

T H E
odenville press



S U M M E R 2 0 1 5

C O V E R A R T

Flamenco

Mariya Petrova

Mariya Petrova is inspired by the spirit of Spain, and guided by the philosophy of existentialism. The photograph is a means to a freedom achieved through hard work. Her passion for photography was sparked by the knowledge of art acquired throughout life, instilled by parents and teachers of arts, and the influence of her brother Kaloyan Bogdanov-Kalo, a young artist, known for his pictorial wisdom, symbolism and the freedom of his artistic creations. Artistic photography requires patience, deliberation and a clear idea of the image the artist intends to convey.

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

W W W . O D D V I L L E P R E S S . C O M

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Call Him Cliff

Evgenij Soloviev

Evgenij Soloviev is a digital graphic designer and illustrator from Nizhniy Novgorod, Russia. Since 2006, this uniquely talented artist has put his skills to good use by employing photo manipulation to make intriguing and dynamic surrealist images. With high-profile clients like Wired, Philosophie, and Interscope, Soloviev is one of the most multifaceted artists out there today.

I'm Not Here

J.L. Metcalf

“ARE YOU EXCITED?” My soon-to-be husband’s sister, Polly, asked as she fluffed the train of my dress behind me.

I studied myself in the full length mirror. Black hair in tight curls. Green eyes shone in a face paler than moonlight. I looked paler than normal today. It felt like my knees were going to give out so I turned and sat. I bent over and breathed heavily.

Polly stared at me. “Are you OK? Amanda!” “I...can't...breathe...” I gasped.

Polly put her hand on my shoulder. “You have to calm down, love,” she said softly.

I nodded and took in a deep breath. “You’re fine. You can breathe. You are fine. You are fine. You are fine.” I repeated the words to myself like a mantra.

“I’m better,” I said, sitting up straight. I smiled at Polly who handed me a glass of champagne, looking concerned.

“Do you need a pill?” she asked.

I looked her in the eye and forced a smile.

“No. I’m okay now. Really,” I said. I’d already taken two pills this morning; I knew I shouldn’t have more or things would get... weird. Polly looked at me, concerned, but I waived her off. I was going to be fine.

At the last second, before the ceremony, I swallowed another pill. I just couldn’t seem to gather my thoughts the way I wanted to. I knew that taking three pills was playing a dangerous game on such an important day, but I needed them. I needed the pills to soften the edges.

The ceremony was a blur. During the vows Jack told me he loved me. Even then, I saw the emptiness in his eyes. The lie of it. He didn’t see me at all. The funny thing was, I didn’t care. I knew it didn’t matter if he saw me or not.

We had been married for almost ten years. I felt old. Ghost-like. I didn’t remember the last time he touched me, even by accident. We slept in separate bedrooms. We barely saw one another. We never talked unless we had to. I think he talked more than I did. He told me things, and looked at me sadly, but I don’t care.

I think he had a lover. Sometimes the sheets were rumpled in the middle of the day when I went up there. Sometimes his dirty clothes smell of perfume. I didn’t wear perfume. Did I? I got so confused some days. If he had a lover, I didn’t care. I hope she made him happy. Lord knows I couldn’t make him happy.

I was incapable of making myself happy anymore.

What is happiness anyway?

I moved through each day like a robot. I’d wake up, I’d shower, sometimes I’d eat breakfast, I’d brush my teeth. I’d do laundry, I’d clean. I didn’t have a job anymore, he made enough for both of us to survive and he never seemed to care what I spent money on. The fact is that I don’t want anything. I have no desire anymore. No passion for life.

I still had friends for some reason that I didn't quite understand. They would call me, they would try to get me out. They'd stop by with coffee cakes to get me to eat. I didn't eat anymore. I knew I was thin, I could see it when I showered, I could feel it in the weakness of my body. I could see how disgusting I was to him; he looked at me with revulsion...that is, when he looked at me at all.

Everything changed three months ago when I met Melody.

She was amazing. She was brilliant. She was a professional photographer as well as a photography teacher at the local college. She had long blond hair that was often tied up in messy buns to keep it out of her face.

The day I met her, she wore a tight mini dress (her favorite) and thick stockings, almost leggings. She had on black combat boots that thunked on the pavement when she walked. She looked like she had stepped out of the nineties. Melody never wore makeup—she said she never had time for that, or jewelry. She was simple and complex, and I fell in love with her at first sight.

She was walking towards me as I stood in front of the florist, staring at the window display, not sure what I was doing or why I was even there. I think Jack had told me to get flowers. Were we having a party tonight? I squeezed shut my eyes and tried to remember.

"You okay?" a voice said next to me. I opened my eyes. The speaker had her head tilted curiously to one side, a camera was clutched in her hands and she was smiling. Her lips were red and plump.

"I...think so," I said, and looked back at the flowers. "I can't...I can't remember..." I whispered and she touched my arm.

"Hey," she said, "Let me get you a cup of coffee."

I narrowed my eyes and looked at her.

Her eyes seemed so sincere and there was so much life in them. I felt overwhelmed by that. I'd never seen life in my eyes or his. This is what life looks like. I kept staring at her until she laughed.

"Come on," she said, and led me across the street to the coffee shop. She settled me into the corner booth where I could stare out at the street while she got us coffee's.

After a few minutes, she plopped down with two steaming cups of coffee in her hands. She shoved one at me. I looked down at the brown liquid, then back up at her.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I shook my head and suddenly I felt it happening, the tears were coming, I never let myself cry. I was late taking my pill, I realized. And I hadn't brought any with me. I swallowed hard and looked away from her.

She touched my hand.

I burst into tears.

"Oh hey..." she said, then her arm was around me. "Shhhh...it's okay. Let it out...you poor thing..." she murmured. I hadn't felt so loved, so cared for in so long that I didn't know what to do except sob.

Melody told me I cried for an hour that first day. She said that each time we met I cried less and less, and finally began to speak about my agony. She would feed me, always paying, even though I had money that I offered to her every time we met. She would shake her head, laugh and smile at me. "Nope. My treat," she'd say.

We started to hang out every day.

She told me about her life one day when we went for a walk. Melody was a child of divorce, she had lived with her Dad and not her Mom because her Mom was a drunk who liked to beat her. She had scars on her back from the cigarette burns. I'd show her the burns on me from where my Dad beat me

with a fireplace poker. It was a relief to be able to tell someone about it.

Melody hugged me after we talked of these things. She didn't have brothers or sisters, she said, but she was finally happy for the first time in her life. She was at a job she loved. She felt like she was making a difference in the lives of the kids she taught. She was having her first ever gallery show of her photos next week and she wanted me there. I wanted to go. I loved photography and couldn't wait to see more of hers. She was always taking my picture even when I told her not to. "But you're so beautiful!" she'd exclaim, and kiss my cheek.

I couldn't make sense of the tingles that went through me every time she kissed me.

My head started feeling a bit clearer after Melody persuaded me to stop taking the medicine my husband had put me on. She had taken one look at the various bottles and then started to cry. "He's keeping you sedated Amanda. Do you realize that?" she asked through her tears.

"No, no, he says I'm hysterical. That without the medicine, I'd be confused. He's keeping me safe," I said, tugging the bottle from her hand. Melody handed the bottle back and shook her head, studying me with her blue eyes.

"He's keeping you from having thoughts of your own," she said.

"No...he...he..." I stared at her, suddenly feeling the truth of what she was saying. I couldn't say he loved me because he didn't, he told me just last night that he hated me.

He was keeping me quiet. Manageable so that he could do what he wanted. This time I didn't cry at the realization, I merely tossed the pills into the toilet and flushed. Melody cheered from behind me and gave me a big hug.

I went through withdrawal, of course, but she helped me through the worst of it. I

stayed at her house for a couple of weeks. My husband never called my cell phone to try to find me. Melody went to the house one day and came back with a bunch of my clothes and books.

"You're living with me now," she proclaimed.

"What? How? My husband..." I said.

She snorted. "Your husband never even asked how you were. He was there when I knocked. He didn't care Amanda," she said. She seemed agitated. Not at all like her normal, carefree self.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said, turning away to hang up my clothes. I stood and grasped her shoulder. She pulled away, ducking her head. "Amanda, please...let it go."

I stepped away from her and sat, my head swimming. He had done something to her. I know he had. My brain was still scrambled so I couldn't quite figure it out. Images swam in my brain. Him. Melody, Me. I had a vision of his face over mine, his breath coming fast, his face red. He was calling my name. I blinked and shook my head, pushing the thoughts aside. You're getting confused again Amanda. Look at Mel, she'll remind you of who you are. I looked at her and she smiled, her eyes clouded with something I couldn't quite place.

It was after we had known each other for a couple of months that I kissed her. We had been drinking and laughing, and I had never felt so good. We were sitting on the roof on a warm summer night, looking over the town. I wore a tank top and a skirt. She wore one of her mini dresses. Sleeveless. I had gained weight; I looked human again. No longer like a ghost. I even had a tan. Occasionally, my brain still got confused. I found myself talking to an empty room every once in awhile, thinking that Melody was around. I always realized it,

though, and laughed. Everyone talks to themselves, right?

Melody let me use one of her old cameras, and I found that I enjoyed taking photographs of people. Of animals. Of the world I didn't feel like I was a part of.

She put her hand on my thigh. "Amanda," she said, looking at me. "I love you."

I put my hand over hers. "I love you, Melody," I said, and I knew it was true. A truth I had never known in any other part of my life. I leaned forward and her lips met mine. The kiss was everything I had ever wanted. Her arms were around me, her body against mine. This was love. This was everything. Two became one.

My husband showed up at the apartment shortly after we became lovers. Melody was out when he showed up. When I opened the door, he stared at me in shock.

"Amanda, you need to come home. What are you wearing?"

I looked like Melody today: a tight dress, tights and combat boots. I had a camera in my hand. I had been getting ready to go out to take photos when he knocked.

"Clothes. What do you want?" I asked.

"Come home."

"No. I'm free here," I said. He pushed into the apartment and I backed away, tripping over a low table I fell backwards. I hit my head.

I woke up a few hours later, it was dark. Melody was nowhere to be found. He was still there though, sitting next to me on the bed, smoking a cigarette. I realized I was naked. "What did you do to me?" I asked.

He stubbed out the cigarette and looked at me.

"You came onto me Amanda," he said.

"I fell. I was unconscious," I said, clutching the sheet to my chest.

He stared at me. "You need help, honey.

Please, come home. Let me get you the help you need."

"Get out!" I screamed, jumping out of the bed. "GET. OUT!"

He stood and began finding his clothing. He looked at me sadly as he made his way to the door. "I'm always here for you, Mel," he said.

The world tilted and things began to swim out of focus. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

"What did you call me?" I asked him.

He blinked and stared at me for a minute.

"Mel. I called you Mel. That's your name."

"No. It's Amanda," I replied, shaking my head again. Things were blurry.

"Oh, you're Amanda now. Sorry," he said.

I was confused. What was he talking about? I had always been Amanda. I slammed the door in his face and took a shower.

When I got out of the shower, Melody was there, lounging on the couch. She looked up when I came out of the bathroom. "Hey love bug, how are you?" she asked and I burst into tears. She jumped up to hug me. I told her everything. She wasn't mad at all; she said she understood.

She was everything I wanted to be.

The day I died was a weird day. It started perfectly. I woke up with Melody next to me. We made love, then ate eggs. After breakfast, we went for a walk, our arms wrapped around each other. We chatted and laughed. I noticed that people stared at us.

"What?!?" I finally yelled at them. "Stop staring at us!" Melody giggled, as people turned away or ran off.

"You're scaring them," she said.

"So what? It's rude to stare," I replied. She laughed more.

"They're staring because they've never seen this before," she said.

"Seen what? Lesbians?"

"No." She paused and tilted her head sideways. "Amanda, you're talking to yourself," she said.

I turned to reply but she was gone.

"Melody?" People stared at me and then hurried along. One guy mumbled "Freak."

Was Melody right? Was I talking to myself? I turned and ran back to the apartment, and that's when I really saw it: this was the apartment of a single person. The bed was rumpled on only one side. There was only one toothbrush, only one set of shampoo and conditioner in the shower. Only one set of car keys. Only one. Only one. Only one.

