

T H E
odenville press



W I N T E R 2 0 1 7

C O V E R A R T

Friendship II

Catrin Welz-Stein

German Graphic Designer Catrin Welz-Stein has been painting since childhood, as she admits she was almost born with a pencil in her hand. Catrin always wanted to do something related to the arts. She has graduated from Graphic Design in Darmstadt, Germany and then worked for different advertising agencies in Germany, USA and Switzerland. Her work is a mix of vintage photos, old pictures and illustrations digitally assembled to create those beautiful images. She is mostly inspired by surrealism, fairy tales, folklore and medieval times. Catrin Welz-Stein finds inspiration in Fantasy, children stories, medieval, Jugendstil, Folklore and Surrealism. I am inspired by the work of Nicoletta Ceccoli, Kelly Rae Roberts, Sabrina Ward Harrison, Olaf Hajek, Maggie Taylor, Natalie Shau, Colette Calascione and Nazario Graziano, and many more. Her work can be found at catrinwelzstein.blogspot.com

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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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Bones

Evan McMurry

NOTHING'S EMPTIER than an empty restaurant. Jasmine paused just inside the entrance of ROOT, its heavy vacancy showing her back, and turned to read the business hours stenciled in lawn-green print on the glass front door. It was only three in the afternoon; no question, ROOT was open. But as she walked past an unmanned hostess stand to her choice of stools at the bar, Jasmine wondered for how much longer.

She set her carry-on bag of tequila bottles down by her heels and surveyed the airy dining room. ROOT's shotgun bar opened into a high white hall hung with metal lamps, their small spirals of energy-saving light swirling off the tops of low Formica tables. Flamenco guitar trilled out of hidden ceiling speakers, and from beyond the grey kitchen doors came the tong-to-sillet clangs of idle line cooks. Jasmine waited a few moments for someone to notice her. Finally, she lifted the menu from the faux-marble bar top and twice read through the source-annotated descriptions of ROOT's small plates, before an emerald-jerseyed man breezed out from the back of the house. In one jolt he evoked surprise at Jasmine's presence, elation at a guest, and alarm that a customer had been sitting at his bar who knew how long without so much as a greeting.

Poor Shawn Cantor. Jasmine had met him at a charity banquet nine months ago: in that shiny soccer jersey and blue jeans he'd stood alone at his booth, hands behind his back, paper cups of crawfish tapenade displayed before him. Back then Jasmine was working for the liquor distributor sponsoring the benefit, and once the event was under way she'd felt free to begin sipping the complimentary bubbly. She was champagne-silly by the time she wandered up to ROOT's booth. Thrilled to finally have an audience, Shawn discoursed about local sourcing and farm-raised seafood while she giggled and giggled. In the moment Jasmine had found him endearing—a word she'd drunkenly settled on—and gave his restaurant one year, max.

But her distributor went under instead, and now Jasmine sat at Shawn's counter, watching him scurry to her. She'd come to sell him Hermosa Tequila, organic, or so it claimed on the bottle, which the Hermosa Distillery would recycle if he shipped it back. Jasmine figured Shawn a sucker for this pitch. She needed him to be: there were so many bars in town and she had only five accounts to her name. Every day, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood, she tasted owner after bar manager on Hermosa blanco and añejo,

but she was behind even her paltry goal of one new account a month, and Paul Hermosa was frantic enough about his failing business that he was hunting for any excuse to let an underperforming sales rep go. So Jasmine's single bubbly-soaked memory of this man from a charity banquet nine months ago would have to be wrung for all its worth.

"Shawn Cantor," Jasmine said as he approached, "you were wearing that shirt the last time we talked."

Shawn's angular face—that narrow nose and clipped goatee seemed plotted with a protractor, but it was enlivened by sun-flushed skin, as though fresh from a hike—briefly contracted in panic. He didn't remember her. Really Jasmine only hazily recalled him, but one of Paul Hermosa's rules was always assume familiarity. Shawn's green eyes fluttered as he scoured his memory, and Jasmine knew he was no match for her.

At last he blushed. "I'm sorry. I'm terrible."

"Jasmine."

"And that's not even a forgettable name."

"My parents were hippies."

"All our parents were hippies. I have four, by the way."

"Parents?"

"No, these jerseys. It's for Connacht—Irish rugby. I played for them, just a few games before I tore my ACL and they tossed me back to the States. But I got a few months in Ireland out of it, so I won't complain. You ever been abroad?"

"I haven't," Jasmine said, she hoped without bitterness; she and her non-fiancé had been talking of going to Europe for so long that she'd come to resent the entire continent. "I hear it's wonderful. How did you like playing rugby?"

"I liked it all right. But this suits me better."

