seeking representation for a coming-of-age novel based on her experience of deconstructing evangelical teachings.

Dobson, Craig
Craig's had poetry and short fiction published in magazines in Canada, US, Europe and Asia. He's working towards his first collection of both. He lives in the UK.

Ebert, Clarence Allan
Allan has tried being something other than a writer (construction, bartending, even law practice, with the latter enabling him to continue writing – albeit tedious briefs, appeals, and motions). But he cannot be anything other; writing is an addiction, and getting published is a secondary pleasure. His poems have appeared in *Sonora Review*, *The Bluebird Word*, *Ariel Chart*, *Burgeon*, *samfiftyfour*, *Down In The Dirt*, and others, and he’s been selected as a runner-up in Poetry.com contests for March, June 2023, and May 2024. He was nominated for a 2023 Pushcart Prize by *Mid-Atlantic Review* for the poem ‘A Pretty Room For My Books’.

Notes on Contributors

Ebert, Benjamin
Benjamin Ebert is an American realist writer based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His published work can be found in *ANTAE*, *Barely South Review*, *Nonbinary Review*, *Vocivia Magazine* and others. Benjamin writes people, how they really live and talk and treat each other.

Eme, Anselm
Anselm Eme is a Nigerian writer, poet, banker, and independent financial consultant. He is the author of eleven books, including *Whiskers*, *Our Kids and Us*, *Awake Africa!*, *Sages in Pursuit*, and the *Shrieks and Giggles* series. Blending finance with creative storytelling, Anselm writes with heart, clarity, and purpose. His work explores identity, culture, social justice, and human resilience. Rooted in African experience but reaching global souls, Anselm's words invite readers into honest reflection and lasting inspiration.

Emmert, Christine
No bionote provided.

Ferriman, Rachel May
Rachel is an artist and writer from South Africa. She has a poem published in *Workers Write! Journal*: *Tales from the Cleaners* (Issue 21) and another in *The Fairytale Magazine*: *Briar and Thorn*, as well as a short story called 'Give and Take' in *Botsotso Literary Journal* (Volume 21) and another called 'Wishlist' in *In Other Stories 2025*, edited by Kerry Hammerton.

Fiorini, Karina
Karina Fiorini (b.1982 Malta) currently lives in France. She is a poet and an environmentalist. Her poems have appeared in several publications. In 2023, she won the London Independent Story Prize with the poem 'Sea major'. The poem, 'La Moselle', an editor's choice, was published in *Survival Anthology* by Hammond House Publishing (2021). 'Habiba' was highly commended by Joelle Taylor, a judge for the 2022 Ledbury Poetry Competition. Two years ago, her poetry collection was longlisted by *Cinnamon Press*. Karina holds a BA Geography, BA English and MSc Sustainable Development. karinafiorini.com

Notes on Contributors

Fisher, Martin
Martin Fisher's poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *The Astorian*, I*nk Sweat & Tears*, *JMWW*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Hobo Camp Review*, *Cosmic Daffodil Journal*, and elsewhere. His work moves between the everyday and the strange, often returning to memory and place. His working life carried him across Africa and Europe before he settled in Sussex, UK, where he works, semi-retired, as a gardener, and shares his home with his wife and two dogs. He writes for enjoyment, not ambition.

Heise, Christopher
Christopher Heise grew up near Philadelphia and received an MLA from the University of Pennsylvania. For the last several years he's been living and working abroad, where he's performed as a festival clown, taught English to refugees, and written advertisements. His poetry has appeared in *Sybil*, *Galway Review*, *Cacti Fur*, *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, and other publications.

Holtzman, Clark
Clark Watson is a poet, songwriter and musician in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, U.S. His book of street poems and songs, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, was privately published in 2022. *The Weather in Bluffton, Ind.*, his book of prose poems and lyric fictions, was published in 2024 by Slender Book Press. In 2021, he released a CD of poems set to music with his band, Program for Jazz. *Fifty Sent Songs*, poems set to music, was released weekly throughout 2022-23. All titles available at *http://www.clarkwatson.com*.

James, David
David James has published ten books; his most recent is *The Cup of Living*, Main Street Rag Press. In addition to writing poetry, James' one-act plays have been produced in the U.S., Ireland and England.

Madden, Phil
Phil Madden lives in Devon, England. His work has been published in many journals and anthologies. His main work is with the engraver Paul Kershaw. They have co-created seven limited edition fine art books, several prizewinning.