Melody wasn't real?

My head pounded. I wanted my pills. I wanted them very badly. I felt stretched out like a rubber band. Too thin. Like I was going to break. Like I wasn't real.

I ran out the door and to his house. I knocked and my husband opened the door. He stared at my disheveled appearance and let me come in.

"Am I real?" I asked him, near tears.

"Amanda?" he asked.

"YES!" I screamed at him. He took a step back.

"Amanda, come in, sit down... calm down..." he said, taking my arm. I grabbed his shirt with my fists.

"AM I REAL???"

He flinched and put his hands over mine. He spoke calmly, but I could see the fear in his eyes.

"Amanda. You are real. Melody is not," he said.

"No," I said, releasing him. I sobbed and felt to my knees in front of him. He knelt beside me and put his arm around me.

"It's okay, baby. This is good. We'll get you

help. It's going to be all right," he said. "Do you want your pills?"

I felt rage rise up inside of me, he was trying to drug me. He was trying to manage me again. I stood up so fast he fell backwards to the floor.

"I came here for the pills. For you." I stared down at him, his face was hopeful, that's when I saw what I had been missing for so long: he wasn't trying to hurt me, he did love me. He didn't know that I was unlovable. I was wrong. I was so very wrong.

"But I see it now," I said and felt the tears clog my throat. "I see what the problem is. It's me. It's me," I whispered.

He stood up as I ran to the door.

"Amanda! No! Please come back!" he cried out.

I soon outran him. His smoking habit slowed him down. I didn't smoke. I was fast. Of course I was fast, I was a ghost now. I started to laugh as I made my way to the bridge. I was a ghost. I walked to the railing, not looking behind me. I had no idea that he had followed me here in his car. I don't know how he knew where I was going. I swung my legs over the railing and sat there, looking down at the water. I smiled. Yes. This was what I wanted.

"Amanda!" he called out behind me.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"You always come here when you're upset," he said.

I smiled at him and turned away from him. "Goodbye," I said, and pushed off.

He screamed my name.

Amanda's dead. He tried to save her but she was gone before he got to her in the river. He breathed into her lungs but Amanda never

came back. I woke up and smiled at him. He wanted it to be Amanda but when I opened my eyes he knew it wasn't her. It was me. I woke up in her body, it was now my body. She was gone. It was for the best, she was weak, confused. I was better.

"Jack," I said hoarsely. His face fell. I heard an ambulance coming.

"Melody," he said flatly.

"How'd you know?"

He looked defeated, and I felt a pang of

sympathy for him.

"Your eyes. Somehow you change your eye color," he said.

"She's gone for good," I told him simply.

He sat back on the bank, put his hands on his face and he began to cry, big heaving sobs that shook his whole frame.

I looked up at the sky. The sun was out and shone in my eyes. It warmed my face. I smiled and laid still. I would miss Amanda, but it would be nice to have this body to myself.

*J.L. Metcalf has self-published two books, a fantasy novel called *The Last Daughter of Lilith* and a non-fiction personal memoir entitled *Coming Undone: Musings on Life, Love and Hobbits* that was released February 1, 2015. J.L. Metcalf also writes pop-culture blog posts on *The Great Stories, Inc* blog called "*The Female Perspective*." Visit J.L. Metcalf's website at www.JuicyCreativeWorks.webs.com*

Evolution of a Jukebox

Will Walton

Her hand on my shoulder,
'Three Little Birds' on the box,
her smile exposing
her purple teeth.
'Lennon was right ...' she says
as she runs her ring & middle finger
on each side of the stem,
cupping the glass.
'You've got to hide it away.'
She drinks. Laughs.
Behind me, I hear pool balls crack
& rattle into pockets,
a cue tapping the concrete.
A man sits at the bar. He lifts his hand.
The bartender pulls the bottle of Jack
back down from the shelf.
She pulls her hand from my shoulder.
The song ends.
We both take a drink,
share a silence.

'I could go for some more Beatles,'
she says, 'more wine.' I walk to the bar,
order another beer, another glass of red.
The box hangs on the wall,
beside the decorative pay-phone.
I select 'SEARCH' on the monitor,
press the letter 'B.'
It's an internet jukebox--
millions of songs at the touch of a screen.
No more CDs or quarters.
I glance over at her.
She's looking down, reading a menu.
Her hair's draped over
her right shoulder,
down to her breasts, a few lucky strands
hanging in the shadows. I can't see
her eyes, but I have them memorized.
I want her. I want her right now.
I swipe my card then begin choosing songs.
Some things change, some don't.

Will Walton is thirty-two years old, and currently lives in Georgia. He has a BA in Creative Writing/Poetry from Valdosta State University. Most recently, his poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Poetry Quarterly, Lost Coast Review, Waterways, Common Ground Review, IthacaLit, SN Review, Tipton Poetry Journal, and others.

Lost in Translation

Kimberley Chong

Boys and girls at the playground
They giggle and scream
A language that I haven't spoken
In a long time, and has become foreign
They yell and command at
Each other, but the wind mistakes it
As its order and carries them
In the air, while they frolic and rollick –
The foliage cavort to be invited, Wind
Does, in fact demands it, because
The children are young, and for them
The leaves execute perfect cartwheels,
Gambol and gambling with the Wind as one,

Rapturous in nature's rupture.
All this time I lie beneath the ceiling fan,
While it blows, rubs hot air in my face
I huff it off like a miser, secretly hoping
For the children to traverse my lawn,
Wind would come along, and I would
Extend my arms, say, 'Please! Make
Yourselves at home!' Maybe they
Could teach me that language again,
And Wind would fondle my face,
Have my back, and love me like he did
Once more.
But I'm too proud to ask.

Kimberly Chong is a Malaysian born Chinese. She is 18 and currently resides in Brooklyn, New York. She was diagnosed with clinical depression at the age of fifteen and is now on her second gap year upon graduation from high school. Kimberly will soon be pursuing a BA in English Literature and Music at Cardiff University in the UK.

As much as depression is a relentless one-eyed cross of a bitch and a pit bull that she would not hesitate to stab any time of the day, Kimberly does believe in balance. And under the throes of depression, she has discovered her passion for art, in which she finds the perfect medium to placate her soul. Her passions include writing and reading, music, and chess. She would enjoy nothing more than a good book with the Beatles making love to her eardrums on a rainy day and a rusty old typewriter by the window.

She originally picked up the chessboard in a search for new hobbies and distractions alongside the Prozac, but her love for chess grew as her understanding and appreciation of the game developed, and now enjoys anything between a casual game with an old man in the park and competitive chess. She sings and plays the piano, guitar, and the ukulele. Her love for music and singing set root at a very young age and she now aspires to be a musician and a singer-songwriter. Her music can be found at soundcloud.com/lewriter.

Abattoir

Kimberley Chong

I'm a big girl now,
I sleep with the lights off
while Teddy hangs from
the ceiling. He saw me
snap Jesus in half,
so I hung him
before he could tell.
But his spirit lingers
within the walls of
my playroom (padded and plastered)
Padded with soft toys, but
armed with glasses sitting
on shelves, framing white lies
that are not so white, because
if you'd look closely,
you can see the red eyes that
couldn't be removed, as they
developed the photos of me
thirteen years ago
(Did it scare my mother, I wonder)

Plastered with posters, of
Dorian Gray and Barney and Friends
each reminding me with their passive-
aggressive affectations, of
an allegiance I never swore, because
their cases were never made;
How could beauty be corrupted?
It defies but it is rife, Mr. Wilde
saw it from the start. The philistines
prosecuted him for it
How could innocence be lost?
Dinosaurs are not purple, don't
give me innocence and call it
fiction. And even if they
were purple, they died
before we even lived
Lord, you made me a child,
and you gave me a playroom
Should it then, not be fun
Or am I missing the point somehow?



Everytime You Go

Martin Stranka

Martin Stranka is a self-taught professional photographer based in Prague, Czech Republic. Stranka's distinctive vision of photography is etched as a unique space located in a balance and serenity, while his sophisticated and rewarding images exist in that narrow window of a few seconds between dreaming and awakening. Stranka has won over 50 major international photography awards from different competitions, including Professional Photographer of the Year, Emerging Talent Award in the Nikon International Photo Contest, Sony World Photography Awards, EISA Photo Maestro and International Photography Awards three years in a row.

Commute

Alex Ulloa

THE TRAIN RATTLES with a rhythmic, shz-tump shz-tump shz-tump and M tries not to think of the time. He focuses again on Hegel—infinite as transcendence of the finite, the universal as transcendence of the particular, freedom as transcendence of one's nature. This last almost sinks in, but the words start to swim.

His attention drifts to ads in the train. Ads for internet dating—happy couples laughing at one another; another for STD testing—a depressed-looking man staring forlornly out at M. M doesn't want to know what the man's results were, doesn't see how the man's vacant hopelessness is supposed to make anyone want to get tested for anything.

The train stops and she enters, slipping into a seat not quite opposite M. He thinks of her as the Kitten Hat Girl. He doesn't see her every day, but often enough to look for her. It's been almost a year now, and while she only wears the pink knit-hat with small kitten-ears when it's cold, this accounts for most of the days in this city.

A pretty, oval face, dark eyes and full but serious lips—someone as comfortable hiking or playing sports as discussing political or social issues, he imagines. Today she's dressed in a black pea-coat, tight black skirt, black leggings and gray furry boots. The pink kitten-ears undermine the somberness of her ensemble. Fighting the restrictions of her career choice, M thinks. He turns back to his book, but her face is burned on his mind like an image of the sun.

Hey!

No. Not this. Not the mimicry game.

Hey! Loser! I know you hear me.

The Daemon in M's head had been gone for almost two years before resurfacing this cold gray sunless morning, the anniversary of his return from his last trip—the India fiasco—waking M with its insistent, *Hey! Hey! Hey!* like a child trying to get his parents to notice the latest crayon scrawl he calls a horse or a cat or a tree. Taunting him to the train in its mocking, nasal tone, *Gonna be late again, assface!* M's forgotten some of its cruelest tricks, like the way its begun to mimic the Kitten Hat Girl. M grits his teeth, looks at his book, the words dancing, swaying. He focuses on his breath—entering his nose, filling his lungs, flowing out.

Still trying meditation, huh? Didn't seem to help with The German Girl. Thought that retreat in the middle of your India trip was enough meditation for a lifetime, for you. Just sat there reliving past sex-capades—stand-alone nights of nameless drunk college girls with low self-esteem and daddy issues. Erection after erection while pretending to search for inner-calm. Speaking of which, what position you got me in today? A kitten-eared shadow leans into him. Got me in the black thong again, huh? Hey! What about pink—to match the hat! The voice has a rough edge, like she'd been shouting across a smoke-filled bar the night before. You want me to leave the hat on? The boots too, right?

God, yes. Instantly pissed for being drawn in by the Daemon. How the fuck is Hegel

supposed to compete with this?

The Daemon only seems to appear when M's life in general feels listless, hopeless, numb. All 'boo hoo' all the time. He thinks of it spelled with a capital 'D' and the 'ae' diphthong. The diphthong makes him think of a medieval monk scurrying down a dark, stone-walled tunnel, carrying a torch, reaching a locked wooden door—the kind with metal reinforcement bands and a large iron lock. A bead of sweat on the monk's brow as he puts the torch in the wall, fumbles with an enormous ring of black iron keys, each the size of a screwdriver, glancing nervously over his shoulder. As he finds the right key, wet flapping footsteps and a laughter-like hiss seep from the darkness behind him. The monk freezes, turns, opens his mouth to scream.

So, you hard? Her raucous laugh startles M. That's what she sounds like when she laughs? *Make any more deductions about me Sherlock? Maybe I'm the one to make you forget The German Girl. What was her name? Whatever. Like her name matters...*

But it does matter. Her face is already hazy—have to hold on to at least her name.

Ingeborg. It wasn't just the easy talk and laughter. It was what she shared—despair when a parent showed up at her elementary school and dismissed their child's drawings or stories with a, "Hmm, "; her irritation at a bureaucracy that focused on scores rather than learning; her anger at teachers who invested in petty squabbles rather than students.

How she listened when he admitted to having no positive feelings for parents who never seemed to want him. Holding his hand, rubbing her thumb over his calloused knuckles, her attentive eyes full of sadness.