Shawn smiled a pleasant, inviting, mildly

sensual smile, the type Jasmine saw on men modeling blazers in catalogues. It was what she'd first noticed about him: the confidence. Even with his booth empty he'd stood straight and tall, advertising that safe-sumptuous smile for each passerby, as though he knew it was but a matter of time before the truth of his food and force of his cause broke through all chance and pageantry. He also apparently felt entitled to declare which versions of his life did and didn't suit him as if jobs and businesses and paying bills were as simple as swapping jerseys.

They weren't: if Hermosa Tequila went down, and it might, it would be the third business in a row Jasmine had worked for that had shuttered: first the steakhouse for which she'd booked parties, then the liquor distributor. That morning, as Jasmine's non-fiancé was inside her, his hands craftily squeezing her shoulders—Hugo was studying to be a masseuse, and he incorporated each new grip—she was deep in this fact: three in a row. Was she bad luck? She squirmed, and Hugo thought he'd found her spot.

Now here was Shawn, acting as though his restaurant were full of customers and he had no bills. He had bills. Jasmine had done the books for the steakhouse, and she knew exactly what type of bills he had, bills you'd never think of, for grease collection, trademark registration, ad placement in hotel lobbies. She'd even started recognizing the typefaces various collection agencies used, so that she divined, before the mailman handed an envelope over, what they were after. And Shawn was smiling away as if a whole heap of those envelopes weren't piled on a desk in some back office?

Jasmine propped a bottle of Hermosa añejo on the counter like a challenge.

Paul Hermosa's brainchild, the bottle was a recreation of a vase in a Picasso painting, an

oblong base with a stained-green cork sprouting fern-shaped from the lid, making the bottle appear bursting with flowers. Each one was hand-blown to life in a Matamoros factory, adding nine dollars to the wholesale cost and pricing them out of the call market they should have been chasing. But every potential customer fawned over it, the way she peered through display cases at rings she couldn't afford.

Shawn whistled as he lifted the bottle. "I'm not even sure what this is."

"That," Jasmine said, "is the world's first one hundred percent organic tequila."

"Certified?"

Jasmine spun the bottle in his hands so that the bark-hued label proudly faced him. Shawn nodded as he read over its emblems and certifications; his firm expression, set by inner commitment, reminded her of Hugo. If determination alone could forge the world, Hugo would have long ago become an archeologist as he'd always wanted. On their first date, their senior year in college, he'd shown her a little starter kit he'd kept from childhood, containing a plastic chisel and a brown brush for extracting and cleaning dinosaur bones; he'd looked at her and his kit with a huge, future-enfolding glance that seemed to capture both of them. Jasmine had been with him ever since, long past the disappearance of the kit and all through late-night discussions of how he needed to reassess his life, to focus on more practical goals—

Shawn lowered the bottle reverently as if its fragile glass now contained all the crucial delicacy of his beliefs. "Do you know why this place is called ROOT?"

He'd explained it all that night at the benefit, but Jasmine leaned her elbows against the countertop anyway. "I was going to ask you about that."

"I feel—" Shawn's hands formed a circle, an urgent funnel—"like the root of what we eat, what we feel, what we believe has been obscured from us. It's not that I think local sourcing will solve all the world's problems, but I think it can be a template: if we pay attention to where our food comes from, we might start paying attention to where our ideas come from. When we improve one we'll improve the other."

"I really like that," she said. "There need to be more places like this."

"Not only is it more responsible, it's better-tasting. And, once the world catches up, it's going to be cheaper. I call it 'inversion of scale.'" Shawn tilted toward her, just as he had when she'd picked his crawfish tapenade out of the crowd. "See, once locally-sourced food becomes the primary method of supply, it's going to flip the big corporations on their heads. Now, I read an article—"

He kept going. Jasmine knew the arguments on local sourcing versus macroeconomics; Paul Hermosa had talked it up the night they'd met. She had convinced her bosses at the liquor distributor to send her to the Spirits Expo in Memphis for some R&D. Paul was just launching his tequila, all those stunning bottles displayed on a shelf behind him in the Marriott W. C. Handy Convention Room. This guy was the real deal: in a charcoal pinstripe suit, monogrammed cufflinks, and cocoa brown brogues, he didn't wait behind his booth for people to come to him, he charged into the aisle and held out his arm to passersby as if inviting them into his exclusive club. Jasmine was swooped into his orbit, a glass of Hermosa Tequila slipped magically into her grasp. "We're a boutique brand right now," Paul told her, "but people are crying out for this stuff, and it just takes someone like me to make it. When this happens—" he pointed to the word

organic on the Hermosa añejo bottle, “—it will happen because of rich people like me, who have the money to throw away on a good product until the public comes around.”

