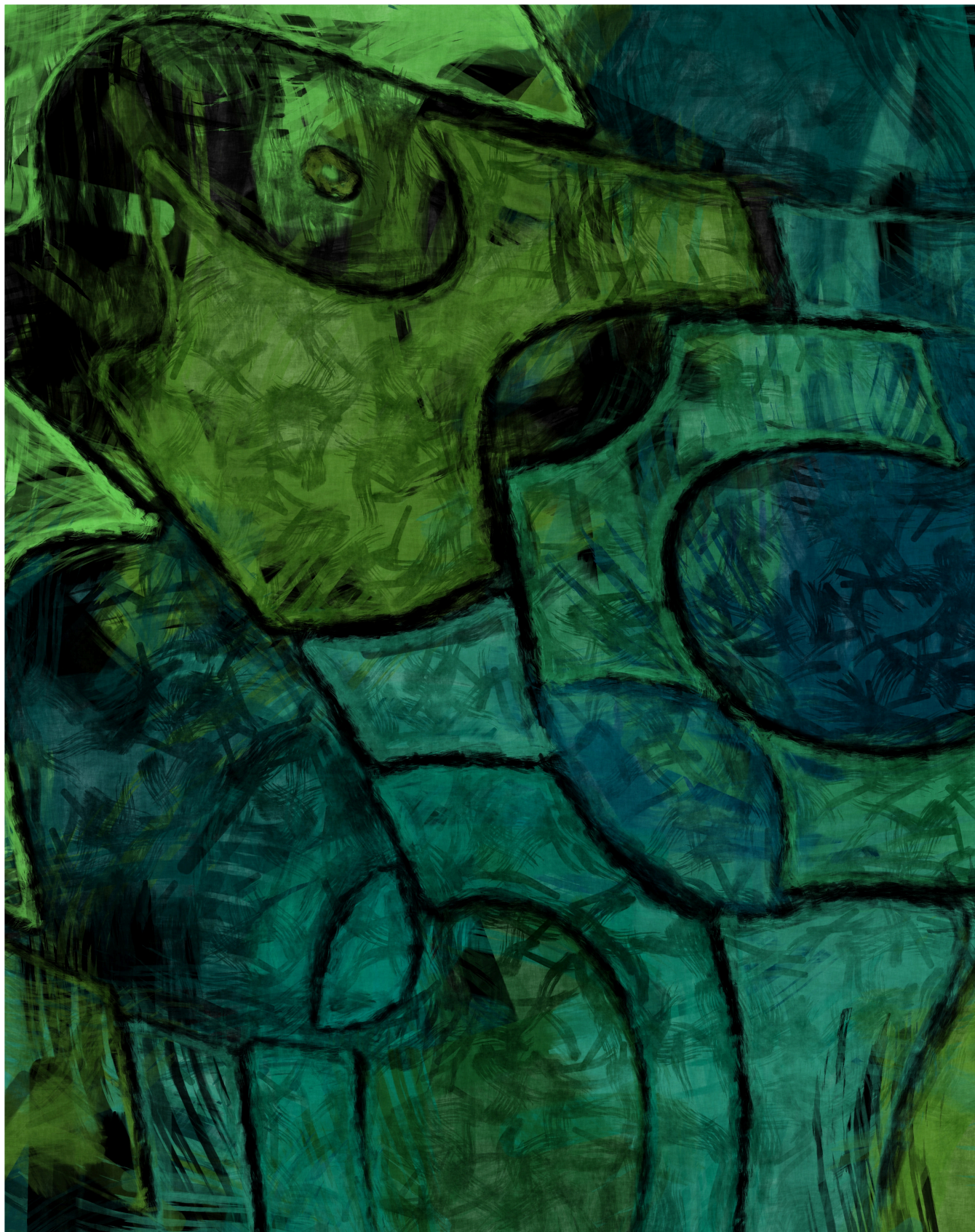


Vol. 8 : Issue 2

ISSN: 2523-2126

# antae

A Journal of Creative Writing



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antae (ISSN: 2523-2126) is an internationally refereed creative writing journal. Our editorial team is open to publishing all kinds of work written in English, from poetry to prose fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, experimental writing, review articles and more.

We are committed to publishing original creative works of quality, whether these come to us in the form of the traditional Shakespearean sonnets or flarf poetry, whether these assume the character of genre fantasy writing or thoroughly researched nonfiction. We only flank the doorway: it is up to writers to step through.

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# A Passaggio for The Knights

*by Julian Bishop*

---

(Caravaggio painted *The Beheading of St John* in gratitude for his *passaggio* (or admission) into the Knights of Malta in 1607)

When a tragedy approaches its climax,  
this is how the last act plays out –  
first a jangle as Death wrenches a key  
in the padlock fastened onto life.  
Lines of cord unspooling since  
birth slip the adamantine knot.  
Set: the granite fortress of loneliness  
behind whose walls all men stare  
through bars of sorrow and remorse.

From beneath the arch's backdrop  
enter the cast – a gaoler, a love lost,  
distraught mother, two partners  
in crime. Freeze-frame the play  
as blood clabbers at the edge  
of the stage. As life evaporates,  
the damned man scribbles his name,  
a long-running stain at the base  
of a stage he'll never escape.

# Wignacourt and Page

by Julian Bishop

---

A portrait designed exclusively to flatter:  
the Grand Master of the Order of Malta,  
rivet-plated, fully armoured, more stag beetle  
than man, human tank ready for battle,  
power-posing with a baton, hamming it up  
like a two-bit actor, one thick foot thrust  
awkwardly forward, no more flesh and blood  
than a black knight navigating a chessboard.

But it's the wide-eyed, tight-lipped page  
to his left who engages, feather-kissed  
fop juxtaposed with grizzled monster,  
as if mirroring the duality of the painter.  
When the oils dry, Caravaggio is thrown inside  
a Stygian prison for *an unmentionable crime*.

# Oubliette

*by Julian Bishop*

---

I painted the light out of Christ  
    now I've broken the night's code  
gutted the Gospels at a stroke  
    reduced to a single cell  
I'm a swan carved in stone  
    held fast by a lamp-black sea  
flogging rocks in the throat  
    of a world that gagged on me  
mortal morsel restless corpse  
    I engrave my own funeral  
on the guts of the earth  
    only intermittently alive  
if ever I see a square of sky  
    I'll be another Lazarus  
waiting to rise

*Note: In 1607 Caravaggio was imprisoned for a month in the notorious underground guva at Malta's Fort St Angelo for assaulting another Knight until he escaped with the help of an unknown accomplice.*

# The Good Samaritan

by Rebecca Clifford

---

*“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was...”*

so I was just minding my own business  
walking down the road  
following these two marks  
I been eyeing for a while  
not really feeling guilty even  
though one of them is a priest  
and knowing it'll be an easy job  
since they aren't walking together  
and as I watch them  
they sidle to the other edge of the road  
and I figure there might be a skunk  
or some kind of roadkill  
and now I see that its one of these  
out-of-towners  
and he's already been doing a few rounds  
with the pavement if you know what I mean  
and since the others  
are already too far ahead  
and since he isn't coming to any time soon  
I might as well go through his pockets  
and check  
for loose change...

# Standards

*by Ken Poyner*

---

Quibble has fallen for the counter girl at the Dillard's in the nearest shopping mall. He drives ninety miles to sit in the common area opening to the store's mall entrance, in line with the counter. He has no idea what she is hawking. Perfume, costume jewelry, something that needs customer contact. He lingers for hours, leaning forward or back to track her out of blind spots. One day she is a blonde, one day brunette, half a foot different in height, evolving twenty pounds either way. His heart galumphs when first he sees who she will be this day.

# The Duality Trap

*by Ken Poyner*

---

Quibble can tell the difference between what is real and what is his imagination. He has been able to do this for as long as he can remember. He imagines others have the same ability, but that is imagination. His wife is grounded in practicality, and that is real. He pleases her in every way, and that is imaginary. Right now, Quibble is listening to the family heirloom chest of drawers talking to him about this gift of knowing the real from the imaginary. That the chest of drawers is talking is imaginary. What the chest is saying is real.

# The Partisan

*by Ken Poyner*

---

The plan is to change the river's flow so it runs through houses across the street. That will leave the banks just fifty yards from his porch. Several rows of his neighbors' houses will be destroyed. Good friends will vacate. More quarrelsome neighbors will also vacate. Parts of the houses not washed away by the sudden water will make splendid fisheries, the largest, most profitable fish lurking in the remains of door frames and staircases and furniture that would not float. Quibble takes to loitering at Thole's Hardware, learning what he can of nets, imagining the configurations he should master.

# Value

*by Ken Poyner*

---

When the fish spoke, he expected he was the subject of a joke: there was an amateur ventriloquist afoot. But he saw the fish's lips moving, could see no one near enough on the dock to be pranking him. He removed his hook as carefully as he could. The fish spoke slowly, garbled, with bad grammar. Quibble marveled: he would either release him to the ocean or let him expire out of water. Either way, no one would believe the fish spoke. What to do? Without opportunity to record evidence, perhaps he would see if it tastes like mute fish.

# Rainy Season

*by Corrine Zahra*

---

The sky is bright and the white light wakes me up. It's only 5:30 am. Elevated from the ground, the wooden open house I find myself staying in doesn't have any walls—only one edge is covered with a thin green insect net, and as I lie here in bed, the jungle right beside me, rain pours plummeting like a bucket tipped over with unlimited water — the jungle is not quiet during the rainy season.

Months prior, I had decided to travel to Costa Rica to volunteer at a hostel in Drake Bay, where I would feed some chickens just like I had at my grandma's farm, clean for the hostel, entertain guests, immerse myself into the jungle. With little information provided by the owner, all I knew were the logistics of how to get to Drake Bay. It was June when I traveled from Chicago to Mexico to Costa Rica, stayed the night in the capital city of San Jose, and caught the bus from the north, along the Pacific coast, all the way to the south. The direct bus dropped me and other backpackers off at the fishing town of Sierpe, where I then caught the 4 pm boat to Drake Bay. After I paid the captain, I handed my backpack to a sailor who placed it in a closed storage compartment in the front of the boat.

Running through the muddy river at high speed, there was jungle on both sides of the wide river and we were told not to stick our hands in the water. Alligators. Around fifteen minutes into the boat ride, rain started to pour, heavy rain that I had never experienced before, rain that drenched me, made my clothes stick to my body like a new layer of skin. The raindrops were heavy, hitting our bodies with bullet-like force. I took off my glasses so that the rain wouldn't damage them. My head was lowered between my raised arms, my back arched, eyes closed. The girl sitting next to me looked the same.

The river eventually opened up to the Pacific Ocean, my first encounter with that murderous body of water. The boat rocked and swayed as the rough open waves toyed with us. Wondering if it should capsize us—fear crawled into my body, remained there, boiling inside—I was convinced I was going to die. Winds blaring,

seawater rush splashing into my face, rain plummeting down, deafening my ears. We should not have been out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in those conditions.