Not sure that's how it happened, big guy. But whatever, she's less real now than I am. And you're nothing more to her than an indistinct

memory—an American she met somewhere in India, got to know for a week or so. You won't even reach the lofty heights of a title like you've given her—The German Girl. So, no, the name doesn't matter, because you don't matter. She clicks her tongue, a touch of the Daemon's usual wheezing laugh creeping in. You know, you could just talk to me, if you had balls...

You're not supposed to bother people on the way to work, right? Isn't that an unspoken rule of the commute? We all...

We all suffer in our personal hell? I think that's your thing, stud. Not everyone here hates their life as much as you. Some of these people might even envy you—getting to sell European tour packages, rail passes, car rentals. You can practically travel for free now. Ironic, seeing how you've lost your spontaneity and drive. Remember the electricity you felt holding your first travel guide? Called it your Bible, right? She whistles a slow, mournful melody. What'd she say on that last day, thin shawl wrapped around her shoulders? "It gets so cold when the sun goes. Are you cold?" and staring at you—eyes wide, lips parted.

I gave her my sweatshirt...

She wanted a lot more than your ragged old sweatshirt, tiger. Now why didn't you kiss her?

I just felt...off...overwhelmed...where I was...

Oh! Right! It was India's fault! Let's go ahead and blame an entire nation for your lack of balls. It had nothing to do with her being a real adult—not some drunk party girl still trying to piss off her parents, impressed by shit like, "Oh, you've never been to Paris? Oh, you'd love it! One of my favorite cities!" No way that was the problem. The shadow leans in so close, M almost smells lavender with a coconut undertone. But no reason to regret. I mean, you guys didn't get along that well. Day after day after day talking, laughing, laughing and talking,

but who doesn't find that every day at the base of the Himalayas. Just another ho-hum experience. Besides, if anything had happened with The German Girl...

"Ingeborg," M whispers into his book. After breakfast, they'd walked huddled together down to the footbridge, crossed the Ganges, wordlessly turning left instead of right—up the small mountain walkway instead of down into town as they'd originally planned. Up, up, up, until they reached the small waterfall, wading into the cold pool, her pulling him to stand beneath it, "We must! We cannot come here and know we did not do this thing."

Like I was saying, if anything had happened with The German Girl, the kitten-eared shadow repeats, You wouldn't have me to obsess over, would you? You'll never have the balls to actually talk to me, so I can be everything you want. I'm a fucking god.

Opens his mouth, snaps it shut, digs nails into his book. What am I supposed to do! Go back and find her? I don't even know her last name or where she lives. Am I supposed to do something with you—her—the Kitten... M grimaces. I mean, the girl right there, across from me. I don't get it, I never get it!

What'd your Dad say when your uncle asked if you wanted to learn chess? "The boy will not understand. He is too slow." A solid point. Not my job to spell it out for you, slow poke. Your Mom used to make that point too, didn't she? And that you were lazy, selfish, generally useless. Don't really blame you for dating girls as empty and narcissistic as her. How's that logic go again? Get them to love you and that'll prove your Mom was wrong? Wow. You are a piece of work. And you think you and all that crazy have a shot with me? She chuckles that wheezing laugh, blending with the rhythmic train rattle.

M steals a look at the girl, only a few feet

away. She stares into a thick paperback, rocking slightly with the train.

They pull into the city-center, M's transfer to the west-bound line. In the mass pressing against the doors, his book shifts sharply under his arm, slipping to the floor. Before he can bend, Kitten-Hat dips and plucks it up. He catches a playful grin as she silently mouths the title. She looks up and offers the book with a smile.

"Thanks," he mumbles, lost in the electricity coursing under his skin, pulsing in his guts. Her lips part to speak and he has enough time to wonder if things are really going to change. That rare electric bolt of awareness—that little push from somewhere, Opportunity here! Wake the fuck up and shake my goddamn hand!

But the doors slide open and the human wave washes him deep onto the platform. When he stops, he's halfway to the mouth of the tunnel leading to the west-bound line. Craning his neck, looking this way and that, he spots a pink knit-hat with kitten-ears bobbing toward the surface tunnel.

Dumbass! She was gonna talk to you! Never get that chance again...

"Goddamnit!" spits through clenched teeth, loud enough to turn passing heads. He rubs a hand over his mouth, watching kitten-ears drift in and out of sight.

She'd only fuck with you...

"Fuck!" More glances. A cop actually looks up from his coffee. M yanks off his gloves, checks his phone for the time, curses. Stumbles as he's clipped from the side. An old man in a red-and-white knit-hat, an ice-scraper in one hand, a plant in a distended plastic bag in the other.

"Watch where you're going!" the old man says, shuffling by, mumbling curses within a black-and-red striped scarf and silver beard.

"Fuck you, old man!" M spits, surprised by his anger, disappointed by the whine in his voice. The old man waves dismissively with the ice-scraper. Why's he got an ice-scraper?

That was awesome! Fuck that old man!

M grits teeth, dives into the crowd, struggling through the roiling flow. When he reaches the street, the world is brighter than before the train was swallowed into the city's bowels. The sky remains a carpet of gray low-hanging cloud cover, but now torn by deep blue gashes. He squints and blinks. The streets are covered in filthy icy slush, but where sunlight filters down, the slush scintillates like cut glass.

Hey! Get back to the west-bound. You do not want to be late again. Idiot.

M looks back at the station. Looks down at his phone. Flash of a pink hat to his right, leaving a coffee shop, sipping a silver travel-mug.

Heart pounding. What am I doing?

She's halfway across the wide avenue and a biting wind slaps his face.

You can't—won't—do this, you know that. It's so much easier—no! It's so much more honest to see world as it is than as you'd like it to be. They're all pricks—every one of 'em—and they don't give a rat's ass about you.

M watches the kitten-hat march along the opposite sidewalk. Eyes locked on her, he leaps into the street, zig-zagging through slush-slowed traffic, caught up in the recklessness and the movement, leaping over a glut of slush in the gutter.

He flies like an athlete, then hits the dark slick of ice. For a moment—a hair's breadth of time—he slides on one foot, the other held up behind like an ice-dancer. A wave of grace pours through him and he knows he can hold this slide, walk away unscathed.

The fall hurts his ego more than his body. And his body hurts like hell. He sprawls palms-out scraping across course ice and concrete,

the side of his head kissing the cold pavement with a sharp snap, his right knee hitting with the force of a hammer blow. He sucks cold air through clenched teeth. Slush seeps in where it touches. Then hands are on him and the pavement flies away as quickly as it rushed to greet him.

"You okay, man?" says a black puffy jacket and hoodie.

"Shit, you're bleeding," says a black well-cut overcoat and behind-the-neck ear-muffs, perfect hair still un-mussed.

M blinks, pulls from their hands. "I'm fine," he snaps.

Holy shit! That was better than Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding in a street brawl!

"You sure, pal? You just got a crazy kinda faraway look on your face," Puffy-Jacket says.

"I'm fine," M says, body screaming. "Slipped on some fucking ice, is all."

The men stare as he walks off. Throbbing pain bellows from hands, head and knee.

You should've told 'em the truth, "Sorry fellas, but I was trying to impress a pretty girl with my show, 'Dipshit on Ice!' Think she'll like it...or love it!"

M balls his fists—fresh pain jolts him to a quicker pace. How much worse can things get? His knee is like a sack of broken glass, his head throbs, but he smiles when the Daemon offers no additional commentary.

Then he sees her. No more than fifty feet away. She flings open a large glass door. He speeds up and is in the building as she stops at the elevator. Squeezes his fist again—sharp pain washing through him. How much worse can it get? He strides across the wide floor of the lobby, tries not to stare at her—she takes a sip from her silver travel mug, adjusts the black courier bag slung over her shoulder, purses her full lips while eyeing the descending numbers above the elevator—but it's like trying

not to think of a blue polar bear dancing in the corner after being told not to think about blue polar bear dancing in the corner.

A door opens further along the wall to the left of the elevator, followed by a deep foreboding echo. He sees a stairwell door swinging shut behind a fast-paced suit throwing on a heavy coat. The elevator doors slide open and she pushes in with the others. M is steps away, close enough to see the wear on her hat. He weaves left to the brushed metal water fountain in the lobby wall. Water running over his lips, he sees her say, “Fifth floor,” to a tall, chisel-jawed man in a camel-haired coat.

He wipes his mouth as the elevator doors shut. Looks to the stairwell. Noise erupts in his head, but he is through the door, lunging for the stairs. Takes them two at a time, knee grinding, hands searing, temple throbbing. Melting slush seeps to his skin. He spirals up and up, faster and faster, gripping the metal railing, screaming hands pulling him on. Each new grip and release sends pain, propelling him up, up, up. Skin grows hot beneath layers of clothes. His rampaging assent an echoing clatter.

He hits the bar on the fifth-floor and stumbles breathlessly into a carpeted hall. Halts at the hall’s humming silence, like a hotel hallway in the middle of the night.

A single bright note rings out and she appears, stepping from the elevator, alone.

Memory floods—he and Ingeborg as the cold mountain water hit like ice and they’d both screamed and leapt from the falls. The laughter from the families around them, the laughter feeding their own.

The Kitten Hat Girl sees him.

His breath stops. “Hey,” he croaks, forcing a stiff wave and smile.

That’s your intro, “Hey?”

She smiles uncertainly.

“Um, hey,” M says, heart pounding. “I, um, wanted to say hello. Wanted to thank you for picking up my book. Back at the station. Or on the train, rather.” Her mouth grows tight. “I had the book on philosophy,” he rushes on, “On the train, earlier. I dropped it. . .”

“Yeah, I remember. Wasn’t that long ago,” she says. “You didn’t look so. . .” she pinches her eyes, “bedraggled.”

“Oh, yeah. I was hit by a couple of guys. . .”

“O-kay,” she says slowly.

“I mean, sorry, not like, hit-hit,” he continues, “More like they bumped me. Just, like an accidental thing—not like they were trying to take me out or anything. I mean hurt me—not suggesting that some strangers would try to take me out to dinner or something. . . I mean,” M begins again, “In regards to the phrase, ‘take me out’, I meant this in an idiotic—no—idiomatic!—an idiomatic way. Like ‘take me out’ was supposed to mean ‘hurt me purposely’—purposefully?—um, which is not what they did. . .”

“Okay,” a hand up, the other arm wrapped tightly across her chest. “Look, I have to get to work, soooo. . .”

“Oh, yeah. Just wanted to thank you. It’s just, you reminded me of someone I met in India not that long ago. Well, over a year ago now, but, relatively, not all that long ago. . .” M rubs his hand over his mouth, sees her eyes go glassy—like he’s lecturing on the minutiae of credit-default swaps, “Sorry. I’m sorry. Shouldn’t have wasted your time.”

“You, um, just smeared blood. . . over your face,” she says, waving a hand around her mouth. “You should probably take care of that—and your head,” she taps her temple, “Looks kinda swollen.” She sighs, rolls her eyes, “Sorry for knocking your book on the floor back there.”

“No...wait...what?” M says. “You picked it up...”

She furrows her brow, head tilts, “Okay. Sure. Whatever.”

You blind idiot! HAHAHAHA!

“Hold on,” he says, “Sorry! I am terrible at this. Just...I see you on the train all the time and wanted to meet you, so I tried to thank you for getting my book, but I got shoved by the crowd, then I tried to catch up to you and slipped on some ice—I don’t know why I said I got knocked down by some guys, that was just weird—then I caught up but got nervous when I saw you at the elevator, ran up the stairs and it’s like the goddamn *Shining* in this hallway and then I just rambled at you about I don’t even know what...” M closes his eyes, breathes, “Would you give me a second chance at a first impression, as dumb as that sounds.”

“Uh, no,” she says, face serious. “This is... very weird.”

A cavity opens in his chest, a brick drops in his gut.

“But I really do need to get to work, so... bye.” She turns, disappears into an office.

Wheezing laughter follows him to the lobby. In the bathroom he sees a wide red smear across his chin and the sides of his mouth. The cavity in his chest is overwhelmed with the lancing bite of soap and water in scraped and still-weeping hands. On the street, the Daemon quiets into a white noise. M’s gloves are gone, lost somewhere in the chase. The wind bites into his torn palms and slush-wet pants.