Shawn finished his oration in a flurry of hand gestures, cheeks an earnest red and eyes wide in petition as if just by agreeing with him Jasmine would validate what were no doubt some risky loans he’d taken out to open ROOT.

But she shook her head instead. One of Paul’s tips—do something to catch people by surprise. It worked: his face scrunched as if the bones behind his face were clutching at his skin. She wondered if that was the face he had made at the initial pain of his knee.

“I’m going to ask you a question, Shawn,” Jasmine said, “and I want you to answer honestly. How’s business?”

The walls of the dining room pulsed whitely; the halogen lights buzzed like timeless insects. For the first time since Shawn had spotted her, his gaze left hers. “It’s, um...Well, it’s been a little slow.”

Jasmine nodded. She wanted to tell him how she had only five accounts in the whole city. She wanted to tell anybody that. But she couldn’t tell Paul Hermosa—to him she tried to gloss it over, “I’m fine, Paul, I’m making the rounds,” a line that lost credibility with each utterance—and she couldn’t tell Hugo, because even though they lived together and slept beside each other and had sex every morning, they hadn’t exchanged a meaningful word in months. Instead Hugo sat on the couch, memorizing the Latin terms of every bone in the body for his anatomy class. Jasmine came home; he told her names for parts of the knee; she told him the names of the bars she’d visited. Then she retreated to their bedroom; he stayed in the living room, and that was their life.

“Look, Shawn,” Jasmine said, “I believe in

calling things as I see them. I don’t think you’re doing that well.”

Shawn resorted to that catalogue-smile, now one turn tighter from effort. “We’re young,” he said. “I’m confident.”

“Oh, confidence is great. If you’re confident, customers will transfer that to their experience here, absolutely.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Optimistic, I think is more the word you’re looking for. Would you say optimistic, Shawn” —another of Paul’s tips, use the person’s name as much as possible, keeps them anchored in the conversation— “more than confident?”

“I—” He seemed to seriously consider the two options she had placed before him “—yes, I’m optimistic.”

“Good. I just believe in calling things by their name, Shawn, that’s all. I feel the two of us can be straight with each other. Now, you believe in your cause—and it’s a good one—and if you believe in it enough, you think that will transfer over to the food you serve.”

“That’s my philosophy. I think of the food as an extension of the process: the farmers who grow it, the distributors who transport it, the chefs who cook it, the people who serve it.”

“And the customers who eat it,” Jasmine reminded him.

“Right! It culminates in the experience of the meal. People can taste the process.”

“The customer is the key.”

“The customer is everything.”

“But, Shawn, you don’t have any customers.”

Shawn Cantor flinched as if he’d been slapped. But before he could begin to feel her comment’s full lash Jasmine had uncorked the bottle of Hermosa blanco, set out two engraved shot glasses from her case, and was pouring out the clear, pure liquid. “Now, Shawn, Hermosa Tequila doesn’t have many

customers yet, either. That's how it is with new companies, especially ones that are trying to do things differently. Companies like ours have to tough it out for a while on belief alone."

Shawn sighed in palpable relief. "Exactly what I'm saying."

"But belief only takes you so far, and then you really do need people buying your product. And that's why I'm here today, talking to you. Shawn, Hermosa Tequila believes in your restaurant, and we believe in you. We're your ally. And if we're allies, we can help each other out."

She slid the shot glass to him. "Taste that."

Shawn accepted the offering, just as Jasmine had accepted that first shot in Memphis. She and Paul Hermosa had talked for an hour at Hermosa Tequila's booth, and soon Paul was incorporating her into conversations with other people who stopped by, asking her to describe his tequila as if she already repped for him. Paul Hermosa met hundreds of people at the expo, but Jasmine was the only one he called that evening. He took her to a bar called Aquarium, fish swimming through thin rivers beneath the glass floor, the crazy flower-leapt bottle perched like a trophy upon Aquarium's top shelf. Paul proudly ordered two shots of his own tequila from the clueless bartender.

"This is the only place in Memphis that serves us right now," Paul told her. "But if I have people like you, Jasmine, on my staff—smart, confident, attractive, aggressive—soon it will be one of many. Jasmine, I predict you'll be working for me within the year, if not considerably sooner."

Jasmine said nothing to this boast, yet as they clinked glasses she couldn't help but imagine her future with Paul, his brand rocketing off and carrying her with it, transporting her to New York one weekend and Miami the next, out of her depressing apartment, and—

this occurred to her only in the hot descent of Paul's tequila down her chest—away from Hugo, who in four years had gone from dreams of archeology expeditions to studying to be a fucking masseuse, including her in his diminishment so gradually she'd barely noticed. In one shiver from his tequila, Paul's wide and underwritten world seared open before her.