When we arrived in Drake Bay, the boat's engines were turned off in the shoreline; legs feeling like jelly, I had to jump out of the boat and into the bay. The sailors carefully pushed the boat in and out with the waves, ensuring the boat didn't hit anyone. Scatter-brained, I thought to myself: *What did I just do?*

The sailors placed all the backpacks on the beach—I didn't have a backpack cover. Everyone had a backpack cover but me. After finding my backpack laying there in the rain, I then found the taxi driver whom my hostel had asked to pick me up. The wipers on the windshield were moving back and forth, fast, water flowing on the glass like a river—neither the driver nor me could see beyond it. My body was heavy, it was hard to move in the drenched clothes. I just sat there, my breath hot, condensation forming on the window beside me.

After the ten-minute drive, the driver dropped me off at the edge of the jungle, and although he barely knew English, I understood his Spanish—he told me to walk down the path, to keep going straight until I saw the house. It was around 5 pm so I followed the brick path through the dense endless trees that sprouted so high, so high you couldn't see the sky above. As I walked through the jungle full of chirping and tweeting, I started to crackle.

When I got to the bottom of the path, heightened panic started to rise from my core to my brain. There was an overflowed river at the bottom of the path—I was lost. I started to feel the air in the jungle thin and my lungs closing in on themselves. My only option was to walk back the way I had come from and then back to the town to ask for help. As I climbed back up the muddy path, lungs dry and my thirty-pound backpack strapped to my dying back, I kept shouting: "HELP!"

The trees cleared and I reached the top, my feet on the concrete road. Relief washed over me when I saw the taxi driver there again, dropping off guests who were going to stay at the hostel. Breathing in and out heavily, my face heated, I tried speaking in Spanish. "Río! No casa."

"Tranquila, tranquila," the female guest said to me, motioning her hands in circles. I don't know why she spoke to me in Spanish because my failed attempt at speaking Spanish to the driver proved I was not a local.

"We'll find the hostel together," the male guest, her husband, added.

They were both in their early 50s, grey disheveled hair, both with green eyes and sagging skin, khaki pants and hiking boots, Americans like myself. She wore seashells around her neck dangling from string made out of floss. They told me what city they were from, but I've forgotten now. Told them I lived in Chicago.

Meanwhile, the hostel manager emerged from the jungle and he too barely knew any English—in silence, we followed him back into the jungle. At one point, I stepped on a brick in the mud and it slipped—I too slipped, fell on wet earth, pain spreading throughout my right knee as I grappled on the ground. I stood up and walked it off, placing each foot slowly on each next brick, down and down the path, pain shooting up my right leg every time I put weight on it.

Arriving at the river again, I had initially been going in the right direction, except the taxi driver had not told me there was a river at the bottom and to cross the river. I followed the hostel manager and stepped into the milky brown water. The river reached my waist as I pushed against its force, grounding my feet steady on the river floor, lifting leg after leg, quickly, to not let the river carry me away downstream. We marched in unison, the river whooshing—the water seemed never to run out. By the time I crossed the fast-moving river and arrived at the main shack, the jungle had turned off its light like a switch—I was surrounded by thick darkness, what looked like a black void.

The couple were seated at the table, backs aching and faces flushed red, drenched wet. The hostel manager took their luggage to their cabin just 200 meters away from the main shack. The main shack had no walls, no doors, just a solid low roof standing on wooden pillars, a kitchen and fridge on one side, tables on the other, and a few hammocks to rest in. The dogs loitered about the shack. They had barked at us when we arrived but quickly warmed up to us once we petted them.

“Now I understand why you were panicked,” the woman scoffed.

“Yeah, that was insane,” the man agreed.

“I told you!” I exclaimed, and laughed.

“This place isn't marketed right. I wouldn't have come here if I knew it was that difficult. I can't go down those steps in the rain. I'm too old. I could've slipped and got badly hurt,” the woman continued, her mouth hanging open, her green eyes wide.

“But we made it,” her husband said, chuckling to himself.

I simply sighed in disbelief.

That next morning, the earth feels cool with the rains and a breeze that brings in some rush of water spray on my face. Rain plummeted to the earth all night long in that black void-looking jungle, a darkness that I slept in, both outside and inside at the same time.

I sit upright in bed and as far as I can see from my non-wall is rainforest. The ground is orange and muddy, full of health. The unpolluted air fills my lungs with pleasure. Big green leaves, bigger than my face, protrude from thick sprouting stems, stems taller than me. The trees are infinite, damp green all around me. I am far from society, far from downtown, far from a grocery store. But we do have wifi here.

The air is light and crisp, the rain has reduced. I can finally hear birds talking amongst themselves. Still upright in bed, under the net, my legs are full of mosquito bites that devoured me last night at the main shack. I didn't bring any bug spray. On my right knee, a bruise has formed, purple and green and yellow, sickening and large. Sighing, I guess I should get up and brush my teeth now.

# Just Like You

*by Tommy Cheis*

---

The electricity was off again. Muhammad Jihad could not nap on a stifling afternoon that converted the Jihad house into an oven. He sat on a prayer mat with Bear and Tyrannosaurus Rex, pretending he and his charges were flying a carpet in outer space, not in a bedroom strewn with toy trucks, soldiers, and books about kung fu and trauma medicine. What looked like a picture of Big Bird, contemporary art, and photographs of ancestors were really planets, asteroids, and stars. After dinner, his vegetables finished, he looked forward to his weekly television hour.

Aunt Latifa was a fundamentalist, but her zealotry focused on advancing tarbiya—the upbringing of children. Although the Jihads were nominally Muslim, there were no prescribed prayer times, no overt demonstrations of belief, no hajj, no fasting. Although Latifa enforced scrupulous adherence to what is common and good in all religions, in practice the edges of the One True Faith were rounded off in service to her private gods: Knowledge and Family.

Thus, if almost-three-year-old Muhammad could not demonstrate the requisite mastery of his assigned math, science, and philosophy lessons, then his evening leisure would be limited to listening to Latifa accompany, by piano, a shaysh baysh battle with his cousin, Lutuf. Either way, when he got in bed, Latifa would read classics to help the boy fall asleep as had been her wont since he was in the cradle.

When the raised voices of Latifa and Lutuf penetrated the wooden door to his room and knocked the boy back to earth, he gathered his stuffies and crawled under his covers. But Muhammad heard every word.

“Anta majnoun, Lutuf!”

“Every messenger gets called crazy or a liar if his message threatens the orthodoxy.”

“But you’re getting worse! You sketched exploding buses and dead Israelis as a child! Then you said 9/11 was an inside job! Then you blamed Israel! Now you say it was martyrdom! Let’s go to a doctor! Your thinking is dangerous!”

“Prisoners think dangerous thoughts. All of Gaza is a prison.”

“Then make us free with your brain! Finish your degree and go to law school!”

“With what laws could I make Israel return our land and respect our rights, Mom? Law’s a charade, particularly the international variety.”

“Then join the Student Union! Or run for National Council!”

“What has political talk done for us? Are we better off than in 2000? 1967? 1948? No. We’re sliding down a greased pole into a sewer.”

“So our leaders are terrible. Why not run for office yourself?”

“Mom, I don’t want that curse.”

“Then you don’t want peace.”

“Not without justice first.”

“If you must fight, the pen’s the most powerful weapon! Not the sword or the bomb!”

“So sayeth Muhammad, Peace Be Upon My Cousin.”

“Your pain must be intolerable. You’re traumatized.”

“Why must I bear this load?”

“It was given to you by God.”

“Spare me the fairy tales, Mom. God can turn me into sand for all I care. Meanwhile, here are some interrogatories for him. Dear God, what will tomorrow bring? Why can’t things be normal? Why is there an Israeli tank around every corner?”

“The sooner the IDF leaves the better, but any Arab army would be far more brutal. Not every Israeli reaction is a massacre despite Al-Jazeera.”

“Then why, at every checkpoint, do I visualize them doing to me what they did to Muhammad’s parents and my father?”

“Doctors can help cure your problem.”

“It’s too late.”

“What about raising a family?”

“No offense, but family’s not my destiny.”

“A good woman then. Seventy-two virgins are too many.”

“What woman would want what I’ve become?”

“Lutuf, you can’t make decisions about your future in your condition.”

“I’ve never thought as clearly as I can now.”

“Don’t tell me Fate has determined you’ll die by your own hand. You have free will!”

“Fate and free will are figments of your imagination, Mom. Reality imposes harsh constraints. I have little money or time. Facts are stubborn. All that’s mine is a difficult decision.”

“And through your distorted perceptions, you’ve made the worst choice possible! To be young and give up on life is unnatural! Why not wage jihad with ideas?”

“I am, by acting in their service.”

“Why are you so obsessed with death and killing?”

“Show me a Palestinian man who isn’t.”

“The few who deal in it inflict great wrongs upon innocents. True heroes don’t run from challenges. They face them. Saving life is the highest caliber of human action.”

"I'll die so six million Palestinians might live. Call it an act of salvation."

Latifa wrang her hands. "Suicide's cowardice. Not heroism."

"Shush. Our ancestors hear your historical revisionism. Imagine Sergeant Firas Jihad, that hoary freedom-fighter against Turkish oppression. If he knew his great-granddaughter posthumously adjudicated him a war criminal, he'd spin in his grave."

"Lutuf, every tombstone erodes. Every martyr's poster falls. Every graffiti splotch is repainted with the same exhausted slogan when the next fool tries to achieve in death what he couldn't in life. There's no glory."

"I care only about justice and family. So I'll fight Israel the only way I can, on the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth principle."

"Thus the world winds up blind eating porridge. How tragic. Jews, Muslims, and Christians are cousins. We lived in peace once, and could again, but your bomb will make things worse."

"If someone broke into this house, would you serve coffee and wash his feet? Suppose, by some miracle, I wound up in a house with a wife. If my cousin threw me out and raped her, I'd hate him too, and my thoughts would run to murder."

"Hate is self-destructive. All the more reason to love—starting with yourself."

"Also Sprach Narcissus."

"Killing to advance any political position is wrong. Why undo in an instant what took me nine months to create?"

"Sorry, Mom."

"Do you think the Israelis will surrender after your istishhad?"

"No. But a vast desert is made from tiny grains of sand."

"I'll report you to Shin Bet."

"I'll say goodbye to my cousin."

Footsteps trod closer. A trio of soft knocks.

Muhammad opened the door. "You promised not to abandon me," he reproached Lutuf, who stood in the frame. "Why did you lie?"

"When you're older, you'll understand." Lutuf took the boy's hand, led him to the bed, and helped him into his lap. "You see, the Jews get to go to schools and offices and have families without worrying about being killed."

"I know. But Auntie says some Jews are good guys."

"One or two."

"So your bomb only kills bad guys?"

Lutuf said nothing.

"This is a bad idea," Muhammad said, then parroted the advice he received whenever he stood on the cusp of a preventable bad decision. "Stop and think about it."

"I have, since I was your age. I'm sorry, habiby. I've chosen to walk this path."

"Are you scared?"

“He who’s not afraid of death is crazy.”