The street is brighter than the lifetime that passed since entering her building—now her building. He looks up, the crush of gray-and-black towers framing the now cloud-spotted sky of blue.

Hey! Hey! Hey! Where’re you going? You know you’ve still got a job, right? Hello!

M walks, synching his breath with the rhythm of his footsteps. No plan, no goal—just walk the city he rushes through day after day after day. Nervousness rattles in his gut, like when he’d skip school or sneak out of his house when he was a teenager.

He passes banks, hotels, cafés. A bookstore. He stares in the window, reflected shadows of passersby vanishing into his own. A display of books surrounded by posters for exotic locales, a few small paper palm trees, some sunglasses, a pail and an overturned bucket of sand. The books are displayed like beachgoers—*Tropic of Cancer*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Our Man in Havana*, *Heart of Darkness*; these fictions mixing with travel guides to France, South-East Asia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

M slips into the store, opens his jacket. The bespectacled clerk, wearing a long red, yellow and black scarf despite the store’s warmth, looks up from a book, smiles, “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” M says.

“Ask if you need help finding anything,” the clerk says, slipping back into his book.

Shelves of books face him, to the left and the right, a pathway running between them to the back. He stops at the desk, whispers, “Um, where’s the travel section? Really like that display, by the way,” aiming a thumb at the front window.

Fourth shelf back and on the left,” he turns and points, “and thank you for saying so. You just won me a bet.” The clerk beams and adjusts his thick black-framed glasses.

Outside in the cold, M clutches a plastic bag with Wind City Books printed on the front. Walking to the station, he sees a payphone. Stares at the metal and molded-plastic anachronism. He lifts the worn black phone from the metal cradle, finds change in his backpack.

“Hello, um, could I talk to Claire real quick? Oh, it’s M... Oh, hey, Paul... Yeah, I’ll wait.” His foot taps, his finger runs along the machine’s cold metal face. “Claire! Hi! It’s... yeah... no, I’m alright, well, that’s actually why I’m calling. I won’t be in today. No! I’m fine. I mean, not really, but I’ll be okay. Just had a little accident on the way to the train. No, nothing serious. Well, not too serious. Slipped on ice, banged my knee and head pretty hard. Yeah, a doctor, actually planning to see one tomorrow, um, so I won’t be in tomorrow, either. Yeah... I know. Pain to get appointments. Yeah. Yeah. Hey, hate to cut you off, but I need to rest a bit. Yeah. Yeah. I’ll be in on Monday though,” he hugs the book to his chest, “Gotta go, Claire, need to call that doctor. What? No, really, I’m fine. Sure, it could be worse than I think. Uh huh. Sure. Anyway, gotta go, so, bye.”

He walks up to the platform. Runs his hands over the plastic bag, tracing the thick shape. The city passes, the snow and ice lit by bright sunlight. He rocks with the rhythm of the train.

Ingeborg slips back in. Getting back after sundown, sitting on the long balcony of their adjoining rooms, the Ganges a dark ribbon far below. They talked, sitting in white plastic chairs, making bizarre associations, laughing with each one.

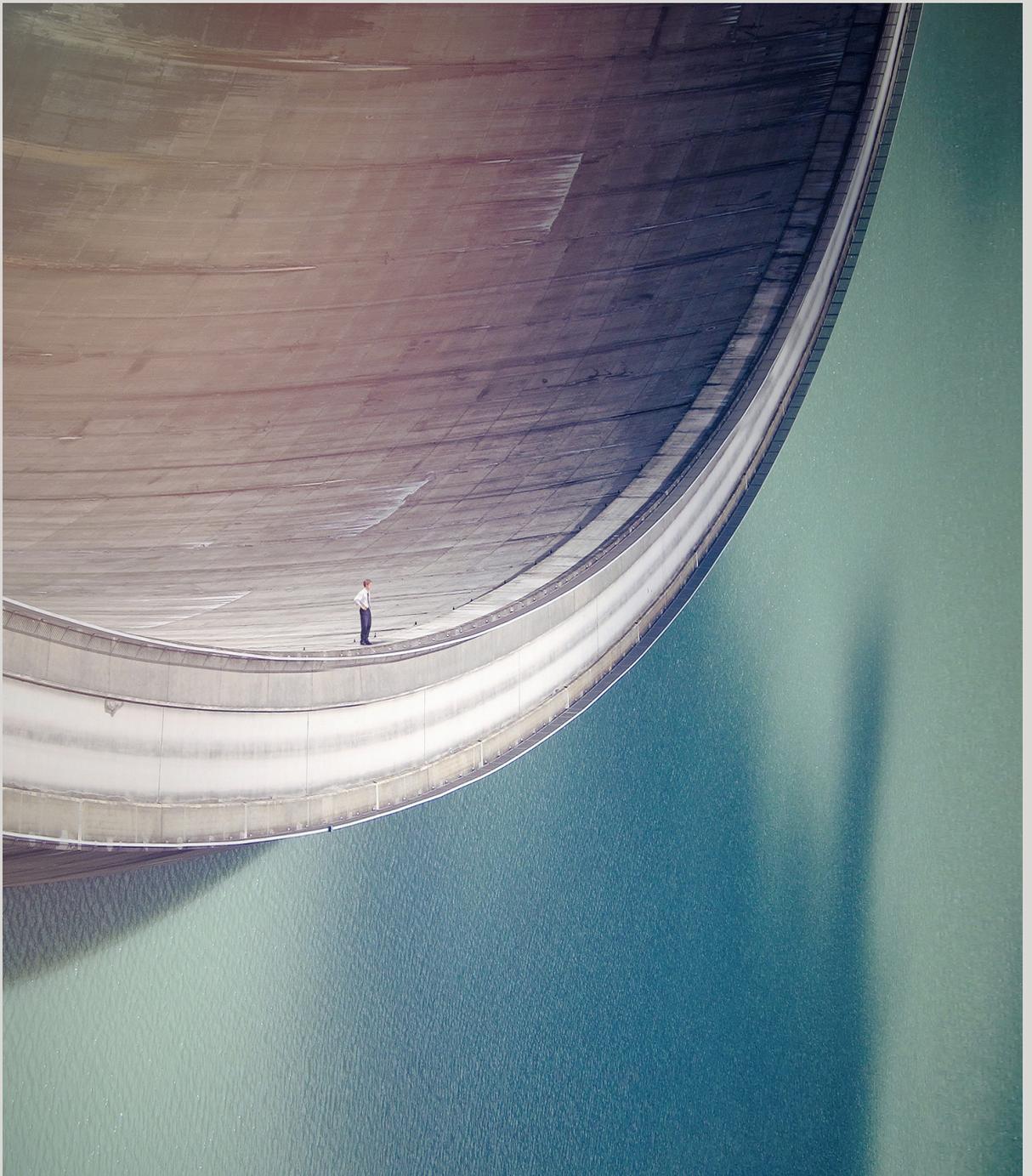
“Are you growing cold?” her eyes locked on his, her lips open. He holds the moment, wanting to go back and erase his response, “Um, I’m alright.” Then pausing before pulling off his hoodie and offering it. Her embarrassed smile and silence. The memory refuses to change.

Home, he pulls off pants, shirt, underwear, dumps it all in a corner and stares at it. After a moment, he picks them up, puts them on hangers near the heater. Finds a pen, wraps his nakedness in a comforter. Falls onto the sofa and pulls the book from the bag. A block of nearly translucent-thin pages, crisp and clean, smelling of new, untouched paper. The newest edition of what he’d called his Bible. Holds the thick edge to his nose, inhales the woody scent, flips to a random page.

A castle stands amidst a green mountain-side, bright blue skies, reflected in a clear lake. Flipping again, a simplified city-map, a key on one side, indicating museums, restaurants, hostels. Flipping again, a heading of, Things to See, followed by a list of sights and events.

He goes through country after country, circling cities and towns, street markets and museums, ruins and graveyards. Calculates costs—air, rail, daily expenses—again and again. It’ll take months. Maybe another nine or ten. Returns to circling cities and places, ignoring the distant but insistent, *Hey! Hey! Hey!*

Alex Ulloa recently moved to Miami. He loves the intense heat and sunshine, but does not love the fast cars everywhere. He is older than he’d like to be, but not old enough to get anything out of it beyond the occasional sickeningly smug sense of ‘life experience’. He fell in love with Poe and Lovecraft at far too young an age. He’s spent many frustratingly wonderful years playing in bands recording and touring—and will probably do it all again when he’s stopped crying to himself about it. He’s traveled enough to miss traveling when he’s not doing it. He’s lived in many different cities, including a couple in the middle of the country, which felt strange for a person who has spent most of his life living very close to the Atlantic Ocean. He’s worked more thankless and terrible low-wage jobs than is healthy for anyone. He loves reading and writing and working on the craft of fiction, which has kept him sane. He doesn’t eat animals, uses a bicycle as his means of transportation and thinks the world would be better off with more bikes and fewer cars.



Nowadays

Evgenij Soloviev

23

The First Month

Heather Rose

LANA DIDN'T LIKE LEMONS in her water or an odd number of ice cubes in the plastic trays they gave us when we moved in. She would say the acidity gave her canker sores, and there was no reason to use more than two pieces of ice in a drink. If they melted before you finished then you just weren't drinking fast enough.

We were staying at a motel in Bradford, a small nowhere town in northern New Hampshire. There was a Gas-N-Go, and a McDonald's that was only open for breakfast. Lana would pick up egg sandwiches and Diet Cokes around five o'clock every morning since her insomnia—and the methadone we were both taking—made her need for sleep sporadic. She would wake me up and put a cigarette in my mouth before I even opened my eyes. The only addiction I had anymore was to Lana and I craved her more than I had the drug that took over my life.

We would sit on the fold out bed, facing a television that didn't turn on, and feast on reheated eggs and stale bread and drink sugary syrup through paper straws. She would scratch at her arms, tracing small fading bruises of green and yellow, and pull at scabs left over from weeks earlier. They told us the first month would be the hardest. I had managed

by chewing my lips until they were raw, and scratching incessantly at a birthmark on my neck. I was proud to have survived the thirty days that promised me years of something better

Lana's skin was starting to glow from a faded pale porcelain to an olive tone I was less familiar with. Her boney knees seemed to grow fatter, and her protruding potbelly was starting to widen and flatten. I pushed on her stomach with my hand and felt the creases and hills of her insides. I traced my fingers over her exposed belly, and she laughed a little before opening a small packet of ketchup and squeezing the red substance around her belly button. I dunked my sandwich onto her now red skin and gobbled down a bite of my breakfast. She dipped a finger in the ketchup and sucked it. I kissed her arms where track marks had started to melt into scars. Lana tasted salty, like the waters near Roads and Bridges Rehab where we completed our ninety day cleanse. The taste of her skin remained as it had when we decided to rid our bodies of all our dependencies, besides the one we had for each other.

Lana said she liked how her body was changing, and I leaned in on her stomach—pushing harder than I should—as I had when my own mother was pregnant with a child I had never met. She winced, and I said I was

sorry. She lay down and tried to sleep again, and I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close with my fist against her stomach. My middle finger cracked against her skin. She said I was holding on too tight. I apologized again. Lana told me the baby liked Diet Coke and the thin air of New Hampshire in the fall. Unable to get comfortable, I left her on the bed and covered her with the wool blanket provided

by the motel. In the bathroom, I unscrewed a loosely secured outlet with my thumbnail and pulled out a spoon and needle and small cellophane bag. I took a yellow lighter from my back pocket, sat on the low toilet seat, and let the water in the bathtub run hot. Lana knocked on the door, and I told her I'd be right out. The lighter smelled like her hands, and I cried for the first time in years.

Heather Rose is a twenty-six year old writer from Nashua, New Hampshire. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Fiction Writing from Southern NH University and works at two local colleges as a Graduate Counselor and Adjunct English professor. Writing since the age of five, Heather has spent the last two decades working to make her dream of being a writer a reality by being published in poetry anthologies, short story magazines, and most recently coming in second place in a nationwide Six Word Short Story Contest and having one of her short stories from her thesis published in The Henniker Review.