"It's creamy," she'd said of the liquor.

"Lack of filtration, Jasmine. And lack of pesticides. Lack of anything that strips the texture."

"No texture-stripping."

"No texture-stripping! It removes the good with the bad, and the Hermosa familia didn't get where it is via such low compromises."

Paul bought her other brands of tequila, quizzed her about their stink or their burn, coached her to pinpoint competitors' weaknesses and express them as their faults rather than her judgments. He was showing her how to sell, to really sell, when you believed in a product as your own. "For every bottle," Paul explained, "we plant a tree. Notice, Jasmine—love that name, by the way—notice that each bottle has a return address on the bottom. So a bar empties a bottle, they send it back to us. We recycle it through a special plant in San Antonio that salvages a greater percentage of the glass than a city recycling facility, and then we make a donation to a tree-planting service out in the Redwoods to offset the carbon footprint of the shipping."

"You've thought of e-ver-y-thing," she said, tripping down the word like a staircase.

"No, not everything, but somebody had to think of something. And, don't forget, we're also getting people drunk. It's not all emissions and local sourcing."

At his hotel room, he poured them glasses of Hermosa añejo, no salt, no lime, no mixer. "Taste it straight." His hand on her back, fin-

gering the cotton of her blazer, Paul led her to his hotel window. “I want you to understand something,” he said as Memphis bowed in her vision. “This is important: I can throw things away. I have the money, three generations worth of rancher deals behind me. I can buy a company and piss it away. Just buy it, run it into the ground, move on to the next. I’m not bragging, I’m pointing out how our world works: the history of good ideas is full of men like me, who were able to sink capital into new ideas and assume their losses, all to get to that one idea that works. If this world is going to get better—and I think you must agree that it has to, or we’re all done for—it needs people like me, who can throw things away.”

On his hotel bed Paul was busy, his hands slaloming down her body, never settling. The next morning he repeated his oracle that she’d soon be working for him, his cufflink winking under the lobby lights as he handed her his card. Jasmine spent the whole plane ride back trying to think of something to tell Hugo, but no word arose for what had happened between her and Paul Hermosa—it wasn’t an affair, because it wasn’t prolonged; it wasn’t a one-night stand, because they planned to talk again; and it wasn’t a mistake, because she didn’t regret it. Hugo greeted her at baggage claim with a masseuse’s embrace; Jasmine didn’t say a word.

When the liquor distributor closed a month later, she still had Paul’s card in her wallet. So Paul was right, she did end up working for him, but that was the limit of his prophetic powers. Paul had never run a business before—those three generations of land deals had allowed him to never actually do much of anything—and he had no idea how much capital really went into a business up front, how much of that money you could lose, and for how long you had to lose it. Jasmine was on

staff only a few months before he began cutting sales bonuses, spotting shortcuts in the organic process, reconsidering his precious Picasso bottle. And while he still strutted about in the pinstripe suits and monogrammed cufflinks, Paul never again caressed her back as he had in Memphis: now she was just as an underperforming account representative. When she and Hugo made love in their dingy little apartment they’d scrounged up after graduation, the reality of Paul’s rejection burned back up Jasmine’s body until she was crying, softly, holding it back as best she could. Her non-fiancé assumed the tears were sweat and the shudders were an orgasm, and after they were done he inched his fingertips over her skin, pressing and naming each of her bones and muscles and tendons and ligaments, his every touch a tiny declaration of a love that hardened as the rest of their life eroded.

Shawn Cantor set the shot glass down with a tiny plink. “That’s the best tequila I’ve ever tasted. That’s just unbelievably smooth.”

Creamy. “It is smooth,” Jasmine said, repeating the lines she practiced as she drove from bar to bar. “That’s lack of texture-striping. Filtering removes the good with the bad. We make the tequila right all the way through, so we don’t have to filter it later.”

Shawn shook his head, incredulous at the harmony of simple truths. “It’s all—about—the process,” he said, smacking his palm on the down beat, Jasmine’s cue that he was ready to subscribe to anything he was told so long as it resembled enough what he already believed.

“Here’s what I think, Shawn: I think Hermosa Tequila fits perfectly with the vibe of your restaurant. I think you should pick this tequila up. Not only that, you should make it your only tequila.” She pointed at the five bottles displayed behind the bar, those megabrands that taunted her from every top shelf in town.

“Toss those guys out.”

“Sure,” he said, laughing. “I’ll just pour it all down the drain.”

She honed in. “I’ll tell you what: you pour those guys out and replace them with my bottle, I’ll pay for the tequila you waste.”