The boy threw Bear across the room. “What will happen to me if you go? Wait. Nothing can kill you, right?”

“Oh, but no one is eternal on this earth.” From the wall above Muhammad’s bed, Lutuf took a framed, sepia-toned photograph of their uniformed great-great-grandfather, Firas Jihad. “Look, Muhammad. What do you see?”

“He was a hero, so he wasn’t afraid.”

“Wrong. He knew death was a good possibility. Even heroes are scared.”

“You’re a hero.”

Lutuf said nothing.

“Are you scared?”

“Terrified.”

Tears and snot ran onto the boy’s Superman pajama-top. He pleaded. “If I study harder, you won’t have to go. Or if I eat broccoli. Right?”

“None of this is your fault. You can’t control it.”

“It’s God’s fault, then, because God runs everything.”

“If that’s true, we have no free will and no choice.”

The boy thought about this. “Are you trying to go to Paradise?”

Lutuf laughed bitterly. “Maybe we live in Paradise already. Maybe Paradise is whatever you make it. Maybe it doesn’t exist. As to God? He’s bad, or she’s lazy, or they exaggerate. Let’s make a deal.”

The boy liked deals. Finish your spinach? Watch TV. Behave? Off to the beach. Get a perfect report card? To the zoo!

“If I get to Paradise,” Lutuf promised, “I’ll signal you. In exchange, please make better choices than I did.”

“No. I’m going to be just like you.”

“Listen,” Lutuf said gruffly. “Stay clear from politics and bombs. I give my body as a soldier so you can give your mind as a thinker and your children can give their hearts as musicians and writers. Please.”

Muhammad hurled himself at his cousin’s legs. Lutuf had to pry him off like a barnacle from a hull before slipping out the front door, driven by destiny or choice, to make things better and worse, kill good guys and bad guys, and break mother’s hearts.

Whether he reached Paradise or its antipode, none can say, but they’re still fighting over it.

# Prachuap Khiri Khan

*by Richard Oyama*

---

On the walk to Hasu Gyoza, sun  
Flaring over wires, above the  
Irrelevance of a church spire, concrete wall  
Sun-blackened by striations, I'm thinking of

Where books are made flesh.  
Venerated old women rest in plastic chairs.  
The tropic day's end steams into dark.

A mother showers her daughter  
With a hose, prepubescent bare chest,  
Hands on hips, unbrazed,

Unashamed. Am I Gauguin  
Stumbling on an arrondissement of orientalist bodyness?  
Manhattan hubris has nothing to do with  
This fishing village.

The aunt of the Catholic schoolteacher  
Who lives alone in a pitch-roofed house  
Behind the apartment complex  
Roasts bananas on a sidewalk grill.

What do I know of such relations?  
Is the protocol to don velvet slippers when  
The *hongnaam* is flooded? Is the novel as  
Central as soi dogs lying abed in this field?

# Khun Rat

*by Richard Oyama*

---

I saw a rat scuttle under a paving stone  
In front of 7-11. He was slithy and grey.  
The squirrel lives in the open, airborne  
A trapeze artist skittering on a telephone wire  
Into dark leaves. The rat lives underground amid  
Filth and muck, feces and waterworks. He is  
A creature of the demon-world. We hate him for that  
For living in the lower circles. I see  
Roadkill, *soi* kill, sun-whitened, flattened husks of frogs  
And rats like shadow forms of the atomized in Hiroshima.

The rat is our double.

# Torturous Shoes

by Cynthia Gallaher

---

Barbie doll, your feet were destined  
for those sky-high heels,  
extremities so arched and ever bending,  
but plastic feet  
as dainty as yours are  
have no nerve endings.

And Cinderella, though used to  
hopping around fireplace cinders,  
still you danced all night in shoes  
made out of hard-core glass,  
no wonder you kicked one off,  
such tortures aren't inflicted  
on most members of the royal class.

As a child, I stood in  
ballet shoes *en pointe*,  
no matter how much lambs' wool  
I stuffed to pad my toes,  
it paid a later toll  
on my arches and knee joints.

Today my feet feel best  
while bare in sunny pools or  
beachy sand,  
I'm more like Salacia\*  
than Cinderella,  
and even when in Barbie pink flip-flops  
those times I hit the street,  
my feet will lead me still to water's edge,  
instead of sporting high heels on concrete.

*\*Salacia: goddess of saltwater and wife of Neptune*

# The Things We Do to Each Other

*by Declan Jones*

---

It is half past two on a Thursday afternoon. Late August. I'm leaving school and it's only the second day of the school year. I have the usual weight on my shoulders from another thing I don't know is a problem just yet. You are standing amongst the scattering of other parents. No one speaks to you. They leave you out of things, or so my sister Sally says. As I walk towards the gate, I know you've caught my eye but I pretend I haven't seen yours. My gaze passes over the rest as though I'm choosing a bar of chocolate in a shop. You don't have any of the dogs with you. You're wearing your yellow raincoat that's blemished from the work you do in the garden.

I get in the car and can hear you breathing through your nose. I'm not sure what to expect but all I know is that you're not happy about something. I try to think; might you have met up with Dad and now feel like you need to have a shower? Might someone from England have called you and now I can't talk to you for a while? Might you have accepted a favour from someone when your dance card was already overflowing to the brim with everything? God only knows. We have our usual chatter but we're silent otherwise. Though, there is one thing. You tell me my brother Eric's coming home for dinner tonight. That'll be lovely. There's always such a good atmosphere in the house when he comes.

At home, my booklist is on the table; doggy-eared and tea-stained at one edge. We have everything except the tables book I swear I have somewhere in the house. Well, where is it? It's in one of the drawers of the dressing table in the playroom. They'll be doing a collection of all the books we need tomorrow at school so I'll need to have it by then. Well, it wouldn't be the end of the world if I didn't have it. *Yes, actually it would.* The collar of my shirt is like a stiff knife at my throat. I'll just get changed and then I'll find it. *No, if you say it's that easy to find, find it, and then you can get changed.*

I go into the room and look through the drawers. There's a mix of many things in there. A geography book and their accompanying workbooks from when Sally went to school in the 90s. Eric's copy books from primary school where he wrote about me as his younger brother who loved the Titanic. Books that were gifts that I swear I'll read some day, but today is not that day. I have to find that tables book. I can see it now - green and slim, almost like a

pamphlet you get from the doctor. It's covered in protective plastic casing for good measure, and has a large white label with my name on it; this covers the many previous labels that had been repeatedly pulled off of it to make way for the next owner. But the book isn't in any of the drawers. Definitely not. *You said it was there.* It has to be. But it's not. I'm sorry, I can't find it. You tell me I've got until 5 o'clock to find the book - or else.

I can feel my chest inflating with that feeling. I know I'm going to cry and it's only a matter of when. I look through the drawers again; something inside me feels that perhaps it'll be there if I look again; like, maybe I hadn't looked hard enough last time. But I know well to look as best as I can when you ask me to find something. Please God, just let the book be here. I won't ask for anything else. But it's not there - and I can feel a pain starting at the back of my mouth as though something is expanding - a spy inside the room that is closing in on me.

*Why does this always happen? I cook a big dinner and have to put two plates of it in the freezer. Adding to the other six plates of dinners that are also in there.*

*Mum, I don't know why you're surprised. He always does this. He says he'll come and he never does.*

*But the bathroom door upstairs needs fixing. And he said he'd help me in the garden.*

*I know, it's really unfair of him to do that.*

*Even if I can pick him up from town, do you think he'd come? Do you know where he is?*

*Even then, I don't think he'd bother.*

*What? But he said he'd come. There's probably something that's come up. Maybe if I collect him, I can help him, and then he can come and help here.*

*That's crazy - you've done enough by cooking for him, where will it end, Mum?*

*Ah, flip off then. You don't know what he's doing or going through. Speaking about him like that - that's your brother.*

Sally is silent. The kitchen door suddenly opens and I back up moving towards the playroom again. Sally is speaking to herself in disbelief and I can hear her throat croaking through the little that she does say. A tinkering sound as she grabs her car keys, the caw of the front door opening and the slam of it closing. Silence.

I am now alone with you. And the feeling in my chest is heightened because I know that all your anger has to go somewhere. I'm not sure what it is you do in these moments after someone has the guts to walk away from you like Sally does. I can't even answer you back, though I've heard others in my class being able to do that to their moms. The smell of the dinner is all around the hallway now because of the commotion. I think that maybe the fact that dinner is ready might somehow save me from my situation. Maybe the argument has directed your anger at the lost book towards Sally - though I hate to think that she is taking the brunt of my mistake. Kitchen door opens. There's a rushing sound in your movement.

You appear at the playroom door. *Have you found it?* No, I can't find it - I swear it was here the last time.

Then it's just a blur of motion and sounds from here onwards. You leave the doorway so I can't see you but I hear you talking to yourself. *Right. Right!* The first is a statement. The second, a scream. Rooms are being entered. Drawers are being pulled out. You scream at me to come into the room and see what I am making you do. You always told me there's no such thing as the banshee whenever we watch that film but watching you now, as you clamber about our home in rage, I cannot be so sure. *Why am I ALWAYS the one who's left to do everything? Why can't everything go as planned, just for once?* I want to respond to you, but experience has taught me that silence is golden - at least until I am forced to respond. *If you think I'm paying for another book that you've lost, you can forget about it.*

You suddenly stop emptying a bookcase and eye me. Before I can gather my gaze towards your eyes, you are already upon me. I back myself out the door and I'm met with the stair banister at my back again, wishing I could liquify myself further into them to escape. A sharp sizzling sound accompanies your left hand grasping my hair, pulling it upwards. I involuntarily pull myself upwards, tears have already started plummeting from my eyes. Your right hand has clamped itself onto the collar of my school uniform and I can't think of anything else at that moment except to wish for it to be over. I'm not even sure what it is you're saying to me. Then a quick *DO YOU?* triggers me to respond with a 'yes'. I'm really not sure what I'm agreeing to, so I must put the pain and fear aside and listen to what you're saying.

*If you ever lose a book again, I'll break your neck - do you hear me?*

There is a slap. Then, another slap. Then you back away for a moment and hit yourself in the head. I am now sitting on the floor, the wall pushing against my spine. I look ahead of me through blurry-eyed vision and see two strands of my hair descending lightly in front of me. I don't blame them - I'd want to be rid of me and this house too. But they won't leave this house. They won't really be rid of us. Those strands will make their way down to the carpet where they'll be stuck and trampled on by those passing by. Their only escape will be through the hoovering which will be done on Sunday. And even then, they'll be stuck in the Dyson's see-through cylinder until it's emptied. And only God knows when that'll be emptied. You reappear at the doorway of the kitchen.

*I know you pretend you don't see me when I come to pick you up at school.*

You slam the kitchen door shut and I can't hear very much happening after that. I'm still crying though, so I decide it's better to stop and just listen to what you're doing in there. I want to go to my room and get changed - I hate the collar of my school uniform. I hate it.