The Fluttering of the Robins, the Counting of Their Feathers

Laura Hanna

We never grew used to her,
her frilly lace dresses,
her running panty hose.
We opened the windows
to clear the room of her smell
of sweat masked with
lavender Lady Speed Stick.
We felt the breeze that fluttered
through the newspapers she kept
on the kitchen table
from the year 1943, the year
her husband was shot
and killed in the war,
the year time stopped for her.
The pages flapped open in the wind
like the wings of the robins that haunt us.

Laura Hanna is a graduate student at Auburn University earning a Master of Arts in English with a concentration in literature. She also teaches composition there. Her favorite genre is poetry, especially the elegy.

Hiring Hall

Mitchell Grabois

MY MOTHER was still sleeping. I took the keys from her purse and started the old Ford. I was tired of hitchhiking, getting rides with stinky old men trolling for young boys.

In San Pedro, I stopped at the Rexall. I bought a postcard with a picture of a morbidly fat man wearing a t-shirt: I BEAT ANOREXIA.

My mother's name was Anorexia. The fat man was my father. I bought a stamp, too. It was a forever stamp. That seemed right. Forever, I would be gone.

With one postcard and one stamp, I would erase my garbage past. I wanted to be prepared in case I shipped out that very morning. I wanted to have that postcard ready to slip into a fat blue mailbox.

I wrote on it:

"Your jalopy is on K St in San Pedro in front of the Merchant Marine Hiring Hall. It has no gas so you'd better put some in unless you want to conk out on the freeway. In a better world couples would need govamint licenses to have kids and you losers would never have gotten one."

(I'm running out of room at this point, my writing getting cramped and illegible)

"The wind and salt spray will clean me off. After 20 years I should be ok. You'll be dead or on an Alzheimer's ward."

I stood in the street as the sun rose over San Pedro and looked at the Hiring Hall, its windows dark as octopus ink.

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over eight hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, including The Oddville Press. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for work published in 2012, 2013, and 2014. His novel, Two-Headed Dog, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. He lives in Denver, Colorado.

Pep Boy

Samantha Madway

THREE YEARS AGO, back when life was still passing me by at a pace that I was comfortable with, my son told my wife and me he was some other kind of gay and wanted to get surgery to cut off his dick and have them 'surgically construct a working vagina,' as he put it. I shoved his head through a wall, prompting Mirabelle, my exceedingly loveless wife, to leave me for quote my lack of understanding and compassion towards our daughter unquote. Yes, she said, 'daughter.'

In reality, she had been wanting to leave for years after it turned out that the only thing I was destined to amount to was assistant regional manager of all the Pep Boys in Northeast Ohio, and not CEO of Pep Boys, which I had always told her was an impossibility since I wasn't an heir to the Pep Family Fortune, but in truth was never going to happen because I was a pretty poor worker with a crappy attitude. I only got as far as I did on account of not having much competition. Still, here I'd been thinking I'd done pretty good for myself, being manager of the plain old local Niles Pep Boys when we met. But as it turned out, she had bigger plans for me. Or, I suppose, for her really, and she figured giving up on me was about the closest she could get to them.

Our son Reggie as it turns out, Reggie can

be short for both Reginald, or Regina gave me a second chance even in light of the whole head-in-the-wall incident. But I blew it by beating the ever-loving piss out of him when I found out he was changing his name.

Now it's almost as if I have no family. There's no Christmas cards for me in the mailbox come December. On my birthday, I usually go to Clarence's Bar by myself and hope to pick up a chick that isn't a hooker even if she might look like one. Sure, usually, I end up with a whore, but there has been the occasional non-working professional type who'll let you kiss her on the mouth and might actually want to stay the night. There was this time one of the second kind truly surprised me. She was named Breanne, though you can never be sure of their real names, even if they seem like perfectly regular gals. Truth be told, you can't usually even be sure what sort they are, whether or not there's a tab at the end, 'cause even pros'll throw a pity fuck your way now and again. (Lord knows the regular ladies do it all the time.)

"Hey there, good lookin'."

"Well hi," she said, drawling on it like there was no such thing as time itself. I assumed she was a working girl on account of the way she

knew just how I'd hit on her and just how to deal with it, but she didn't have on so much makeup like the others, the kind with all that glitter shit. I thought maybe she was dressed like one, but around here, any girl in a dress looked about the same 'cause girls came to Clarence's to get picked up. No one goes to a bar like this one just to have a nice time. Whether you're a guy or a gal, you're either here to fuck or get fucked, and this ripe little peach was of the second breed, looking for someone to buy her a drink and tell her she looked all pretty-like in that skin-sticking red getup she had on that hugged her thirty-something body in all the right and wrong places and looked damn fine to everyone, especially a pickled beet like myself.

"Name's Holcomb. Earl Holcomb."

"Hello there, Earl." She twisted up her fingers in her necklace. "Can I call you Earl?"

"You can call me anything you like."

She giggled. I knew she would even though it wasn't funny. We sounded like kids, whatever they sound like nowadays, since all the crap stays the same even if the words change.

"I'm Breanne." She started up with her necklace again, sliding it like she was hoping to hypnotize me or something.

This is how the game is played between man and woman always has been. And I don't know if Reggie knows how women operate when they're trying to get picked up, and he certainly doesn't know how to be one. So Reggie's not only going to be unable to do what he's supposed to to get someone in the sack, but he's going to fall victim to the god-damn bitches who are trying to outmaneuver each other, and is gonna get even less mercy than a man gets. Women know men don't know what to make of 'em, so they take some pity on 'em, go a little easy so as not to bruise

'em to eternity and back. But the competition that goes on between women for a good man? Well that must be about the most brutal contest the world's ever known. They're all onto each other's tricks so they know just how to foil 'em too.

"It's nice to meet you." She let go of her necklace to shake the hand I'd held out to her.

"Pleasure's mine."

"What're you doing here all by your lonesome?"

I told her it was my birthday.

"No better day for a drink. But alone? No one should be alone on their birthday."

"Then I suppose it's your responsibility to fix that."

She pulled at the hem of her dress. I knew she was uncomfortable, but also flattered. She looked about thirty-eight, the perfect age. Just young enough to be young still, and old enough to be self-conscious. Vulnerable. Empathetic. She waited for me to say something, even though I had given her an opening to buy me a drink.

"Say, Breanne, can I get you a drink?"

"Oh my," she said. She put her palm to her cheek like she was either real hard pressed to decide or totally shocked. "I...I'd like that. But I...I suppose I should buy you a drink, shouldn't I? It being your birthday and all." She raised her voice at the end of every sentence, like each one was a question, even her name.

"Aw, no, you shouldn't waste your money on...on someone you'll have forgotten all about by tomorrow. Pretty thing like you doesn't keep one man on her mind for long." I knew she was old enough that she most certainly did keep one man on her mind for as long as she could, but I was trying to keep things playful. She might've been skilled in the game of man versus woman, but not enough so that she didn't have to end up at a place

like Clarence's on a Tuesday night. It made me feel sort of sorry for her, like even if all this was for show or to prove she could get what she wanted from me, she still wasn't getting exactly what she wanted. But then again, I didn't feel too bad neither 'cause it meant I was gonna get what I wanted.

"No, no. Of course I have to."

"Well that's awful kind of you, Breanne."

"What're you drinking?"

"Three fingers of bourbon."

"You know what you like."

"I like what I know." I winked at her.

She laughed and ordered the drinks. She got me exactly what I asked for, and Jesse, the bartender, poured it with relative ease, it being a drink that required absolutely no expertise, only a proper hand. 'Cept since Jesse was barely old enough to tend, even simple and standard didn't always come out right. I don't even think he could drink yet, not legally at least. It showed in the kind of red his cheeks got while pouring liquor. It was like a little boy putting cookies on a tray: he knows he can't have any, so he's tickled just to be allowed to touch 'em.

Jesse gave her a good once-over while she ordered, then looked at me like I had to vouch for her getting my drink. As if I was the only guy in Niles to order three fingers of bourbon out in the country, any man that ain't ordering three fingers of somethin' ain't old enough to drink yet. Breanne ordered gin. She was trying to seem sophisticated. Or, if not that, then from the city at least. Thought she could impress an ol' country mouse like me by ordering a real drink. But alcohol is alcohol, as long as it ain't flavored like a fruit. I wasn't gonna give her no medal for getting something that didn't end in '-ini.'

"Here ya go, ma'am."

"Thanks. Can I have the bill?"

"Oh, I...I was gonna put 'em on...on Earl's tab. The bourbon's for Earl, ain't it?"

"Sure is, but...but I'm getting this round."

Jesse stared at her a moment. He was thinking the same thing I was: she was unlike any girl who came around here. They were all short skirts and flirts for free drinks and a laugh. No one knew what hospitality was, not to a man from a woman. Around here, a woman can't buy herself a place to live without rousing attention, let alone a drink. So Jesse was more aghast at me for allowing this to pass than he was at her for being so willing. It was like I was supposed to be embarrassed to let a woman buy a drink for me. But I wasn't, because I wanted her to. I wanted to owe her something. Or, at the very least, to feel like I got something from her she couldn't take away, like she could love or lust if that's what she'd given me.

She handed me my glass and took a little sip of her own. "So, what do you do, Earl?"

"Take a guess."

She looked me over real good. I figured she was trying to find grease spots or singses or something to see whether I was a mechanic or an electrician. Most of the guys around here work with their hands. Some women look down on 'em, city women mostly I guess, but it's honest work. Not like they're pimps or nothing.

"Well, you...you don't work with your hands."

"How'd you figure?"

She put her little hands on mine. There were rings on some of her fingers, but not on the one that counts. "They're soft. No calluses. You...you can see just by looking at them."

"I'm impressed. Most'a your type just figures we're all plumbers or some shit."

"My type?"

“Women.”

“All women? That’s a pretty big generalization.”

“So is thinking every man who goes to a bar on a Tuesday night is some grease monkey.”

She thought on this a minute. I was challenging her because women may act like they don’t want a fight or nothing, but that’s what they live for—they just don’t want us to know it so they can act a victim if they start to lose. But Lord knows no man who knows what’s good for him will let his lady, or any for that matter, lose a fight. Even if she’s so wrong it’s enough to bring him near to tears.

“Well, I...I’m not all women.”

“You don’t need to tell me that.”

I finished my bourbon and let the glass bang when I put it down on the counter. The bar was getting quieter. It’s never too busy on Tuesdays since all the family-types were back to real time and had to go from work to home to work to home until the two didn’t seem all that different and the weekend was the only thing to make ’em separate again. But, even so, it felt too early for the no-collars to be leaving just yet.

“You’re out.”

“Don’t worry your pretty head about me. Jesse’ll know what to do.” I raised my eyes to find him, pointed at my glass, and before another minute passed, I was ready to lift hand to mouth again. “Where are your manners, Jesse?” I didn’t really care, but I wanted Breanne to think I did. Playing a woman hot/cold is like teasing a dog with a rubber steak: they don’t really know if what you’ve got there is any good, but the fact that they can’t have it makes it look so damn appetizing.

He looked at me with his head cocked to the side. “Whaddya mean, Earl?”

“Get this lovely lady another glass of what-

ever she takes. Put it on my tab.”

“Sure thing, Earl. What’ll ya have, ma’am?”

“Well...if he’s paying”—she laughed and rubbed her chin with the pad of her finger and let her tongue poke some from between her thick lips—“then I’ll have what he’s having.”

There it was. She got me. It was a good move, ordering one of mine. Men are suckers for any type of flattery, and women are very powerful sorts ’cause they know just how to get a man. Even when we think we’re winning, we never are. That’s why I worry about Reggie. Well, that, and because I can’t understand why anyone’d ever want to get his dick sliced off. Maybe his problem ain’t that he’s not a girl but the fact that he wants to be one. It’s a little late to harp on that still though. But how will Reggie know that one of the best ways into a man’s heart, or his pants at the very least, is by surrendering to him? Reggie never had any luck with the ladies in the first place, so how does he intend to become one without even knowing how to keep himself from being chewed up by ’em?

I had to commend her, give her something for pulling out the win. “Say, why don’t we finish these drinks and then take this someplace a little more—” I was reaching, or I thought I was.

“Let’s go to my place.” She was nearly off the stool with saying that.