“That’s...” He squinted and released a long breath, the universal expression of a business owner performing vital, impromptu calculations; Jasmine had seen three of them do it on multiple occasions. “. . .two-hundred and forty dollars worth of tequila.”

“Throw it away.”

“I don’t—”

Shawn stopped, caught. Jasmine had him. And while Paul would cringe at buying two-hundred-odd dollars’ worth of someone else’s tequila, this was the exact sort of move he truly respected. She could already envision the next time the whole staff was out for drinks, Paul bragging to some colleague about how his account reps convinced bar owners to pour out whole bottles of Patrón. This momentum would propel her into her next account, one would lead to another, and another. If Jasmine could just make Shawn Cantor budge, right now, the rest of her world would crack open.

“I don’t think I can,” Shawn said, but his voice wavered. Jasmine scooted forward and fixed him with an approximation of the look with which Paul had first snared her.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she whispered.

His hands on the counter, he tipped toward her, almost as if in a trance.

“Nothing, Shawn, absolutely nothing, projects confidence in a man like the ability to throw things away.”

Jasmine watched his green eyes flutter until she could almost see the numbers in one eye and his ideals in the other.

At last he sighed, deeply, sincerely, and shook his narrow head.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry! My liquor costs are almost at forty percent, and we’ve been slow since the holidays. I’ve actually been in back all morning looking at how to reconfigure my cocktails so that they’re cheaper to make. I was about to come to the decision to start using well liquor when you came in, so I mean, I didn’t mean to lead you on, thank you so much for tasting me on this, because it was, seriously, it was the best tequila I’ve ever had, and if I could in any way afford it I would absolutely use it in our margaritas, I think it would be delicious—”

Jasmine stabbed the cork into the top of the bottle.

“And, I mean, that’s a great b-b-bottle. Seriously. With that bottle—I mean, I really do believe in what you guys are doing, I wish I could help, because you guys—” he tried to flash the smile with which he’d first greeted her “—you guys are it.”

“It’s okay, Shawn,” Jasmine said. “At least now you won’t forget me.”

He flinched once more, and she was done with him. Jasmine replaced the ridiculous bottle into her case and rolled the whole contraption out the door, its cheap wheels squeaking against ROOT’s exposed concrete. The first happy hour guests were just strolling in; Shawn loudly welcomed them as she left. Jasmine wanted to beg them to turn around. She wanted to tell Shawn they were a punishment masquerading as patronage; with each new customer his hopes would rise, but the two-top here and four-top there would never be enough to buoy his sinking business, and when he would lock the doors of ROOT for the last time, and tell himself he’d at least fought the good fight, Shawn would remember this afternoon, rejecting Jasmine out of the same bottom-line calculations as every process-corrupted business he hated, and in this

would slip away the very thing that had stood him so straight and proud at his lonely booth nine months ago.

In her car she sobbed against the steering wheel. Jasmine still had three bars to visit that day, but if she couldn't get an account at ROOT, whose mission statement was a cognate of Paul Hermosa's, there was no point in trying anywhere else. Hermosa Tequila was going down. The vast and varied life she'd fantasied was obliterated before it had even taken form, removing with it the chance, however faint it had ever been, of she and Paul together. The weekend after Jasmine had returned from Memphis the force of Paul's hand on her back and the warmth of his spirit down her chest had still suffused her as Hugo drove them out for a hike on Enchanted Rock and, right at sunset, just as they reached the summit, lowered to one knee—"the patella," he said as he knelt on the specific bone—and proposed, peering up with those same purpose-formed features as the night he'd shown her his archeology set and awoke in her dreams of a life that he never realized.

"It's just not the right time," she stammered, "emotionally, financially—" and behind him the sun Hugo had counted on set.

He never mentioned marriage again. They still had sex, still went out to dinner, to movies, to friends' birthday parties, appearing just as they had before. But she caught Hugo cringing when he introduced her as my girlfriend, a quick but deep seizure as if she were yanking his chest from within. His friends ribbed him about when he was going to propose already; he laughed, coughed, pretended to sneeze.

She was increasingly relieved as her non-fiancé disappeared more into the dittoes of human parts spread on the coffee table, spending his grief in his study and sparing her, out of what could have only been love, the true extent of what she had done to him.

Jasmine humped her still-full case of Hermosa Tequila up the three flights of stairs to their apartment, the shot glasses cackling with each step. Inside Hugo was hunched over a map of the shoulder, reciting the tiny Latin in a private murmur. He looked up at the sound of the settling glass. His eyes were squinted from reading, but as he blinked the terms away, he resumed a late version of that face that had recruited her in his dorm room. His lips had pursed in the years since, his boyish cheeks had hollowed, but he was still Hugo. It was Jasmine who had changed. How altered she must have appeared to him, worn down by pursuit and petty in her constant objection to the smallness around her. She thought he'd traded in that starter kit out of failure; but he'd done it to stay with her, as she struggled and struggled and dragged them both down.