But I don't dare move in case you're not finished. How could I ever run away from something you needed to do to me? Unthinkable. But it's been over 5 minutes now and I can't hear anything. Maybe you're sitting down at the table and eating. I hope you are. Maybe you were just hungry today. Yeah, I suppose that's what the problem was. You put everything ahead of you and forget to look after yourself. And it always leads to things like this. Disappointments. Arguments. Thrashes.

I quietly climb the stairs and go to my room; there is a smell of cardboard and fresh bed sheets. You recently bought me new things for my room so I'd be happier sleeping in it throughout the night. But it hasn't worked; I still end up coming in to you in the middle of the night. I take off my uniform, the itchy sweater, the shirt with the collar like a bike tyre, the tie with the elastic band for easy application, the gray trousers that feel like needles when they're wet from the rain. I look out the window and wonder what my brother Eric is doing. I know Sally is somewhere else, upset and crying - but why didn't Eric come? Why does he always say he'll come but never does? He's probably out drinking again and forgot. I think of those days when I'll come of age and have a life of my own. And I can choose whether or not to come and remain sitting against the stair banister wall, just in case you want to express yourself to me any further.

You finally call me down, and I find myself eating the dinner you made at the table. It's something with gravy, vegetables and meat. I want to try and make conversation - put the whole thing behind us but I still can't gauge your mood. I don't want you to respond to me with something sarcastic so I stay quiet. And then; *I'm sorry Iain. I know I'm like this sometimes but you need to know how mad you make me and that's really not ok. I end up smashing things to pieces - because you can't find your tables book.*

I bow my head in shame. Me, that documentary camera that sees your real life: how you conduct things around the house to make them conform to your liking, the conversations you have on the telephone with your friends and relatives who take advantage of you, and the aspirations you have for a better life that are just not realistic because of everything that has ever happened to you.

You promise not to hit me anymore if I promise to be more careful with my things. I agree with a smile, thinking this will be the change that I want most. Then suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, it's there - in the corner of the room. The tables book! I jump out of my seat and pick it up. Yes, this is it! The real thing! I hold it against my chest, my heart beaming as I carefully walk into the playroom. I place it back in the drawer where I had stowed it last time - with all the other promises that had been made. All those changes that had been pledged all the other times before came into fruition if only through the best of intentions, in the most ephemeral of ways.

# Soulpin

*by Juleigh Howard-Hobson*

---

What happens if you take your soulpin out for  
A while? If you let that center of all  
That is you, the essential very core  
Of you, slide out, down to the floor, to fall  
Like a button come undone, or a coin  
Let go between a pocket and a hand?  
Would you roll off into some street and join  
The yellowed cigarette butts that expand  
In the black oily puddles, pointlessly  
Coming apart from yourself? Would you drop  
From the linch of your own middle, slowly  
Falling away in bits, until you stop  
Having definition – like food washed from  
A plate in the sink? Would you un-become?

# Play My Hand

*by Dee Allen*

---

When it came to classroom projects  
And the teacher asked students  
To choose whomever they wanted  
To be on a team with, I was

Either picked  
Dead last

Or passed  
Over entirely.

Only once  
During a labour studies class in college

Was I  
Chosen first

In a group classroom project.  
First pick  
At the business end  
Of an Italian chick's finger.

She wasn't my type.  
She wasn't a Goth [ as I lived then ].  
Probably wanted me for something  
Other than a classroom project.

Didn't feel like  
I won anything.  
Didn't feel  
Accomplished that day—as a fifth wheel.

I play my hand  
With the marked cards I'd been dealt

Bound to cheat me  
Out of a real victory.

---

[ For Marjorie Lotfi. ]

# Mute Witnesses

*by Dee Allen*

---

The evening stars  
Are mute witnesses

To passers-by  
On cobblestone road,  
The lights in  
The café terrace  
And nearby tenements  
And chic businesses  
Prove brighter  
Than their heavenly observers  
In the indigo sky.  
Yellow warmth  
Bathed the customers  
Sipping on tea, perhaps  
Dining, bathed farther  
Into the closeness of themselves.  
Positive human interaction,  
A seemingly dying art  
Practised by walkers & sitters—

Dutch painter's  
Idea of peace—

---

[ Inspired by the painting *Café Terrace At Night* by Vincent Van Gogh. ]

# Fog of Time

*by Peter A. Witt*

---

My mind is like a fogbank,  
more so now that I am in my ninth decade,  
less than it will be in a few years.

Sometimes I can't recall the names  
of plants in our garden, though  
late at night a name pops  
into my head and says, here I am,  
in a voice clear and bright. By morning  
the name has departed like yesterday's news.

Luckily my wife's name never abandons me.  
She is, was, and will be Joyce,  
perhaps the last thing unfogged  
as my recall disintegrates  
like sandcastles at high tide.

I tried creating a pack of study cards,  
like the ones I used in college to learn French,  
each with the name and picture of a plant,  
but sadly I laid the pack down and can't  
remember where I left it. Maybe the memory muse  
will whisper in my ear in the middle of the night,  
saying, look under the pillows on the living room  
couch, which by morning I will have forgotten,  
leaving it to the cleaning lady to find them  
next time she comes.

# Garden Diary, Wednesday

## 10 a.m.

*by Peter A. Witt*

---

A parade of roses welcomes visitors:  
hi, they say, whispering sweet nothings  
in a voice filled with rainbow hues,  
not knowing their leaves will shrivel  
under an onslaught of aphids.

Dandelions explode across the lawn  
like tiny landmines, each an invitation to a hungry  
lawn mower, each despised by a fastidious gardener  
who doesn't understand forgiveness.

Hummingbird dances around the sunflowers,  
dodging a territorial sentinel who missed  
the lesson on sharing when he was just a nestling.

Monarch is suspended in the shimmering ether  
between blooms and cumulus, lands, then flits away,  
not knowing its life is short.

Bumblebees pirouette through coneflowers  
with the precision of buzzing ballerinas  
then disappear into the noonday sun.

Dragonflies streak like tiny blue bolts  
around the garden, never seeming to land.

Sun dips, garden succumbs to silence,  
sparrows snuggle into rosebush cradles.

# The Tree Trunk

*by Bernard Pearson*

---

Hollowed out, as full of black miasma  
As a tea bowl; ants skittle around  
Its ringless rim, while down below  
The roots wash up from the ocean  
Of land and life to which the tree  
Once belonged.

On a nearby sapling,  
In this all but fallen wood,  
A bird of solitude  
Re-arranges her feathers  
Preparing them for inspection  
By the dawn.

# Botheration

*by John Grey*

---

Steamy summer's day,  
insects are on the prowl  
competing with my swats  
for the available air.

It should be gratifying  
that at least something  
is in love with my skin,  
but it's not.

I want nothing more than  
to just sprawl on the grass  
but the gnats, the bugs,  
see that as an insult  
to their omnipresence.  
They're as persistently annoying  
as some people I could name.

Of course, with beasties,  
my responses are cruder,  
more basic than my typical,  
"I'd love to but I'm busy."

And I have the stings, the bumps,  
squashed wings and smeared insides,  
to bear witness.

People, on the other hand,  
just go away until the next time.  
Ah, the *next time*:  
now there's a blood-sucking,  
irritating, infuriating,  
insect for you.

# Ice Attack

*by Noah Galea*

---

Named within the prose:

CELEBRAS TIWARI – Intergalactic business magnate and owner of Tiwari Morplex.

GRETCHEN RUBIN – One of the lead representatives of The United Planets.

VALENTINA PAGANI – Italy’s representative for Earth’s board in The United Planets.

HÖTTE – Twin sister of Kald.

KALD – Twin sister of Hötte.

CELIA PROVE – News Anchor for Soler News.

LORD JASTRIX – Leader of the Xylites.

JAKATLA – A Xylite and friend of Tiwari.

COLD COMMANDER PIERCEFOUL – Kald’s most trusted.

ENZO STROMBOLI – Event Commentator and supposedly Pagani’s fancy.

ERNEST LAMBERGAMBER – Wealthy businessman and owner of the sports car company of the same name.

MORTICIAN MORTICIA – Practising mortician and associate of Celia Prove.

\*\*\*

“You did it because you could, and because you could, you had to.”

\*\*\*

WAR. Such is the threat being expected by the United Planets. The Twin Lords of the planet Inverna have come to a disagreement that could mean ruin for the neighbouring systems. Taking means into her own hands, intergalactic business magnate Celebras Tiwari has reached out to both sisters individually so as to propose means towards a peaceful resolution.

The solution, though, is none too promising.

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AUGUST 23, 2064, TIWARI SPACE, TIWARI MORPLEX

“Cel you silly goose! What did you do?!” Barging in to her suite all uncivil-like was Gretchen Rubin.

Tiwari, all unbothered and such by her entrance, lay deep into her bubble bath with a stylish virtual reality headset. “Oh. Oh wait that’s actually-” and by this point she’d slid them off, “hi, Rubin.” Cel met her eyes, and saw that she looked hopeless. “Oh well what’s the matter? I was hoping for some good news right about now.”

*Oh this one... I really can't with this one.*

“Good? Cel, now don’t lie to me. What did you do?” She sounded miserably defeated. “Do you know what you did?”

“Mm... what are we talking about? The ship? The twins? Or the leak?”

“The what?!”

“Oh I said nothing. What were you referring to?”

“Earth, Celebras! You’re bringing the twins to Earth?! Who told you to do that?!”

*Gosh I've never seen her so red.* “Well, I just thought you know... if all of you were just going to panic over nothing, I’d get them to agree to at least do something somewhat right.” Cel felt herself very proud about what she was saying, and yet Gretchen still stood there like an inanimate object.

“And that is?”

*I swear sometimes these people.* “A tennis match.” When she said it, Gretchen looked at her as though the world fell. Rubin’s voice deepened a few decibels.

“What the hell do *they* know about tennis, Cel?”

“They said they knew what it was! Don’t act like that was the first thing I suggested to them. Swimming was off the table, for obvious reasons... and the blue one was all like ‘Ya ya, what about that game with the... the ball?’ and then I said ‘Oh you mean tennis!’ and she nodded so I thought we were good.” By this point, Gretchen was disgusted with Cel.

“Do you know what you’ve done Celebras?”

“I’ve helped! And that’s more than any of you ever do!” *The nerve of this woman!* “Look if you want to call it off then call it off, but don’t say that I never do anything! It’s just offensive.”

“Call it off? How can you call it off?!”

“Well hell don’t get all worked up. We planned this for like next week.”

“Cel, they’re coming tomorrow.”

*Oh.* “Bullshit.”

And by that point, Gretchen’s worry seemed to dissipate, and she really looked at Cel more so than before. She’d begun to actually realise just who was in front of her, and what she was seeing – this sight of a girl with all the money in the world, inside a complex spanning starships, and yet somehow she was the one with enough power to convince those two idiots to hopefully make up after a stupid game. “I get it. I get it now.”

Cel didn’t say a thing.

“You’re a clown. Like actually. You don’t think about what happens when you do something. You just hope the world fixes itself around you.”

“Hey wait now hold on.”

“Save it. You never say anything good anyway. We’ll fix this.” Having said this, Gretchen turned to leave with all the hurry in the world.