I must’ve gave her a look—didn’t mean to, but how could I help it with eagerness like that?—and made her realize how desperate she seemed, beating me to the finish like that, ’cause then she said, “I’m betting it’s cleaner,” but not like she’d been planning to from the start.

I almost asked her to marry me right then and there. The damage was done. I knew from the start she wasn’t just the same old bar fare, but I hadn’t realized that the whole time,

she'd been aiming for the exact same thing as me: a night off from the loneliness.

"Now what would give you an idea like that?"

"Just a wild guess." She was running her finger along the rim of her glass like I seen kids do to get the things to sing, and like I seen Bond girls do in the movies to get a man mesmerized as much as if they were naked.

"I'll have you know I keep a very clean house for a slob."

She laughed, but I wasn't that funny this time either. That's how women are though. They can't stand to see you emasculated by your own joke or downtrodden by the cruel play of another. If they're the cause, well, that's another matter. They love to make you squirm; they'll rip your ticker right out your chest. But if they have to watch the aftereffects, or, better yet, if they see what some other woman did to you, well, that they can't handle. But if they can keep you from failing until they're ready for it, they'll do what it takes to keep you up until it's the right time to step back and watch you crash to the ground and burst into a heap of smoke and flames.

That's another way Reggie's going to get torn alive just for trying out there: they'll

expect more from him as a her than they would out of just a him. But the worst thing is it won't just be by the people who don't understand him (I mean, her?). It's going to be by the very people he—she—is looking to for love. And not just the love of a mom or dad, but that real kind of love. The kind that'll kill you if it leaves too soon. The kind that I thought me and Mirabelle shared without Pep Boys, without credentials, and without letdowns and a son who's using my alimony money to buy a vagina. The kind that makes you want the person just for who they are and hate the person they want to be because that'd make 'em different than the person you love.

I tipped back my head and cleared out the rest of my glass in one go, and she did the same. I asked her if she was ready to get out of there. It was time to go somewhere we could pretend to care about each other for a little while. As she took my hand and led me to her car, her dress strap fell down and rested against her arm. Just hanging there, so close to letting go completely. Maybe it was some ploy, a way to get me going before we got anywhere, but just then, I didn't really care so much about a thing like that.

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The Cardinal Sin

Timothy De Jong

It's said pride is the cardinal sin,
and this one seems to flaunt it,
flitting about a fencepost
above a thick carpet of snow.
Dab of red paint on white canvas,
he seems somehow to know
how the cat in the window
sits and watches, feigning
indifference, licking his paws.
The cardinal senses his eye –
and ours; dips his wings
for his audience,
coaxes its applause.
The cat's tail twitches,
he flexes his claws,
watching the bird swoop and preen.
Flap of scarlet silk
on a white screen,

bright red actor in a white film,
star of each scene,
vivid as Hawthorne's famous letter,
the cardinal circles again
and again sets down.
Red ink on a blank white page,
he struts across center stage,
subtle as a bloodstain
on a wedding gown.
So carelessly solitary,
so selfattentive,
this bright creature actuates the pose
of world shrunk to self,
the very thing we know
we must most resist;
but his audacious beauty redeems all;
winter's grip may be iron,
but a flower's blossomed in its fist.

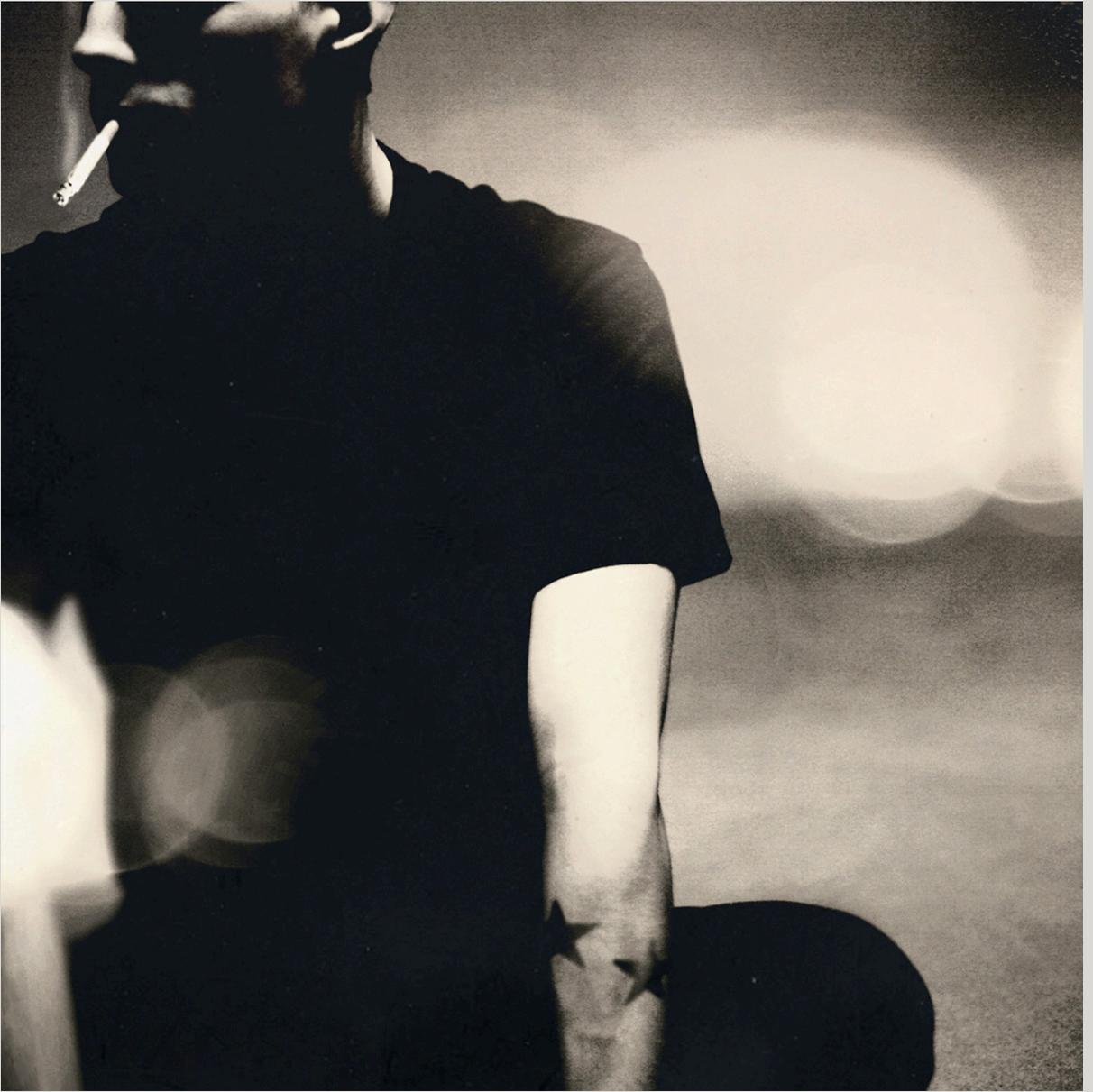
Timothy De Jong teaches in the Department of Language and Liberal Studies at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario. He received his Ph.D. in English from The University of Western Ontario in 2013 after defending a dissertation on sympathy and postwar American poetics. He is the past winner of the Marguerite R. Dow Canadian Heritage Award in Creative Writing and the Maitland J. Banting Silver Quill Award, and his poems have been published in the journals Euphony, Forge, and Booth.

The Restart

Kristina Brodbeck

I have divorced my past, and put myself up for adoption.
He wanted his children to be genetically modified, his women to be plastic.
He has both now. They are the latest models.

Kristina Nichole Brodbeck is a graduate student at Northern Kentucky University working toward a Master's degree in English, focusing on creative writing and literary studies. She holds a B.A. in English from The College of Mount St. Joseph. She teaches as part of a graduate teaching and mentoring program at Cincinnati State. This is her first publication outside of her undergraduate campus literary magazine. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband and three children.



Since You Left

Martin Stranka

Strangerman

Arthur Davis

MY NAILS ARE DIRTY. Always been that way.

I didn't know men had their nails cut until I moved from Hutchins, Georgia to Lafayette, which had three theaters and a mall where you could buy everything and not speak to anybody as they drifted by you in a glaze of indifference. I spent my first weeks in Lafayette walking up and down the mall, inspecting merchandise I had never seen, people I could not have imagined.

I listened, sometimes walking right behind couples, making mental notes on how they walked and how badly they spoke about their dearest friends. And, there was always the cheating. Irma cheated on me. That's why I killed her. I knew it was reason enough.

My small room is next to the storeroom where Gus is examining the eggs and bread and bacon he should have thrown out yesterday. He cheats too. Definitely on his customers, and probably on his wife. He has grease under his nails but since he works in the kitchen, no one sees except to acknowledge his fattened, bearded face over the counter where he doles out dishes of food to Gretchen, his waitress and sometime wife and Diana-Lynn, a pinched young girl with a name she has spent her young life trying to live up to.

Gus slapped his hand against the storeroom

wall. "Hey, time to get your fat ass out here and help with the garbage."

I haven't got a fat ass, but expect he's said that to every drifter who came by needing a day's wages and found himself indentured to the temptation that was Gretchen. "Don't crap in your pants about it, Gus," I said, but he doesn't hear.

I rolled out of bed, my hands stiff with the memory of Irma's neck, how she bent and twisted. Her neck fit so, I guess, perfectly, in my hands. Again, my room shudders with the boss man's impatience.

"Hey, let's get it moving back there."

Fucking Gus. I slip into my pants and yesterday's shirt, a blue and white striped denim I found in Lawson's Dime Store over in Hutchins. It was Irma's favorite too. I was grateful to her for not ripping it apart during her struggle.

"You're seeing somebody else, girl," I said confidently.

"Now don't you go on about that again," Irma had said in that tone that diminished everything and everyone.

Irma's ancestors had endowed her with the skill to make you feel less about yourself, always questioning your purpose, keeping you in place with just a nod of exasperation. She

controlled me like that, most of the time we were together. But it was not until the end that I realized what she was doing, and angered, so powerfully angered, that she had done what she had done and worse, that I was so uncertain and blind that I couldn't defend myself against it.

I took out the garbage, the foul leavings of Dave's Diner. Gus bought it from Dave Gutterson a dozen years ago with his young wife Gretchen. They were full of promise, as Diana-Lynn told me on a hot airless Georgia night some weeks past, in anticipation of the opening of a plant that was to have made car fenders. They bought a plot of land with a loan on Gus' insurance policy. Gretchen was fifteen years younger and both thought they were on their way to the easy life. The plant never opened and they barely survived on tourists and locals—the lean combination stirred Gus' brooding resentment that preferred to believe there was a celestial conspiracy bent on keeping him down.

"Here," I grunted, "where do you want this?"

Gus looked up from his hissing stove, the counter spotted with truck drivers and day laborers. The rusted sign they first used when they bought the place. "Where the hell was it?"

"Out back behind the barn where you must have left it." It was a lie. They're so easy to come by and work so often and make others think so much less of themselves.

"I never put it out back there."

"Got to be you or Gretchen." I love to refer to his wife. It gives me license to nod or look in her direction more than usual.

Best part of this shit-kicking job is watching her bending over and reaching out to clean off the tables. Spreads her backside cheeks wide when she moves the filthy wet rag from side to side, swiping crumbs onto the torn booths.

"Shit, man," Gus said straightening up, "set

it in the storeroom."

"No problem."

Any man who came into the diner looked at her longer than the menu. Gus knew that. He huffed and puffed, and spat out threats and cursed and knotted his face when it became too obvious, but he knew she was a draw. And since his food wasn't getting any better he let it go, not the looks, just his self-esteem. Like I did until the end with Irma.

Irma smoothed the skirt to her hips in front of the mirror that last night. "Just going over to Benson's Landing. Olive's sick."

"She was sick last week."

"She's depressed since Carl left."

They were a wild couple that preyed on each other's weakness, sometimes like Irma and me and the rest of the world. There seemed to be no happiness or contentment, no place for peace or compassion, so we just drifted about or holed up with those who can offer a pound of flesh or the apparition of a warm bed. "Carl should have left years ago."

"You've been in town two fucking months and you have all the answers. You're so damn smart?"