She crossed toward him. Hugo had no idea what was wrong, but he rose from the couch and did the thing he knew, wrapping his arms beneath hers and clutching her shoulder blades with practice. As his fingers pressed against the spots he'd mastered, Jasmine let him tell her that she was the same, beneath the skin, as she'd always been, and always would be.

Hugo would forever treasure that afternoon as the moment everything got better.

Evan McMurry graduated from Reed College and received his MFA from Texas State University-San Marcos. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in a half-dozen journals, including Euphony and Post Road. He is currently the Social Media Editor for ABC News and lives in New York.



Modern House

Wout Vromans

Wout Vromans is a visual artist and freelance graphic designer hailing from Hasselt, Belgium. His work can be seen at woutvromans.com

Jim Harrison

David Sermersheim

he knew
his time had come
embraced it reluctantly
and completely in his way
with pen in hand
poised over paper

words seemed to come easily for him
and he used them
to describe the mystery
of beauty and resilience of life
in all he saw around him

the world could not contain him
his print pressed the earth with all the force
of energy and will he could summon from a body
slowly wracked and weakened with pain
but he persisted and endured
as he gradually wore it down
until the pain became too hard to bear

so he sat alone
in his cabin
trembling and fearless
while light slowly ebbed
into darkness and
silence ruled the hour
in his honor

The author taught at The Hotchkiss School (Ct.) for 33 years; has had poems published in The Aureorean, Ancient Paths, Sacred Journeys, Cloudbank, Iodine Review, Everyday Poems, Writing Raw, "Poetry Pacific, Poetry Superhighway, Bitchin' Kitsch and other journals and quarterlies. He was a MacDowell Fellow and has a book, Meditations, listed on Amazon. He lives in Westbrook, Connecticut.

Remember?

Eileen Herbert-Goodall

REMEMBER THAT TIME when you walked across the water tank with its flimsy metal roof? We could hear the water swirling, waiting to swallow you whole. I called for you to come down, but you said you weren't chicken. When you finally made it to the other side, relief flooded my veins.

Somehow, I always sensed you were in danger, even before I knew the score.

I was twelve years old when they said you were suffering from Schizophrenia.

'Is that like a split personality?' I asked.

The psychiatrists looked at me as if I was stupid.

'It's more complicated than that,' replied the one wearing black-framed glasses.

'You wouldn't understand,' said the other.

They walked away, clipboards in hand.

I stood alone in the corridor, examining the grey vinyl floor that seemed steeped in sadness. I caught the acrid smell of disinfectant and something else: was it sweat, or the stench of human suffering? Who could tell?

Remember that time when you tried to make a run for it out the hospital's doors, which were temporarily unlocked because the registrar had just released a visitor? You were too doped up to get far and it didn't take much for me to pin you down.

'Fuck you,' you said. 'Fuck you.'

I cried on the way home, fixing my gaze out the car window so Mum wouldn't see.

Remember when we used to swim in the river? The water was turbid, swirling with suspended matter, but it offered welcome relief from the summer heat. And there was that day the dog dove in behind us and nearly drowned when he got caught in river weed. You rescued him in the nick of time and dragged him back to the muddy bank. You were always the brave one, transgressing boundaries in a way that made me shiver.

Because that attitude seemed to attract trouble.

I remember watching as they restrained you and injected drugs. Your eyes pleaded with me to do something. Anything. But I was just a kid. What could I have done? Besides, doctors were supposed to know what they were doing. They were there to help. Wasn't that how the narrative went?

To some extent they were right: without the drugs, the monsters inevitably came out to play. As they still do, given the slightest opportunity.

Remember that other time when you woke me and said you'd seen a mangled hand reaching through the window? You were

trembling as you sat on the edge of my bed, and I said it was nothing, that you needed to go back to sleep.

I didn't know how to keep you safe.

Truth be told, the monsters stole you from me when I wasn't looking. If only I'd seen them coming. Maybe I could have driven stakes through their hearts, like Van Helsing did to vampires. But life rarely offers such clear-cut resolutions and heroes who save the day are few and far between. Mostly, we're left to our own devices as we drift through an indifferent universe filled with nothing more than stardust and old light. And all the while, for reasons beyond our comprehension, chemicals inside our brains instruct us to stay alive, to cling to survival.

Like you did in that hospital.

Once I found you slumped in the beanbag, head back, stare glued to the ceiling. You—the girl who could scurry up coconut trees faster than anyone else I knew—had become practically comatose.