Notes on Contributors

Martin, John
John Martin is a retired barrister whose working life was mainly spent in law and community centres dealing with housing, welfare, and immigration problems. He has written poetry since his teens. He won the Cambridge University Chancellor's Medal for an English Poem in 1969. When he retired, he edited his poems and has so far printed 15 volumes. His plays have been performed on community radio and at amateur dramatic society readings.

McFarland, Ron
Ron McFarland is emeritus Professor of English at the University of Idaho. His most recent books are a critical study, *Gary Soto: A Career in Poetry and Prose* (2022) and his fifth full-length book of poems, *A Variable Sense of Things* (2023).

Murdoch, Jim
Jim Murdoch is a prolific Scottish poet. In 2025 alone, he published 140 poems and wrote a further 200 to replace them. Over the last fifty years pieces have been accepted by respected journals such as *Acumen*, *Stand*, and—much to his own surprise—*Analog*, though the greater amount by far have vanished without trace. For ten years he ran the literary blog *The Truth About Lies* but now lives quietly in Glasgow with his wife and, whenever the mood takes him, next door's cat. He has published two books of poetry, a short story collection, and four novels—Jim, not the cat.

Murphy, Rich
Rich Murphy's latest collections – *Elephant* by Bass Clef Books; *Storage Shed*, *Inside Stories*, *First Aid* by Resource Publications; and *Mind of Europe: A Genealogy to The Fat Man*, *Susan Constant*, *Footholds* by Cyberwit – were published 2023-2025. His poetry won The Poetry Prize at Press Americana twice for *Americana* (2013), *The Left Behind* (2021), and the Gival Press Poetry Prize for *Voyeur* (2008). His other book by Press Americana is *Asylum Seeker* (2018). His first book was *The Apple in the Monkey Tree* by Codhill Press (2007).

Notes on Contributors

Naden, Eve
Born in France, Yvette (Eve) Naden is a writer based in the UK. She graduated with a degree in English from the University of York. Her work has been featured in *The Roadrunner Review* and *The Elmbridge Literary Magazine*, and she won the Zealous Short Story Competition in 2021. In 2025, she won the Creative Future Award and was shortlisted for the New2theScene Novel Prize. Diagnosed with autism and ADHD in 2024, she works as a neurodiversity ambassador within the Civil Service. She is currently working towards becoming a published novelist. When she isn't writing, she spends her time baking inedible brownies and knitting scarves no one asked for.

Obregon, Freddie
No bionote provided.

Poyner, Ken
The latest of Ken's twelve collections of poetry and flash fiction is *Science Is Not Enough*, speculative poetry. He lives in the lower right-hand corner of Virginia, and is married to a world champion female power lifter. He spent 33 years herding computers. See him in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Café Irreal*, *Blue Unicorn* and another hundred or so places. www.kpoyner.com.

Reut, Rick K.
Rick K. Reut was born in 1984. Having struggled with different types of obsessive-compulsive disorder since secondary school, he studied philosophy at EHU in Minsk, Belarus, and Vilnius, Lithuania, and literature at SPSU in Saint Petersburg, Russia. For most of his life after graduation, he has worked as a translator and a tutor of English as a foreign language. His writing can be found in various online and print literary journals and magazines.

Notes on Contributors

Sami, Ibrar
Ibrar Sami is the pen name of an internationally published author. His poetry and reflective prose explore memory, silence, and human resilience through symbolic imagery and emotional depth. A cancer survivor, his work reflects vulnerability and quiet strength. His poems have appeared internationally in *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, *The Wells Street Journal*, *Mosaic Lit*, *Ultramarine Literary Review*, *Navy Pen*, *Bipolar Poetry*, *Ink, Sweat & Tears*, and *AllPoets*. Big Thinking Press with forthcoming publication in *Levitate*, SHINE International Poetry Series, and *EgoPHobia #89*. Writing from Bangladesh, he continues to explore the fragile intersections of private grief and collective consciousness, giving voice to human resilience.

St Claire, Joshua
Joshua St. Claire is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania who works as a financial director for a non-profit. His haiku and related poetry have been published broadly including in *antae*, *Frogpond*, *Modern Haiku*, *The Heron's Nest*, and *Mayfly*. He has received recognition in the following international contests/awards for his work in these forms: the Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational, the San Francisco International Award for Senryu, the Robert Speiss Memorial Award, the Touchstone Award for Individual Haiku, the British Haiku Society Award for Haiku, and the Trailblazer Award.

Tustin, John
No bionote provided.

Witmer, Christian
Christian Witmer is a United States citizen. While his background at the Capital Area School for the arts was primarily in screenwriting, he developed a vested interest in both traditional and modernist poetry.

Notes on Contributors

Zheng, Huina
Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her creative work has been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other literary journals. She has received multiple honors, including nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.