"Smart enough to know that Olive's got no phone so there's no way to call and see if you're really there."

"You know, if I wanted a man I could throw Olive out and bring him back there and if Olive had a phone, talk to you all the while he pulled down my panties and shoved himself between my legs."

It was her open defiance that threw me off. As if her answers were flushed from the heart instead of a mind that had already gone through the best and worst of possibilities.

"You'd like that?"

"Maybe," she said slamming the front door behind her.

That night she came home smelling of

cheap whisky with a slight rash on the side her neck. A man's beard had come too close too hard and too often. When I pointed it out, she screamed and cursed me, then came at me when I told her I thought Olive was a tramp and Carl deserved better.

I held her arms down and pushed her in front of the tall bedroom mirror. She cursed me worse and tried to pull away. I smelled the sweat of sex, the humid cloying scent of a body that had been licked and bitten and penetrated. The more she struggled, the more my hands tightened around her neck. At first, just to hold her still. Then she spun around and spat in my face. The only way to cut off her indecencies, her contempt, what she said about me, was to tighten them, just a little.

But the words in sound and spittle found a way out. Her lips undulated with heartless, cutting trash about what I wasn't and what her young lover was, about my manners and stupidity and how I couldn't compare to what she had found in another man's arms. My thumbs could no longer bare the insults and moved together, pressing, crushing, acting in my behalf as if they had my best interests at heart. I watched them push into her throat, the flesh folding in around them.

Her breasts jerked from side to side. They were beautifully large and accommodating. Another man's hands and lips had been at them hours before. His hands on her, his seed in her, his rancid saliva already hardened into a stinking, pasty sheen between her legs.

As she squirmed, kicked, and hissed, I knew that I had to cut off more than the words. I had to stop the thoughts. That's where my nightmares and hurt were coming from.

"Hey, the delivery truck is here," Gus belched. "Get out there and give Connors a hand."

I put down the broom and went outside. "What do you have for us?"

Calvin Connors yanked open the side door to his refrigerated truck revealing racks of chilled eggs, vegetables and fruits. The bumper sticker on the fender below announced Eisenhower's run for a second term in bold red, white, and blue lettering. A thing of some pride to him. He had survived the Battle of the Bulge and twenty-two years later he was still considered a real hero in these parts.

"Nothing you could get better anywhere else."

His answer was always the same, but I liked it. We shared an identical disenchantment and distrust of life. I lifted three crates of eggs and set them on the hand dolly. "How long you been at this?"

Connors shook his head. "Too long. Too damnable long."

"Not good to be doing too long. A man needs to move on."

Connors slapped the door shut. "Say, you been keeping on top of that murder over in Lafayette?"

"Can't say as I have."

"Woman got her neck broken. Police are all hot up about it. Seems she was the granddaughter of some big shot in Atlanta."

"Sorry to hear."

He gunned the engine. "Say, don't you come from Lafayette way?"

"No," I said shaking my head in a slow wobble, "Passed through there once. Nothing much to stop for."

"Well, so long. See you next week."

"I'll be here."

Connors thought a moment longer. "Too bad," he added, winked, and spun away onto the highway that led off in every direction to nowhere.

A Blue bottle fly stopped to feast off a

blister of fat on the frozen packet of bacon. "You don't want to eat that shit," I said to him, pushing the hand dolly out to the storeroom in back.

Gus was waiting for me. "About time. We work for a living here and that don't include socializing."

"Man's got a right to be civil."

"Not on my dime he don't."

Gus wasn't much for listening or reflecting. He ran a business that, except for his wife, served up the commonest of gruel. "Well, get it unpacked and start on the floors."

Crushed her neck the newspapers railed. How come no one cares how evil the dead once were in life? How come no one cares about their victims, the ones who trusted and loved them, who only did what they did because someone had to before they hurt others? The papers don't give a rat's ass about the whys of death.

"You talking to yourself again," Gretchen asked standing in the doorway.

"I think your husband has it in for me. Not much I can do around here that sits right with him."

"Don't pay him no attention," she said, leaning an easy pose against the railing, "He's jealous anytime a man passes by who gives me the time of day."

"I can understand that."

"Really?"

"A man's got to protect the real pretty ones against strangers."

She looked surprised, but more appreciative. "You know, you haven't said two words to me since you've been here."

"Some things are pretty obvious."

"Like protecting pretty women from strangers?"

"I can see his point."

"You're a stranger."

"Well, that's true enough. But we all start out as strangers."

"Then some of us become more."

"Did you ever notice how some people feel a compelling urge to poke about others' lives? Can't keep their tongues from wagging, their words from where they shouldn't be heard."

"Maybe they're just friendly?"

I noticed a roll of flesh taking its toll on the front of her white uniform. The kind every waitress wears. Except Gretchen was different. The heft of her waist and thighs and butt was revealing, exciting. Urgently appealing.

She wasn't fat or anything like that, but there was a heft to her that I wanted to reach out and grab. Except, I wasn't going to do it. I knew that even though my pulse raced, the throb in my temples could be heard in my groin, I knew I would do nothing. I never did when women were aggressive. The more outspoken, the more forward, the more I receded into myself. It was always that way with me.

"Maybe it's none of their business."

"Do you want me to poke about your life?"

"You feel that kind of urge, do you?"

"Every once in a while."

"Like now."

She moved closer, now with a grin that gave her away. "I think you got mysteries, strangerman."

"We all got mysteries, lady."

"No, I think you got special ones. Some you just can't let out 'cause if you did, it might be the end of it for you."

I thought about Irma. The daughter of someone with influence, who would use all their power to hunt down the murderer of their slut grandchild. "Who've you been talking to?"

"Ain't been talking. Been listening. Listening and watching."

"Listening and watching, me?"

"Does that bother you?"

Standing real straight up now, exposing the bulge in my crotch. I know women liked that. "Can't say as it does."

"Cause you're watching me don't fall on a dead heart."

"You know that for sure?"

"I can feel the heat in your eyes brush up against my rear end. Been feeling it since you got here weeks ago. Can't imagine why Gus hasn't noticed."

"Maybe because he ain't got nothing left for you."

"Maybe because he don't appreciate what he's got," she said pretending to flick away a piece of dirt from my shirt. Then she did it again, smoothing out the little creases she made along my shoulder. Slowly she made sure it was all neat and orderly.

"I have to get back to work."

"Gus went out front to talk to Miles Winslow. They're cooking up one of their deals."

"Don't mean he ain't never coming back. And what happens when he sees you're not around."

"Diana-Lynn's out there."

"You've been working this up for some time, haven't you?"

"About as long as you've been avoiding it."

"Look," I began.

"Gretchen."

"Yes. Gretchen."

"It takes on a different meaning after you've rolled it around in your mouth a bit, or slept on it."

Irma was a light sleeper. Many of the women I've been with were light sleepers "Everything takes on a different meaning in your sleep."

"Have you been saying my name in your sleep?"

"Not that I know."

"I don't believe you. Not a bit; not the way you're always staring. You didn't think I noticed. I've had every sailor, trucker, and laborer staring at this butt of mine. One or two have gotten a quick hand on it, but it never felt right."

My sister could tell. My teachers could tell about me. They had this sense, as if they could read ahead in my book and see what's coming. Usually it made me uneasy. But not with Gretchen. "What do you want?"

"It's not me that's wanting."

"Well, whatever it is, it's not worth getting all fired up over."

"I think it is," she said, turned around, and began to pull up her dress. Slowly. Finally, she hiked it up to her hips crumpling the material tightly around her waist. She wasn't wearing underwear. She bent forward, resting her hands on her knees. "Better this way?"

I stood there, a man frozen and transfixed. Sight before me, straight out of one of those girlie magazines you see in the corner of newsstands.

I knew time was passing, but I was quickly gathering in as many memories as I could, knowing I might never see another quite like what was before me. The roar of an engine flashed by on the road outside and split the moment into shards of time. Gretchen eased up straight. She let a piece of white material drop, covering up one of her cheeks.

I already had regrets.

She adjusted her stained white apron. "If you think I've ever done this before, you're wrong, and I probably wouldn't ever do it again. Sweet dreams strangerman," she said, stepping back into daylight.

I don't recall how long I stood there

steeped in recrimination and contempt for myself. She had taken a risk and was rejected, by a murderer. I went in and broke open the packages of bacon and vegetables and brought them into the kitchen and set them out for Gus who was still wrapped in conversation with the man Gretchen described. A deal. What were they capable of? What scam or contrivance?

Could either of them kill anybody? Could I do it again?

At first there was a sense of pride, then relief when I realized how isolated we were in Irma's cabin. We had only been together for a few months and she refused to go out anywhere with me. Said her parents lived in town and wouldn't approve. Didn't want to show me around and get town folk talking.

I didn't care what others thought, but I did want to get into her pants and needed a bed for a while. So we were set off from her friends and family and in my jealousy, I killed her. And I don't regret it. But things are different now. Connors said so. Someone had to have noticed me out there. Irma must have told someone. Even Olive.

I knew the police were anxious to find Carl. His description was front page on every newspaper. He'd been away since right before the killing. I thought it strange, then a profitable coincidence that he hadn't returned. Maybe he was involved in things he didn't want the police in on. Maybe Carl was also a man of mysteries. Irma must have told Olive all about me, with that brand of contempt and ridicule that came so natural to her.

It would only be a matter of time before Gus would turn on me, with or without cause. And I didn't need to call attention to myself.

The rest of the day went about itself harmlessly, tediously, and predictably. The diner was busy for lunch and half empty for dinner. If you were going to spend money on a good meal,

you didn't come to Dave's Diner. Unless you wanted to see Gretchen and then, often as not, she would spend hours alone up in her bedroom leaving the tables and tips to Diana-Lynn.

I washed up for dinner and went out front to the small booth in the corner of the diner and sat down. Diana-Lynn brought me leftovers and I ate contentedly. I knew I had to leave soon. I was getting too used to it. Diana-Lynn brought me hot apple pie a-la-mode for dessert, but Gus being picked up by this Winslow fellow was the highlight of my meal.

"What's up?" I asked her.

Diana-Lynn cleared the table. "They're going into Atlanta."

"This time of night?"

"Who cares? I hope the pig never comes back."

Atlanta was a two-hour drive, and in that pick-up, closer to three. It was seven-thirty. The puddle of vanilla ice cream in my plate and the flakes of piecrust were testament to the end of my patience and the beginning of the evening. Diana-Lynn made her way around the tables, servicing those few who had no other place to go and made their dinner at Dave's an evening's experience. Diana-Lynn had no place to go either and was relieved for the company. Whatever had to be extracted from the kitchen she could accommodate and serve at the same time.

I went out back and stared up at the back of the second floor. The lights were out. The space over the diner must stink of bacon, sausage, eggs, hash browns, and a million slices of burned toast. My arms felt heavy at my sides. I felt a throbbing in my fingers, a lingering of pooling blood.

"How was the pie?" Diana-Lynn asked, coming towards me.

"How long have you been here?"

She lit a cigarette. "Close to a year. It's been that long since I graduated high school over in Lafayette."

"I didn't know you were from there."

"Well, it's not something worth bragging about."

"Connors told me a woman was killed there recently."

"Yeah, I've been reading everything I can on it," she announced excitedly.

"Why? It can't be the only murder in Georgia."

"Seems she was living with a man, and having an affair."

"That happens."

"Not if the affair is with another woman and that woman is her cousin and they're both related to one of the most powerful contractors in the state."

Olive.

"It's in all the papers. The idiots around here don't read much, but I keep up. I like to think I stay current with what's going on in the world."

"You're a bright girl."

Her eyes sparkled with delight. "You really think so?"

"No doubt. I saw it all at once. This place is a pit stop for you."

"You know, I've always wanted to act. I did a little summer stock, and I played a pretty good Cleopatra in high school."

"There then. You see, I was right."

She finger-combed back her hair trying to recreate her morning look, a dewy-sweet torqued pose designed to call attention to her slim figure, her smile, and her charm. "I thought you might be different, you know." Her mindless gleam dissipating into a focused, purposeful glare.

"Than?"

"The drifters who come through here.