'You're giving her too much medicine,' I told one of the nurses.

'The doctors know what they're doing,' she said.

A silent accomplice in your abuse, I

accepted her answer.

Remember that time when we were in one of those therapeutic community sessions and the doctor said you needed to learn more acceptable forms of behaviour? You told him to go fuck himself and the skinny girl with dark hair and hollow-looking eyes burst out laughing. The doctor sent you both into isolation for 're-socialisation time'. No one spoke as the nurses dragged you away.

Later, I learned about all the suicides that went down inside that ward.

And all the unexplained deaths.

An inquiry was held. Events were labelled as scandalous. Doctors were considered culpable. Eventually, the ward was closed.

But the damage had already been done.

Remember that time when we trespassed on the mango farm and helped ourselves to the fruit we loved so much. That man appeared, yelling and swearing, and we ran to our bikes like our lives depended on it, then pedalled hard, laughing as we went.

I do: I remember.

I wish we could go back there, to that time when we were young and free and innocent, when we thought monsters weren't real.

Eileen Herbert-Goodall is a writer of fiction and non-fiction. She holds a Doctorate of Creative Arts, which she earned at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. As Director of the online writing organisation, Field of Words, Eileen is dedicated to helping other writers improve upon their craft. Her novella, The Sherbrooke Brothers, is due to be released in February, 2017. She is presently working on another novella, as well as a collection of short stories.

Folie a Deux

Janna Kupper

Shattered pieces.
One plus one equals
Frankenstein Heart.
Oh!
Misshapen puzzle,
how do you undo
those knots and stitches?
Is that piece here
her/yours?

Janna Kupper is a 24 year old writer from New Hampshire. An avid reader since childhood, she pursued a degree in English from Plymouth State University. Janna finds that matters of the heart and mind are a constant muse to her writing. She's been published in a few literary magazines; including Plymouth's own Centripetal.

The Clenched Flower

Colin Dodds

The void
to a living creature
is iridescent, amniotic
an inferno of symbols

Zero o'clock ramparts rent records burning
in a surging sea of hands and flowers
the kinks and sins of every wind
incarnate unrestrained

The man on the beach loses track
of whether he's a human sex trafficker
holy sacrifice murderous salesman fool
whose failure matters
or just a confused kid circling the drain crying out
in what small sullied aperture of wilderness
he could afford for a night

Every guiding directive
to speak or not see remember or not
to run to or from the lights to seek
or flee human aid
shatters to a flock of flipping coins
and drowns in the ineffectual wish-fulfillment
of a riot

Red lights flare green
Language explodes into unknown codes
Nailed to the beach groping for a clue
the sky opens without welcome
to reveal a clenched unblossoming bud
vibrating poised to vomit itself forth

It's the knob of a door
he dares not reach for

Colin Dodds is the author of Another Broken Wizard, WINDFALL and The Last Bad Job, which Norman Mailer touted as showing "something that very few writers have; a species of inner talent that owes very little to other people." His writing has appeared in more than two hundred publications, and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net Anthology. Poet and songwriter David Berman (Silver Jews, Actual Air) said of Dodds' work: "These are very good poems. For moments I could even feel the old feelings when I read them." Colin's book-length poem That Happy Captive was a finalist for the Trio House Press Louise Bogan Award as well as the 42 Miles Press Poetry Award in 2015. And his screenplay, Refreshment, was named a semi-finalist in the 2010 American Zoetrope Contest. Colin lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter. See more of his work at thecolindodds.com.



Galerie

Catrin Welz-Stein

Your Lover is British

Marina Rubin

AFTER A DELIGHTFUL DINNER on Wellington Road, Hugh switched on the bedroom TV and lay on the spread, still wearing his shoes. Marguerite took off her dress. The day before, she had gone to Agent Provocateur and carefully selected lingerie from their exclusive Caught in Charlotte's Web collection. This was her daring attempt to ignite a dash of passion in Hugh, the handsome British bachelor she had been sleeping with for the past six months. In the boutique's fitting room, when she saw herself wearing the bra, panties, stockings with the garter belt, she almost gasped and bit her lip—her reflection in the mirror was tantalizing. Barely there tulle with satin strips in a cobweb design, it was like a tattoo against her skin, a spider pin crawling in the center of her bra.

She turned around and unveiled herself for Hugh like a 1930's pin-up girl.

"Marg, turn off the lights and come to bed, luv," he said with a placid smile, and went back to watching BBC.

She crept up under the covers and curled into the nook of his arm. She tried wet teasing kisses on his neck until he pressed her head down to his chest and locked her immobile in his firm grip. She lay quietly and thought about the best lover she ever had. Alexander.