With the same hurry, Cel emerged bothered and almost half-naked out of the bath, flailing her arm in the air as though Rubin hadn’t meant what she said. “Hold on don’t screw this up Gretchen! I mean it! Let me he-” and she slipped on her own soapy feet.

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AUGUST 24, 2064, SOVEREIGN SPACE, EARTH

Valentina Pagani, lead representative of the Italian Embassy, had found herself once again wrangled by the masses as a favour for Rubin. Once Celia Prove had announced the whole mess on Soler News, a violent horde had thrown themselves at the doors of poor Pagani. Gretchen, of course, was disassociating in the back, smoking a tiny cigarette so slowly you’d think it wouldn’t end.

“Please, please. I know you’re all concerned, but you shouldn’t be.” Nothing was helping.

“You’re only doing this here because they told you not to do it at Zerial Bay!” a voice shouted, and Pagani could see an array of threatening tomatoes waiting to be flung towards her.

“The United Planets are on our side I assure you. Gretchen Rubin has personally decided to oversee the smooth running of the match.”

“Rubin... and where’s she huh? Pomodoro per la giustizia!” But Valentina, Val was a fast one when it came to these things. By the time she heard ‘Pom’ she’d already barricaded herself within the embassy.

It took, very taxingly, a great deal for her to remain composed and not unleash an onslaught onto Gretchen. “You... we need to fix this. I- I don’t know what we’re going to do by the next four hours.” Of course, she referenced this exact time period knowing the twins to be arriving at 12 o’clock sharp.

“Three hours, Val.” Gretchen stated plainly.

“Come again?”

“Yeah... yeah I know. Apparently due to the time differences in Inverna, the Inferno and the Snowstorm will be docking at around eleven.” Gretchen delivered the news numbly, not taking notice that Pagani had withered in colour at what she’d just been told.

She quivered as she spoke, and trembled as she neared her. “What- wait no what do you mean *you said*... and I quote ‘the Twin Lords only’, you didn’t say anything about the whole fleets.”

Gretchen was unmoved by Val’s distress. “You didn’t really think they’d come alone, did you? And on what? It’s fine.”

“Nothing’s fine.”

“You have the colosseum still open as planned?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s fine. Besides, it’s not like we can do anything else now. We play Tiwari’s game, that’s all. It goes well, then swell. If it doesn’t, then I guess we had a good run, I don’t know. It’s not like they’re going to kill us. Their quarrels are with each other.” Yet as she spoke, and said out loud what she’d been reasoning so as to calm herself, Rubin started to feel unconvinced by her own thoughts. She’d never met the Invernians personally. “Although,” and she quietened herself quite a bit before continuing, “I normally don’t suggest this, but if you could somehow get into contact with Lord Jastrix...”

Valentina knew what she was getting at, and she was appalled. “You really think it could go that badly?”

“Just in case, you know? Just in case.” If ever Gretchen wanted not to stoke Val’s paranoia, this was a most monumental blunder to that effort.

The hours passed in minutes, and Gretchen Rubin, alongside Valentina Pagani, found themselves stationed onto Italy's spacecraft docking platform awaiting the arrival of the twins. Of course, they weren't the first to arrive. Rudely unannounced, Cel had popped by on a little mini star cruiser and came down all quick-like and excited.

"Gretchen! Gretchen!" She yelled, and Rubin wanted only to choke her in that moment. "I'm so glad you agreed to go through with this. It'll be swell, trust me. I've done business with them plenty of times. This should be no different."

"Aha. Nice Cel." That's all Gretchen could bring herself to say. Any more and she might outright break into strangling the Glowlyfe.

"Pagani," Cel turned to her. "Got my tix?"

*What?* "Ah." There and then Val pulled something out of her pocket. "Yes, two front seats. Central."

"Mhm hm, that's the one. Neat. I invited Jakatla to come with, you know? Poor girl... with that whole thing that happened to her, I thought this might help her clear her mind."

"How thoughtful."

"Yeah, I know. Anyway," Tiwari's goggles blinked red but for a moment. "They're coming. Break a leg guys!" And she hopscotched like a little girl over to Jakatla waiting for her. "You'll do great!"

"Val."

"Rubin."

"I think one day I will strangle that girl."

"What?" Pagani couldn't hear her. Not then, when the two starships came down rupturing the peace and quiet of all towns in a near hundred-mile radius.

*This is it.*

Rubin and Pagani froze. With smiles plastered so neatly onto their faces, one would hardly have taken them for horrified. They awaited each twin with feelings even they couldn't outright discern for themselves.

First there was the red one, Hötte. When Gretchen laid eyes on her, it occurred to her that until now she hadn't quite considered what she would look like. If anything, and with how mortified she was in anticipation of the meeting, perhaps she would have assumed her an

ominous creature. But no, not at all. Hötte was beautiful, like carved stone on porcelain flesh, draped in an ephemeral aura of dress-lined smoke. She was, amusingly, especially tall, and wherever she stepped turned to ash, and then back again to what it had been rather slowly.

“Lord Hötte, it’s our pleasure to have you.” Gretchen bowed, extending her hand.

To this, the lady of fire giggled little embers. “I don’t think that is such a good idea Miss Rubin. I might burn you, no?”

She wasn’t expecting it, but Hötte’s voice had a Swedish thickness to it. It caught Gretchen off-guard. “Ah yes!” and she laughed, half-embarrassed, half-torn about what she thought of the first twin.

Hötte was accompanied by no one in particular, and perhaps that wasn’t to her advantage. There was a lapse of silence after initial greetings, and the Lord of Fire looked at Gretchen, then to Valentina, then back to Gretchen with this awkward smile. “I- whereabouts should I go? I’m not too familiar...”

“Ah! No, of course. Please please I apologise...” and Gretchen’s head darted like a compass needle all round. *My God, there’s no one.* “Down the right.” She motioned to a staircase an embarrassingly long way away.

“Mm...” Hötte tried her best to not seem displeased. “Maybe I go down with both of you... or... when you go down?”

“If you’d like.” Gretchen didn’t mind. Something about the cordiality of the fire lady made her rethink the whole situation in a more hopeful light. Val pinched her.

“She’s coming now.” It was meant to be a whisper, but Hötte heard her.

Kald. Cold Lord and twin sister of Hötte descended from the steps of the Snowstorm alongside her second, Cold Commander Piercefoul. Hötte made out her sister’s visage, and discerned with what attitude she was approaching. Quickly, and before Rubin or Pagani could say anything, she turned back to both of them, smiled, and assured them that “I’ll just go where you said. This way? Yes? Yes. Thank you!”

“Why the-” Val didn’t have a chance to register what had just happened.

*Oh this is going to go well.*

Kald looked, and was, nothing like her sister. Hötte’s gaseous-like, flowing body opposed directly the short and solid stature of little sister. When Gretchen had come close to greet the blue one, she’d noticed her distinct, rude look. Kald’s eyes were the shade of a concerning crimson. Rubin had extended her hand all cordial-like, and Kald returned the

gesture with the nastiest slap to the face.

Val didn't even notice it happen at first. The Cold Lord had a mean left hook, leaving Gretchen slurring her greetings, and falling to the floor unconscious.

"What's wrong with her?!" Kald demanded. Her voice was surprisingly deep.

Pagani didn't know what to say. She was speechless. There and then she laid her eyes on Gretchen like a ragdoll on the floor, her cheek hardened and marked by a pearl-white handprint.

*Oh what the f-*

Four rapid finger snaps, glitter pouring out from between the fingers. "Are you deaf? Why is she on the floor?"

Val looked up. Kald, Piercefoul... it wasn't great company. Given the circumstances, she almost overthought what best to say.

"Oh. No she does that. You'll have to forgive my... uh... assistant."

"It's good to know, ya? That the one in charge isn't as incompetent."

Valentina nodded, her eyes darting – Kald, Piercefoul, Gretchen on the floor, then back to Piercefoul because he had spikes on his helmet like *why does he have spikes on his helmet*, then back to Kald... and then realising Gretchen was on the floor.

"Actually," and for a moment it seemed Val would gain some courage, "why did you slap her?"

"She come to do the same, no? It is basic human greeting, Tiwari told me."

*Oh well that's one way to put it.*

"Yes. Yes I guess so... well not quite."

Before Val could elaborate, Kald shut her up by raising her hand. "Piercefoul," she called to him, and this gigantic behemoth hunched himself down very uncomfortably to hear what she had to say.

"Why is this... wait what is your name?"

"Valentina Pagani."

“Why is Valentina Pagani wasting our time? Why is she wasting my time? I come to throw ball onto my sister and she wastes my time on this platform. Very bad, yes? No? Yes or no?”

It didn't take long for Val to realise that this big frozen brute wasn't necessarily a man of many words.

Either way it didn't matter what she said. They left, and she left... with Rubin. She had to carry her husk down to their penthouse. She took about an hour to defrost.

“It's over for us, isn't it?” Gretchen puffed a cig.

I mean we got like a day more. I'll tell you what I'm glad they postponed it.”

*As if that matters.* “What are interspatial grants like for asylum seekers?”

“For twelve billion people?”

“Oh hell what do you know anyway? I bet you've never even left Italy.”

*What?* Val was stunned. “Why are you being so rude all of a sudden?”

Gretchen didn't answer. She merely waved her hand a bit to get Pagani to stop talking.

“Are you gonna call him?” And by him, Val was referring to Jastrix. She asked it very quietly, almost ashamed.

Gretchen didn't look her in the eyes. Her gaze dazed off at the soothing moonlit beach close by. *And that's fucked too.* “I'm working up to it.”

It's not that neither of them particularly liked each other. More so really it was just that both were too agitated to deal with each other's stress. But hell, one had to bite.

“Val.”

“Rubin.”

“What was your impression of Kald?”

Pagani shook her head, her eyes blank and face flat.

“She's a cold motherfucker.”

Val agreed. She nodded her head too. “She's got a mean left hook.”

“Shut up. You probably wouldn't stand up if she did that to you.”

“You didn’t, though.”

Now then. Now Gretchen eyed her. “Point taken... so what is it then? Who’d you put as host?”

“Yes. Enzo Stromboli. I heard Lambergamber is sponsoring the event.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“And Prove’s got it on the news.”

“Yeah... no, yeah she would. She would do that there’s no surprise there.”

\*\*\*

“Enzo Stromboli had a few words to say for the event, didn’t he Prove?”

“Mm that’s right. Play the recording!”

A mountain man with thin moustache appeared in comically pursed and neatened tux. “Oh mio Dio, questo è lo spettacolo perfetto al mondo, sto sanguinando dall'anticipazione, sì sì! Sento il bisogno del vulcano dentro di me che sta per RUPTURARE DI NUOVO sul palcoscenico di questo sport sensazionale! Gli Inverniani, sì sì sì! Caldo contro Freddo! NO! Hotty? Hotty contro Kald! Oh mio Dio, si sono persino nominati correttamente. Oh. Mio. Dio. Sono sbalordito. Iniziamo, iniziamo!”