They stay a week or so until they can't stand Gus and see there's no chance with Gretchen. But she really likes you. I can see it. The way her eyes darken when Gus rides you hard. The way she manages to take a cigarette out back when you're doing heavy work with your shirt off. You know, she can't be the first to come on to you."

"So, what do you think?"

"Well, I don't think you should go up there tonight and bonk her the first chance Gus takes off."

"You think that's what I'm out here waiting for?"

"Hey, you don't have to lie to me. I think you're cute too, but I also think you don't need the trouble. Most men who come through this way got enough on their hands."

"Pity. She may be waiting for me," I add jokingly.

"Don't take this too hard, but she left an hour before I heated up your pie."

I turned as if struck from behind. "She say where she's going?"

"Gus don't say where he's off to and neither does she. God knows what keeps them together, but they definitely got an arrangement."

"You seem to know an awful lot for so young a girl."

"You wanted to survive in my family, you got smart or you got taken advantage of. Bad."

I could see Diana-Lynn in ten years with the same stained apron, posing for a different, more desperate class of trucker and laborer with the same transient results. There was attractiveness about her, but little raw sexuality, little that could feed a man's flame. "Am I that obvious?"

"It's just that I've seen it before," she said, "Gretchen don't mean anything by it. It suits her to wiggle her ass, show it off a bit if nec-

essary, and get a man hot and bothered, as if they really stood a chance.”

“And they don’t?” I asked, unsettled by the fact that I was more than the first. That I was a bead on her necklace of wiggles.

“Hey, look, it’s the way she is. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“You ever know her to drop her pants?”

Diana-Lynn walked a few paces back to the diner. “First time I saw her ass, it was hovering over a lanky boy Gus had hired to paint the diner last summer.”

“And the second time?”

“It don’t really matter.”

“I guess I have a lot to learn.”

“Now you’re being too hard on yourself.”

“So, you know where she is tonight?”

Diana-Lynn didn’t pause. “About four miles away from here with her old high school sweetheart.”

For a second, I thought it might be another woman. Wouldn’t that just be my luck. “Can’t keep a girl down.”

I watched her walk back into the diner and attend to the few remaining customers. In her own way, she was so far ahead of me. I continued to stare up at the darkness that shadowed Gretchen’s bedroom.

That was over eight years ago.

I left that night, short of half a week’s pay, but with an urge to get out of town, away from the tangle of my own arrogance. I hitched up to Gresham, Georgia and worked in a wood

mill for almost a year. Good work with a cheap place to sleep provided by the mill for workers with no home. I was good at it, too. They made me a supervisor in six months. It let me forget Irma; take the edge from my rage and fury.

The newspapers kept up a flurry of investigations a few months longer, egged on by an ever-increasing reward posted by Irma’s grandfather. Carl was found working as an attendant in a large Tennessee trailer park. Seems he was dealing drugs in Lafayette and was frightened by the attention. The police couldn’t prove anything and he was released.

A squad car came by the mill one afternoon about a month after I arrived. They were investigating Irma’s death, but the lead was weak and the police were not especially aggressive about a belt with a silver buckle that someone had seen a man with Irma wearing. I had thrown Irma’s present into a river the day after I killed her.

I had taken a young woman’s life. I was a murderer. There’s no excuse, but I have no intention of spending the rest of my life making up for it, suffering in prison at the hands of savages—paid thugs—hired by her grandfather.

But I do have regrets about my life, and every night I pray for guidance. Not to the god of any particular religion, but to an almighty, if one really exists—though sometimes I doubt it—if he can let people like me get away with such evil.

Arthur Davis is a management consultant, has been quoted in The New York Times, Crain's New York Business, interviewed on New York TV News Channel 1, taught at the New School University, given testimony as an expert on best practices for the U.S. Senate and appeared as an expert witness on best practices before The New York State Commission on Corruption in Boxing. He has written 11 novels and over 130 short stories. Over 40 stories have been published online and in print.

Dick and Jane

C.M. Miller

The whitest of white worlds
was in those pages.

The girls wore ribbons
in their blonde hair;
the boy's eyes were blue.

And they went to an
amusement park
where no man with
whiskey-breath,
tattoos, locked
them in their seats.

Jane dropped her
ice cream cone on Dick's
head; he huffed then
smiled. It was just
more fun...

This book, the first
we learned to read,
was a primer for life
in safe, green suburbs.

The only colored man
we knew was the janitor
who called us "ma'am"
or "sir."

And we read without
questions, no hands
raised to doubt
these pictures.

But Dick and Jane died.
They died after fire hoses
and police dogs—when
our first black teacher
called the roll.

She swore we'd learn
to read all over again,
think and feel,
never forget her face.

William Miller is a widely published poet and children's author. His poems have appeared in many journals, including Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, The Southern Review and The South Carolina Review. He teaches in the summers at Hollins College in their MFA Program in Children's Literature. He lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

This Is What Happens When You Don't Really Know What's Happening

Ambika Thompson

UNTIL A COUPLE OF MONTHS AGO I'd been dating a clown. My father always said that's the kind of guy I'd end up with. The clown mostly does kid's birthdays. He knows how to make twenty-three different types of balloon animals, and can do it very quickly like a ninja. This he told me on our first date when our relationship still seemed full of possibility, like we would one day move into our first apartment together in an upscale neighbourhood with a garden full of sunflowers, and throw dinner parties where we'd do it on the table in a dish of leftover lasagna after everyone had gone. We might have even ended up being the couple to have done it when everyone was there.

Turned out that he was one of those miserable types of clowns though, the kind Smokey Robinson knew about.

I don't tell my mom on the phone that I'm not dating the clown anymore. She never met him, but she acts like she did. I tell her that I'm going up north to review an old people's resort for the magazine. It's actually a small feature, my first, even if it's just a magazine geared for old people about what kind of holidays they should spend their pensions on.

My mother asks me what magazine, and

what do I mean review, and what do I mean old people, and is the clown coming with me. I ignore her first three questions and tell her that the clown isn't coming with me, and she tells me that he isn't going to like that, as though she knows what the clown likes and doesn't like. She isn't compelled to ask me why he's not coming, but I make up a reason in my head anyway. Maybe he had to work a really big birthday party for some major corporation's CEO's kid, and they're paying him enough money that we're going to go live in Mexico for the winter. Except, oh yeah, we broke up. That's what I'd tell her if she bothered to ask.

I go on a couple of dates with a plumber. He told me on our first date that he just plumbs for the money. He said that he's really into music and plays in a band called The Drainpipes with his brother who is also a plumber. I don't tell him that I think his band's name is stupid and maybe they should be called The Brain Drains because I think he might be a bit dim since he claims that the United States is the largest country in the world by land mass.

I go to one of their concerts anyway when he asks me because he said he'd put me on the half-price list, and that kind of made me feel

obligated. He also has sideburns which I'm a sucker for. I don't tell him after that I think his band stinks, and he looks like an idiot on stage. He does this gyrating thing with his hips when he's playing, and I feel embarrassed for him.

To bear the humiliation, I get really drunk and out of pity I go home with him and we have sex on the bathroom floor. I hurt my back, bang my head on the toilet, and the condom breaks, so I miss work the next morning to wait at the doctor's office to get a prescription for the morning after pill.

The pharmacist then won't fill my prescription because he says he doesn't believe in it. I'm so hungover that I don't get what he doesn't believe in. The existence of morning after pills? I start to explain what they are and make circular shapes with my thumbs and forefingers. This appears to make him fairly agitated so he comes around the counter and escorts me out of the pharmacy and drags me out by my arm while telling me I will pay for my sins. I don't realize until I'm outside what he means because I'm in shock, and I'm too hungover to argue, so I just start walking to the next pharmacy.

I call my mom that night and my father answers, and I can hear in his voice that he's going to be dead soon from some disease, and can't remember if that's really happening or not, or if I just dreamed it, or if it's just that I assume that that is going to be what happens. He says to me the only thing he ever says to me, that his team is losing this season and that he'll put my mother on the phone. I don't tell her that I fucked a plumber, who plays in a crappy band, on a dirty bathroom floor, and had to take the morning after pill. Instead, I tell her that the clown is fine. Then I tell her that I'm going to intern for no money and far too many hours at a magazine I really like, and maybe they'll let me write something for them. My mother tells me that I shouldn't work for free and don't I dare

ask them for any money.

The plumber doesn't call, and I don't call. I meet the clown for drinks one night, and we go back to his place. We don't talk about how much he hates clowning, or how he believes he'll never go anywhere in life, nor even why we broke up, so by the following week we're seeing each other every night and he's left his toothbrush at my place again. I kind of know that it's not going to work out, so I start having sex with the summer intern at the magazine in the storage room on the fourth floor, even though he's still in high school, and I'm way older than him. This makes me feel like a bit of a creep, but I choose to ignore those negative thoughts.

When I'm not busy having, or thinking about my affair, I have a scrapbook at home where I put all the clippings of the articles I've had published, which to date is all from the old people's magazine. I imagine that it's my parents keeping it, not me, and they tell me this on the phone. Actually it's my father who tells me every time I call, that he's really proud of me, and that I should have gone to journalism school like I wanted, and that they didn't ever discourage me from it in the first place.

The summer intern and I start having sex at my place on Saturday afternoons because there's now a third intern at the magazine who I think is on to us and seems to go to the storage room on the fourth floor a lot. We can't go to his house because he still lives with his parents and getting caught by them seems like something that would just be too deeply horrifying. For some reason I'd forgotten that I'd given a key to the clown for my place so when he shows up unexpectedly one Saturday afternoon, because a birthday party was cancelled due to the kid and all his friends getting measles, and I've got my skirt hitched up and the intern has his pants down and is behind me, I'm confused more than anything

else. The clown is absolutely not confused and starts yelling that I'm a horrible person after he goes to the bathroom to fetch his toothbrush, and then slams the door on his way out. It seems to me then that perhaps I should end it with the intern so I tell him that we should end it, but he doesn't want that. I tell him that I want to settle down and have kids. He says he understands, and we agree to break it off.

On Monday when I go to the office my supervisor takes me into her office and says that she'd been informed about what has been going on between me and the summer intern. Though he was legal, they find me to be the creep that I know I am, so of course I won't be writing anything for the magazine, or doing anything else with them ever again.

I tell my mom on the phone that I'm going to take some time off and think about my future. This involves watching a lot of daytime TV and eating a lot of TV dinners because I like the way they have the meat and potatoes and carrots and desert all sectioned off from one another, and it all tastes like a whole whack of surreal unreal just like my life has become. After a couple of weeks, I text the plumber but he doesn't text me back so I call the old people's magazine to see if I can have my old job back. They say it's filled, but they need someone for distribution starting next month, so I agree to take it.

After about the third week of driving from pensioners' apartment complexes, dropping off bundles of magazines in their foyers, and giving one old man a hand job in his car for fifty bucks, my mom calls to tell me that my father has died

from that disease that I wasn't sure he really had. She wants to know how soon I can come home and will I be bringing the clown. That night I call the clown and tell him that my father has died and that's why I was cheating on him because I felt like I was dying too and wanted to hold onto my youth, so instead of facing my fears and accepting I was losing my father I went off the deep end and could he come over.

He comes with me to the funeral in my I start to feel like everything is going to be okay as I stand next to my mother looking down at my father's dead face, which has the same expression his alive face always had, contempt. I realize that he doesn't look as old as I thought he was and that I actually don't know how old that is, so I ask my mother. She doesn't answer me but instead tells me that she doesn't like the clown, that he seems a bit miserable. I look back at him sitting in the first row aggressively pulling on one of his whiskers and staring at the big cross at the front of the church. I'm miserable too, so I come to the conclusion that we're made for each other, and maybe I love him, and I'm probably too enthusiastically happy about the fact that she doesn't like him.

That night the clown and I have really loud sex in my childhood bedroom, and immediately after he gets mad at me because my mother was an asshole to him. I can't help but to start crying, just like my mother is doing loudly in the next room. I wanna think that it's for the passing of my father, and my mother's grief, or just the general state of my life, but to be completely honest, I know that I can't really be too sure.

Ambika Thompson lived her past life in an alternative universe that had everything sorted out. In this universe she can't recall what happened in her past-life so she's resorted to being a mother, writer, musician, and just generally very cranky. She is also one-half of the riot girl band Razor Cunts, and she lives in Berlin.