“Uomo dolce!” Val spouted, having taken her seat with grimpiss right beside her. She noticed Gretchen giving her the stink eye.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Gretchen couldn’t understand her. She’d made her hair in these weird ribbon loops which were more elaborate than normal. But then she saw Cel all chill and smug in the premiere seats of the arena. She’d maul that one.

Gretchen saw Hötte and Kald. Kald had this strange looking racquet which glittered at every slight movement. She had first throw, all equipped with tennis clothes and a ball she threw up and down repeatedly. Opposite the arena there was Piercefoul, and sat by him was some weird looking girl with both hot and cold elements about her. She was going to ask Pagani if she knew who she was, but she got distracted.

Stromboli’s voice boomed at every toss and leap and jab. “I hate you!” said Kald. “I’m not your enemy, my sister!” said Hötte. It was a tragic back-and-forth. Or at least that’s how Gretchen saw it. It didn’t really matter anymore. She’d made up her mind.

No matter what happened, the views of Prove went up. Hell at one point even a pigeon came into view of Prove's streaming camera and that quadrupled the channel's profit. Her views went even higher the day after.

"And he was crying, no? I still can't believe it."

"Mortician Morticia confirmed it. Kald's toast and Hötte's out cold. They're both dead."

"Jastrix's little gun, huh? Wiped out that whole planet... you know I really thought no one would do it. Didn't they say it might affect some spatial radiation or something?"

"Come on, Prove. It's been done before. But did you see Hötte's face when her sister wobbled onto the floor?"

"We have a close up don't we?" The numbers boomed. "Yeah pull it up pull it up. It's that one."

# Breathing

*by Lorraine Caputo*

---

The barks of a pack  
of dogs echo  
echo down the empty streets

*Breathe slow*

*one-two*

*Breathe deep*

*three-four*

A car alarm sounds,  
the wind gusts  
through the city canyon

Night falls  
into the silence, yet  
prays my mind, please, Spirit ...

*Breathe slow*

*one-two*

*Breathe deep*

*three-four*

High on a hillside  
a police siren  
whoops...

*Breathe...*

# Midday Minuet

*by Lorraine Caputo*

---

High  
wispy clouds  
dance across this  
noon sky, nebulous ribbons

pirouetting around the  
bright white  
sun

# To a Home that was not my own

by Annie ZH Sun

---

I hated your smile the warmth of your touch the gentle  
violence of your hands as you forced a strange tongue  
into my mouth and even stranger faces before my  
eyes purging all that once was familiar  
into a distant dream replaced by New words  
New bodies brand New clichés.  
You let me sow beneath your skin, watched, timid hesitations  
bloom into friendship tattoos and failing paper into a  
Bachelor's Degree. I tried to tell a hero's journey, of battles  
conquered and Identity solved. Pieced void into a nest, and scars  
into art. An Alien Acclimatised, a seed taken root. The subtle  
Difference remained in the Mirror, and my Name, in the  
Photoed Rectangle, tucked inside my wallet, by the faded  
Characters I could no longer read. A thread  
severed, a language lost. But  
I wished to be loved, despite being  
a creature of the In-Between.  
You did not want me. Your rejection was  
pre-written in your ambivalent laws, and the  
exorbitant sums I could never afford. You  
fed me, shaped me, then asked me to leave.  
Slammed the doors I yearned to step in.  
All tongues, present and past tasted  
like stiff cotton and soft stones. Who  
am I, what is home? What can  
I do? Where do I go? The answer  
rang in nonchalant shoulders and disinterested  
gaze. Nobody. Nothing. Nowhere. I  
spiralled, crashing and crumbling into the dark  
red, pulsing terror of my own body, and  
heard it whisper,  
Here. Home.

# The Cellar Songs

*by Emecheta Christian*

---

I was thirteen when I first heard the singing from our cellar. Not the kind of singing you'd expect—not the muffled voices of my parents doing laundry, or the hum of our ancient furnace. This was different. Pure. Beautiful. Like wind chimes made of quartz, or the way I imagined starlight would sound if it had a voice.

Mom had been gone three months by then. The doctors called it rapid-onset dementia, but I knew better. I'd watched her change that summer, watched her start talking to empty corners and drawing strange symbols on the walls with her fingernails until they bled. Dad painted over them every weekend, his hands trembling as he covered each mark, pretending everything was normal.

But nothing had been normal since we moved into the Tudor-looking house on Sycamore Street.

The singing started on a Tuesday night in June. I remember because Dad was working late at the hospital again, leaving me alone with my homework and the creaking sounds of our too-big house settling into its foundations. The melody drifted up through the heating vent beside my desk, so faint I thought I was imagining it at first. Three notes rising and falling like a question asking to be answered.

I should have ignored it. Should have turned up my music, finished my algebra, and gone to bed like any sensible person. But Mom always said I had more curiosity than sense, so I followed the sound.

The cellar door was at the end of the kitchen hallway, a heavy oak thing with black iron hinges that groaned when I pulled it open. The wooden steps leading down were steep and narrow, worn smooth by generations of feet. I'd only been down there once when we first moved in, helping Dad store boxes we still hadn't unpacked. The bare bulb at the bottom cast more darkness than light.

The singing grew stronger with each step I took. It was a woman's voice, I realized, though it had an odd echoing quality as if it were coming from the bottom of a well. The words were in a language I didn't recognize, but they made my skin prickle with goose bumps.

I fumbled for the light switch at the bottom of the stairs. The bulb flickered twice before steadying, throwing harsh light across the concrete floor and stone walls. Everything looked normal at first—the washing machine, the old workbench, boxes of Christmas decorations we'd never put up. But then I saw it. A door that hadn't been there before, set into the far wall.

It was small, barely four feet high, made of dark wood that seemed to absorb the light around it. The singing was coming from behind it, clear as a bell now. And underneath the melody, I heard something else—the sound of my mother's laughter.

I knew, somewhere in the rational part of my brain, that it couldn't be her. Mom was in Silver Pines Care Center, barely able to remember her own name most days. But the laughter sounded exactly like her—the way she used to laugh on Sunday mornings when Dad made his terrible jokes over pancakes before the confusion set in and the light started fading from her eyes.

My hand was on the doorknob before I realized I'd crossed the room. The metal was ice-cold against my palm, and for a moment I hesitated. But then I heard Mom's voice, clear as day: "Freya? Baby, is that you?"

I opened the door.

The space beyond wasn't a room—it was a tunnel, its walls smooth and pearly white, seeming to glow with their own inner light. The singing pulled at me like a physical force, and the air smelled of Mom's vanilla perfume. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled through.

The tunnel twisted and turned, growing larger as I went, until finally I could stand. The walls pulse with soft light in time with the song, which had changed to something sadder now, full of longing. I followed it around one last bend and found myself in a vast circular chamber.

The ceiling arched high above, lost in darkness, but the walls glowed as mother-of-pearl does. In the center stood a woman in a white dress that moved as if underwater. She was singing, her back turned to me, her long dark hair floating around her shoulders.

"Mom?" I whispered.

The singing stopped. The woman turned, and I stumbled backward. Her face—where her face should have been—was smooth and blank as an egg. But somehow, I could feel her smiling.

"Not quite," she said in my mother's voice. "But I can help you get her back."

I should have run. Every instinct screamed at me to flee, to scramble back through the tunnel and never look back. But she kept talking, her words wrapping around me like the

welcoming arms of my mom before her illness.

"Your mother isn't sick, Freya. She's just... lost. I can show you how to find her. How to bring her home." The faceless woman held out one pale hand. "All you have to do is sing with me."

I thought of Mom in that sterile hospital room, her eyes vacant, her fingers constantly tracing invisible patterns in the air. I thought of Dad's haunted expression every time he came home from visiting her. And I thought of how, just before they took her away, she'd grabbed my hand and whispered, "They're coming through the walls, Freya. Don't let them take you too."

"What happened to her?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"The same thing that happens to anyone who hears our song but refuses to join it." The woman's head tilted. "She tried to protect you, to block out our music. But no one can resist forever. She should have known better—should have taught you to sing instead of hiding you away."

My throat went dry. "What are you talking about?"

"Your grandmother heard us too, you know. And her mother before her. It runs in the blood, this gift. This curse, some might say." She laughed—my mother's laugh exactly. "Why do you think she never let you meet them? Why do you think there are no family photos older than your mother? Because they're all here, Freya. All singing. All waiting."

The chamber had grown darker, but the walls pulsed faster now, like a frantic heartbeat. And I could hear other voices joining the song—dozens, hundreds of them, harmonizing in that strange language. Among them, I recognized Mom's voice, but it was twisted and desperate.

"Join us," the faceless woman said, stepping closer. "Your mother misses you so much. We all do."

That's when I saw them—faces pressing through the pearly walls like masks pushing through a membrane. Women's faces, young and old, all with my eyes, my chin, my mother's high cheekbones. My family. My legacy. All of them singing, calling me home.

I ran.

I don't remember much about the journey back through the tunnel. Just the sound of their voices rising to a shriek behind me, the feeling of hands grabbing at my clothes, the smell of vanilla turning sickly sweet. I emerged from the small door at a roll, slamming it behind me hard enough to crack the frame.

When Dad found me hours later, I was sitting at the top of the cellar stairs, my back pressed against the wall, still shaking. I tried to tell him everything, but the words wouldn't come out right. Maybe that was for the best. He's got enough to worry about with Mom.

That was two weeks ago. The door in the cellar is gone now, as if it never existed. But late at night, when the house is quiet, I still hear them singing. Their voices rise through the heating vents, sweet and terrible, promising everything I've lost. Sometimes I catch myself humming along before I can stop.

And sometimes, in the bathroom mirror, I see my reflection smile with too many teeth. But only when I'm singing.

Yesterday, Dad said Mom's getting worse. The doctors want to try a new treatment, but they're not optimistic. I caught him crying in the kitchen this morning, holding one of her old photos. He didn't see me watching.

Tonight, the singing is louder than ever. I can hear Mom's voice clearly now, calling my name between verses. My throat aches with the effort of keeping quiet, of not answering her call. But I know if I start singing, I'll never stop.

Still... I can't help wondering. What if they were telling the truth? What if I could bring her back? What if all it takes is one song, one moment of surrender, to have my family whole again?

The cellar door is open now, spilling darkness up the kitchen stairs. I don't remember opening it.

But I can hear them singing.

And this time, I know all the words.

The first step down feels like falling.

My bare feet know these stairs—seventeen worn wooden frames, each one crying out beneath my weight. But tonight, they feel different. Softer. Almost fluid. The darkness below pulses like it were conscious, and I swear I can see filaments of pearly light weaving through it, reaching up toward me like hungry fingers.

"Freya." Mom's voice is clearer now. "Come sing with me, baby."

My hand trembles against the wall as I descend. The concrete floor at the bottom is ice-cold, but I barely notice. Because there's the door again—that impossible door—exactly where it was before. It seems bigger now, its dark wood swirling with patterns that weren't there the

first time. Or maybe I just hadn't noticed them before. They look almost like faces, these patterns. Familiar faces.

The singing swells, and I recognize the melody from my dreams—the ones I've been having every night since my first visit. In them, I'm always five years old again, sitting on Mom's lap while she brushes my hair and hums this very tune. But in the dreams, when she leans down to kiss my forehead, her face is smooth and blank.

"It doesn't hurt," the faceless woman's voice joins Mom's. "Becoming. Belonging. We've been waiting so long for you."

My hand finds the doorknob. The metal burns cold against my palm, but I don't let go. Because I've realized something in these past two weeks of resistance: the singing isn't just calling to me. It's already inside me. Has been since the day I was born, maybe even before. Every lullaby Mom ever sang, every bedtime story she whispered—they were all rhythms of this song. Preparation. Practice.

The door swings open at my touch, lighter than air. The tunnel beyond is wider now, its pearly walls rippling and glittering like the surface of a pond on a sunny day. The air smells of vanilla and something else—something older, like earth after rain or wood buried deep.

I step through.

No crawling this time. The tunnel seems to draw me forward, its walls pulsing in time with my heartbeat. Or maybe it's my heartbeat matching their tempo. It's hard to tell where I end and the singing begins.

The circular chamber opens up before me, vast as a cathedral now. The faceless woman stands in its center, but she's not alone. They're all here—my grandmother who died before I was born, my great-aunt whose name was never spoken, cousins and ancestors I know only from the whispers of their songs. Their faces press through the walls, no longer trapped behind them but emerging, taking shape, singing.

And there, in the front—

"Mom?"

She turns, and for a moment she's exactly as I remember her from before: beautiful, whole, her blue eyes bright with love. Then I blink, and her face is smooth and perfect and blank, like a canvas waiting to be painted.

"It's better this way," she says, holding out her arms. "No more pain. No more forgetting. Just the song, forever and ever."

I think of Dad, alone in our big empty house. I think of my friends at school, of sunlight and homework and all the normal things that seemed so important just hours ago. I think of Mom's last lucid moment, trying to warn me about the very thing I'm facing now.

But mostly, I think about the song. How it feels like coming home. How it feels like truth.

I open my mouth, and the first note rises from somewhere deep inside me. It's perfect, pure, and exactly the right pitch to match their harmony. As I sing, I feel it happening—the change starting at the edges of my face, smooth and cool like water washing away everything unnecessary. Everything human.

Behind me, the tunnel seals itself shut. I won't need it anymore. None of us will, until the next daughter is born, until the next voice is ready to join our choir.

We sing together, my family and I, our voices pitching through the earth, through the foundations of houses built on ancient ground, through the dreams of other girls who carry our blood. Some of them will resist like Mom tried to do. Some will run like I almost did.

But in the end, they'll all come home. They'll all sing with us.

Because that's what we are, what we've always been: not just a family, but a song that never ends. An appetite that's never satiated. A choir that grows with each generation, calling through the walls, through time itself, until every voice that belongs to us is finally here.

I reach up to touch my face—smooth now, perfect now—and smile with a mouth I no longer have.

The song goes on.

And somewhere above, in a house that's no longer mine, a man I once called father wakes from a nightmare, thinking he hears his wife and daughter singing in the dark.

But by then, of course, it's far too late.

# My Africa

*by Priscille Nyeck*

---

Land of my ancestors  
Today you call me and I ponder  
I'm a stranger to your rooster's morning crow  
To the natural smell of your plants  
Adding greenery to your landscape  
I've walked on the blood of my forefathers  
The valiant fighters  
I scorned your heritage  
Left for me for eternity  
I've lost my tongue  
Everything I say is transparent  
I've forgotten the motto  
That was the foundation of your radiance  
I've lost my identity  
Conquering a new land

# Truth & Reconciliation

*by Marianne Tefft*

---

If you had asked me  
I would have shared with you  
My land my ways even my heart  
But you wanted it all  
You took my home from me  
Carrying me far from the hills  
Where I gathered young greens  
With my mother and sisters  
You took my tongue from me  
That I could not speak with my schoolmates  
Beside me on your hard benches  
In the words we learned from our fathers  
You took my soul from me  
That I would look at your sorrow-faced man  
Suspended from two crossed sticks  
And imagine he could save me  
From this life every Sunday  
You wanted it all and we were small  
We could not fight  
We could only wait  
And we watched you make mistakes  
You should have carpet-burned our land  
When we could not hold up our arms to stop you  
You should have starved every one of us  
When life was even cheaper than it is today  
You should have gouged my eyes from my face  
When even my body was barely my own  
For I saw the warm sun turn the snowy hare brown  
The trees squat silent through the winter  
And stand to sing out green songs again each spring  
You should have stripped the memories from my mind  
That I would forget the voices of my mother and father  
As they rang out across the frozen bay

In the days before you came  
To empty the gold from our valleys  
I will be ever grateful to the spirits  
Who have guided me and my people  
To this place from the edge of Time  
You did not plunge your hands  
So deeply into my heart  
That I cannot use mine  
To carve wood and stones  
In the shape of all the ancient stories  
That tell the world who we are  
And ever shall be

# Wild Fire

*by Marianne Tefft*

---

At the end of days  
They say we will not know  
Our own roofs from the midnight sky  
Whether to fling our barrels  
Or capture our last gasps within them  
That we may wring one more hour  
From the ochre mist  
As we watch the molten cobbles  
Once hard beneath the sandals  
Of our fathers and theirs  
Flow down the ashen streets  
Toward a sea that offers no reprieve

# A Handful of Dust

*by Wayne Russell*

---

One hand holds the sands  
of time within its grasp.  
See  
the granules seeping past  
    clutched fingers?  
I am the relic, drawn up  
from tear parched earth,  
my other hand holds  
the dust tightly,  
as  
    a witness  
time is fleeting, hovering  
with translucent feathers of  
snowy doves, drowning within  
full yellow hue, ghost tide moon.  
See the great horned owl, taking  
flight upon the arrival of a calm  
lingering death of day?  
Hovering over dry dead fields of  
autumn corn husk,  
talons snapped tightly upon the  
tiny rodent, that never saw that  
its demise was eminent—  
the dust and sand have now been  
cast into the lament of stars,  
where the ghost of lost lovers dwell.

# The Dreams of Howard Kirk

*by Eamonn Stewart*

---

Outside The Falls Library  
Magpies sound like sewing machines.  
Inside, mass typing  
Echoes their chattering.

One day, our messages  
Will arrive before they are sent.  
Then, Kirk The History Man's  
Abolition of privacy  
Will arrive via Mercury  
Of the winged heels  
With warp engines on his sandals.  
Nanometric drones will be  
More common than dust.  
Broadcasting every scintilla of us.

Selfie pouts will evolve  
To be prouder still  
Than flies' proboscides.

The Congo with it's Coltan  
Will be the new world's Omphalos.

# For GG

*by Eamonn Stewart*

---

On my last bender I saw  
Apollonius of Tyana  
In my shaving mirror,  
And gasped  
Until the glass  
Steamed over.  
Then, corpse candles  
In the meteora of a shucked pullover.

When the booze gives your brain a fracking:  
What Pythian nonsense  
From the deepest founts –  
Lost luggage of the unconscious  
In staggering amounts.  
You must regain the thrill of the inane,  
Like Bart Simpson's joy  
At burlap sacks.  
Though sobriety is profane  
There is workaday divinity  
The Dionysian lacks.

# Tumbling Down a Staircase: A Scene from My Writing Life

*by Greg Roensch*

---

I'm reviewing my manuscript in Farley's café, right across the street from Bloom's Saloon—which I recommend if you're ever looking for an adult beverage in my quiet corner of The City. It's just after seven o'clock in the morning, opening time at the café, with the sunlight streaming through the street-facing windows. Alone at a small table, I'm gearing up to tackle the latest round of edits on the opening pages of my work-in-progress, a book about my writing life, when a German Shepherd bounds into the room and skitters to a stop on the hardwood floorboards. "He's just a puppy," the owner says while wrapping her arms around the dog's neck. I insert my earplugs, not to shut out the frisky pooch or "London Calling" blasting from the overhead speakers, but more to insulate my mind in the blanket of solitude needed to make sense of my chicken-scratch marginalia. Just as I'm about to dig into my manuscript, the woman at the table next to mine leans over.

"Excuse me," she says, "I hope you don't mind the interruption..."

She's a regular like me, though we only know each other well enough to share a passing nod.

I remove an earplug and cock my head in her direction.

"Do you mind telling me what you're working on?" the lady asks.

That's a personal question I think at first, but I've been making good progress lately, so I don't mind answering. "I'm writing the story of my life," I tell her.

"You must have had an interesting life," she says.

I know she reads the paper every morning at the café. I also know she likes almond milk in her lattes and often orders a chocolate croissant. After pausing a few seconds to ponder my

response, I tell her I've led an ordinary life, a life not unlike hers, I imagine, or anyone else in the café, though in my case I've somehow, somehow been able to make a living as a writer.

The words "somehow, somehow" strike a chord. Maybe I'll use them as a theme, I think. Because it's not like I slid from the womb spouting iambic pentameter or penning the next great American novel. Instead, somehow, somehow, after working at a variety of odd jobs, I figured out how to get paid for working with words. I hunt for an apt metaphor for my career trajectory but can only envision a drunk tumbling down a staircase, climbing back up, brushing off his clothes, and tumbling down again. Somehow, somehow he keeps finding his way back to the top.

Somehow, somehow, I keep getting paid for my writing.

I'm about to say more but the lady has turned her attention to the newspaper. So, I reinsert my earplug and focus on my book.

*Lock in!* I tell myself, like Stephen Curry, the babyface assassin, icing the game with a barrage of three-point daggers. Lock in by ignoring the chatter of the baristas grinding beans and steaming milk. Lock in by not crossing the room to pet the Rhodesian Ridgeback chewing a ball in the corner. Lock in, most importantly, to shut out the self-doubt ricocheting around my brain as I write about navigating twelve years of Catholic school education, about obsessing over medieval literature in graduate school, about tramping across Europe for months like some kind of wannabe Ernest Hemingway, and about floating from job to job until landing my first paid editorial gig as a writer of abstracts at an information database provider.

Somehow, somehow, I survive the tumultuous first months of that job, even after my supervisor marches me into a conference room to say he doesn't think I have what it takes to do the work—he doesn't think my writing is good enough!

I not only prove him wrong, but I rise through the ranks of editorial middle management for five years before leaving to join the writing team at one of the world's largest videogame companies, where I work for fifteen years, climbing the rungs on another editorial-career ladder before stepping away to become a freelance writer.

I don't imagine anyone thought that was a good move at the time.

Hell, I know I had my doubts—which is what my writing life has been all about, hasn't it? The doubts that rise like clouds of dust and smoke kicked up by the legions of angels and devils going to war on the battlefield of my brain. Lean in close and you might even hear the devils as they fill my head with doubt after doubt after doubt. Like the boatload of rejection slips I file on my hard drive.

Like this.

*Dear Greg. Thank you for sending us your work. We're going to pass on this piece, but we wish you the best of luck finding a home for it elsewhere.*

Or this.

*Dear Greg. It's with a heavy heart that we must say your work wasn't selected as one of our finalists.*

Or this.

*Dear Greg. We enjoyed reading your story but don't think it fits the needs of our next issue. This isn't a judgment of your skill as a writer. Rather, this is our regretful sigh at having to pass on something that will be a perfect fit somewhere else.*

"Holy bejesus!" One slippery devil hollers in my ear. "You could wallpaper City Hall with the rejections you've collected over the years."

"Shut your filthy piehole!" a dulcet-voiced angel claps back at the devil before reminding me of the acceptances that have also come my way.

Like this.

*Dear Greg. Your story will appear on our home page next month. Thanks for your submission, and we hope you contribute again.*

Or this.

*Dear Greg. We've selected your story for our next issue. Please send the final version as soon as possible because we're up against a tight deadline.*

Or this.

*Dear Greg. We love your flash fiction! Be on the lookout for your story in our next edition. Thank you.*

Now that's more like it.

For the record, this angel-versus-devil exchange is exactly what happens when I don't lock in, when I let self-doubt, the dog in the corner, and the hiss of the espresso machine conspire to distract me from the words on the page.

"Get to work!" says a voice in my head.

Janelle Monáe is playing now on the café stereo. My tea has cooled. The lady reading the newspaper has left, her table occupied by two young venture capitalists plotting their next big cash grab.

I nudge both earplugs deeper into my ears.

“Get to work!” the voice says again.

My pen is poised over the page, but before I write, I check the clock hanging near the magazine racks, with the glossy faces of writers, rock stars, and supermodels staring me down, brows furrowed and lips pursed, as if waiting to see what I’ll do next. Nicki Minaj on *Vogue*. Snoop Dogg on *Rolling Stone*. Amanda Gorman on *Time*. Even venerable Allen Ginsberg on the cover of a slick, new literary journal. A young man wearing paint-spattered jeans and a velour shirt (like the kind I used to wear) struts up to the counter to order a cappuccino, and I flash back to my college days when I’d hang out at the Owl and Monkey, a cosy Sunset District café I thought would be around forever but is now long gone.

*Lock in!* I urge myself one more time, because I now have less than an hour before meeting a new client who’s hired me to write a lengthy instruction manual about workplace design. Space planning and ergonomic furniture. Flexible work models and environmental graphic design. Soon I’ll be buried up to my eyeballs in a mountain of research materials and conversant in a whole new lingo needed to circumnavigate this uncharted editorial terrain. Until then, all I have are these few precious minutes to polish the opening pages of my manuscript about how I became a writer in the first place, even with a chorus of devils bellowing “you’ll never make it.”

Oh yeah, I tell them. Just watch me.

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## Notes on Contributors

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### **Allen, Dee**

African-Italian performance poet based in Oakland, California U.S.A. Active in creative writing & spoken word since the early 1990s. Author of 10 books: *Boneyard*, *Unwritten Law*, *Stormwater*, *Skeletal Black*, *Rusty Gallows: Passages Against Hate*, *Plans*, *Crimson Stain*, *Discovery* and his newest just released, *The Mansion*. Dee also has 77 anthology appearances under his figurative belt so far.

### **Bishop, Julian**

Julian Bishop's first collection of eco poems called *We Saw It All Happen* was published in 2023 by Fly On The Wall Press. A former environment journalist turned poet, he lives in Barnet with his family and dog and runs a small media company. He's worked for many years as both reporter and producer with the BBC and also on ITV's News At Ten. He's been widely published and also been runner-up in the International Ginkgo Prize for Eco Poetry. He's currently working on a follow-up collection of eco poems as well as a separate project about the life and times of the Italian painter Caravaggio.

### **Caputo, Lorraine**

Poet-translator Lorraine Caputo's works appear in over 500 journals on six continents. Caputo has 24 collections of poetry – including *In the Jaguar Valley* (dancing girl press, 2023). She also writes travel narratives, articles and guides. Caputo is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. She journeys through Latin America, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth.

### **Cheis, Tommy**

Tommy Cheis is a Chiricahua guide and diyyin. He resides near the Cochise Stronghold with his horses. His short stories (will) appear in *Yellow Medicine Review*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *Invisible City*, University of Mexico's *Look to the Mountains* anthology, and many other publications. He is the winner of the Colonel Darren L. Wright Memorial Writing Award and his work appears on the CLMP Reading List for Native American Heritage Month November 2024. He is a PEN and a Pushcart nominee. His first novel, *Rare Earth*, is on submission; his second, *Child of Water*, will follow shortly.

### **Christian, Emecheta**

Emecheta Christian is a vivid writer whose work explores themes of self-actualization, belonging, and the complexities of the human experience. His works have appeared in esteemed literary journals and anthologies such as *The Potter's Poetry*, *Indiana Review*, *Oxford American*, *Four Way Review*, the *Academy of American Poets* Poem-A-Day Series, and elsewhere. He has been recognized with several awards, including the Iroko Award and The Dorothy Hewett Award. Emecheta's unique voice and evocative imagery have garnered him a growing reputation as a voice of change in the global literary scene.

### **Clifford, Rebecca**

Rebecca Clifford holds a B.A. in English Literature and a certificate in Creative Writing. She is a member of Tower Poetry Society, The Ontario Poetry Society, and the Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers. She has had works appear in Canadian, American, and British anthologies and e-zines. Five of her poems have been set to music by Canadian composers. Her writing runs the gamut from sonnets to caustic diatribe. Rebecca is supported in her endeavours by her partner and a cat of questionable parentage.

### **Galea, Noah**

Noah Galea is currently a postgraduate student with the Department of English at the University of Malta. He has recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in English with Philosophy which complements his passion for creative writing.

### **Gallaher, Cynthia**

Cynthia Gallaher, a Chicago USA-based poet, is author of four poetry collections, including *Epicurean Ecstasy: More Poems About Food, Drink, Herbs and Spices*, and three chapbooks, including *Drenched*. Her award-winning nonfiction / memoir / creativity guide is *Frugal Poets' Guide to Life: How to Live a Poetic Life, Even If You Aren't a Poet*. One of her poems will be sent on NASA's manned flight to the south pole of the moon later this decade. Her poem in this issue, 'Torturous Shoes', is part of a poetry chapbook manuscript-in-progress about fashion and fragrance with the working title "Ready to Wear."

### **Grey, John**

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Tenth Muse*. Latest books - *Between Two Fires*, *Covert* and *Memory Outside The Head* - are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Amazing Stories* and *River and South*.

### **Howard-Hobson, Juleigh**

Juleigh Howard-Hobson's work can be found in *Think Journal*, *Able Muse*, *The Lyric*, *Great Weather for Media* & other venues. She has been nominated for The Best of the Net, Pushcart, Elgin & Rhysling Awards. Her latest book is *Curses, Black Spells & Hexes* (Alien Buddha). She tweets: @poetforest

### **Jones, Declan**

Declan Jones is an emerging Irish writer experienced in theatrical and literary writing, looking to contribute to LGBTI+ promotion and positive change within the literary, theatre and film industry. Graduating from the University of Galway in 2016 with a degree in French, Italian and Film Studies as well as a Masters in Theatre Practice and Production. His short story 'The Returns Policy' will be published in the *Sparks Literary Journal* in May 2024, and he is currently taking part in the Irish Writers Centre's Foundation programme for 2024.

### **Nyeck, Priscille**

Priscille Nyeck is a Cameroonian 20-year-old student at the Faculty of Education. She is a playwright, poet and short story writer.

### **Oyama, Richard**

Richard Oyama's work has appeared in *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, *The NuyorAsian Anthology*, *Breaking Silence*, *Dissident Song*, *A Gift of Tongues*, *About Place*, *Konch Magazine*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Buddhist Poetry Review* and other journals. He has an M.A. in English: Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Oyama taught at California College of Arts in Oakland, University of California at Berkeley and University of New Mexico.

### **Pearson, Bernard**

His work appears in over one hundred publications worldwide, including *Aesthetica Magazine*, *The Edinburgh Review*, and *Crossways*. In 2017 a selection of his poetry 'In Free Fall' was published by Leaf by Leaf Press. In 2019 he won second prize in The Aurora Prize for Writing for his poem *Manor Farm*. He has also published three novels.

### **Poyner, Ken**

Ken's nine collections of brief fictions and poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several rescue cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in *Amsterdam Review*, *Analog*, *Rundelania*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Best Micro-Fictions 2024*, and elsewhere. Visit [www.kpoyner.com](http://www.kpoyner.com).

### **Roensch, Greg**

Greg Roensch writes flash fiction and poetry, makes poetry-films, and writes and records original songs. His writing has appeared in *Dream Noir*, *365 Tomorrows*, *Defiant Scribe*, and elsewhere. His poetry-films have screened at the Midwest Video Poetry Film Festival, the Ó Bhéal Poetry-Film Competition, the Maldito Festival de Videopoesia, the Bloomsday Film Festival, and other festivals worldwide. He recently released *Howling at the Moons of Saturn*, a spoken-word album featuring original music by a contingent of all-world composers and musicians. Learn more at [gregroensch.com](http://gregroensch.com).

### **Russell, Wayne**

Wayne Russell is a creative jack of all trades, master of none. Poet, singer, artist, rhythm guitarist, photographer, and author of the poetry books *Splinter of the Moon* and *Waves of Lucidity*, both published via Silver Bow Publishing and both available for purchase on Amazon in paperback and digital formats such as Ingram Distribution at your local library.

### **Stewart, Eamon**

No bio note available.

### **Tefft, Marianne**

Marianne Tefft is a poet and voice-over reader who daylights as a Montessori teacher in Toronto, Canada. Her poems and short stories have appeared online, in print and on air in North America, Europe, Asia and the Caribbean. Her poems have been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. She is the author of *Full Moon Fire: Spoken Songs of Love* and *Moonchild: Poems for Moon Lovers*.

**Witt, Peter A.**

Peter A. Witt is a Texas poet and a retired university professor. His work has been nominated twice for Best of the Net. His work has appeared on a variety of online poetry and in print publications including: *The Wide Owl*, *Verse Virtual*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *Panoplyzine*, and *Bluebird Word*.

**Zahra, Corrine**

Corrine Zahra is a 25-year-old creative nonfiction writer from New York and Gozo. She recently graduated from the M.A. in the Humanities program at the University of Chicago. Corrine was published in the Creative Writing Department's first anthology called *HEYDAY* and was a guest lecturer at the University of Malta. She also published two YA novels with FARAXA Publishing in 2014 & 2016 and is the co-founder & co-editor of the literary journal *Mghawġin*.

**ZH Sun, Annie**

Annie ZH Sun is a writer born in China but grew up in Malta. She graduated from the Msc Creative Writing programme at the University of Edinburgh. Her work has been published in Bag of Bones Press's *This is Tense* anthology, Band of Bards' *Dark Side of Purity* zine, and was shortlisted in Liar's League, Colour and Vision Event 2022. She is the winner of the Horror Competition in Edinburgh Writer's Club, 2024.