Every kiss with him, be it hello or see you later, was the beginning of a new love-making session. He lived in a hostel with a shared bathroom on the fourth floor, so after sex she had to climb the stairs wrapped in a bed sheet, dripping with juices, just to wash her face and wipe herself. She looked at Hugh... Hugh had three bathrooms in a beautiful house he had built with his own hands, and a garden with a fragrant pine tree where she loved to sit and read a book.

"Every time I do my washing, my vests shrink," Hugh announced suddenly, full of angst. "They barely reach my belly button. Darling, it's maddening! Same with my socks—they seem to vanish in the machine, there is always one odd sock left!" he exclaimed into the dark.

Marguerite squeezed her thighs together, the tulle prickling between her legs. "Why are you telling me this? About the socks?" she asked carefully, hiding her dismay.

"Who else should I tell?" he laughed. "Should I call mum in Chichester? Or maybe ask one of my interns at work – chap, what happens to your socks in the washing cycle?"

The second best lover she ever had, Lorenzo, could perform cunnilingus on her for hours and hours and hours, a lone swimmer

in the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately, he didn't speak a single word she could understand. When she wondered if this language barrier could be solved with basic ESL classes, his friends hinted that he didn't speak much better in his native language.

"Well, Hugh, I must confess," she started. "While we are on the topic of domestic issues, you must know—your shower doesn't work for me."

"What?!" He turned on the night lamp. "What do you mean—it doesn't work for you?" The house was Hugh's only passion, it spoke to him like a woman, with hints coming through the pipes in the basement, and whispers from the thermostat.

"The stream doesn't reach me. It hits the wall. I know you are six foot three, but I'm not! Perhaps you should date a taller woman," she suggested, resentful of his iciness in bed.

"I don't need a taller woman," he said, preoccupied. "So how did you shower all this time?"

She looked at him—he had the body of Apollo, the face of Cary Grant. "I've struggled."

"Oh dear," he pressed his lips to hers as if he was trying to stub out a cigarette. She knew exactly what came next. Sex. Mechanical and rehearsed, like step-by-step instructions to assemble an IKEA bookcase. He kissed her left breast, once, then her right breast, climbed on top of her, and after 6-8 lusty oh yeahs, convulsed, pecked her on the cheek in gratitude, and fell asleep.

The third best lover she ever had, Adidas, could do it 3-4 times a night. A quick change of condom and he was ready to go at it again. He was now in prison in Michigan because while out on bail for credit card fraud, he decided to buy himself a stolen Harley-Davidson.

"Wake up, darling. Your coffee is ready." Hugh snatched the duvet and tickled Margue-

rite's foot. He always got up earlier than her, did things to the house, made breakfast, read emails.

She walked to the bathroom naked, her underwear in hand. As she lathered herself in the shower, she tried to remember that joke. How did it go? In heaven, your mechanic is German, your policeman is British and your lover is Italian...But in hell, your mechanic is Italian, your policeman is German and your lover is British. She toweled herself dry, put her Agent Provocateur lingerie back on; how it mocked her now, bullied her as if she were a teen girl in braces.

She headed for the bedroom. Hugh was lying on the bed in his suit.

He looked at her, a predatory carnivorous stare, as if he was seeing her for the first time—the supple breasts, the voluptuous body bursting with cravings. "So..." he whispered.

She stopped in the doorway, curving her almost naked body like Lady Godiva. "So..."

"What did you think?" he asked, excited like a child.

"About what?"

"The shower! I fixed it while you were sleeping! It was actually quite easy. What I did was, I readjusted the valve to make the trajectory..." as he droned on with intricate details of plumbing and engineering, she retreated to her memories. "Marg? Darling? Did you enjoy it?" he asked.

She heard this question before...from different men...in a completely different context.

"Yes, I did," she nodded. "It was rather wonderful. No one ever adjusted a shower for me."

Yes, she thought to herself, she would... stay with him, she would lock away her lust like a fur coat in the middle of July, shove it so far back inside her closet no one would ever see it again. Hugh's parents were

coming from West Sussex next week to meet her. She would say yes to it all. Yes, she would be faithful. Yes, they would live in

a beautiful house with three bathrooms and she would read books in the garden under a pine tree.

Marina Rubin's work had appeared in over seventy magazines and anthologies including 13th Warrior Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Dos Passos Review, 5AM, Nano Fiction, Coal City, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Jewish Currents, Lillith, Pearl, Poet Lore, Skidrow Penthouse, The Worcester Review and many more. She is an editor of Mudfish, the Tribeca literary and art magazine. She is a 2013 recipient of the COJECO Blueprint Fellowship. Her fourth book, a collection of flash fiction Stealing Cherries was released in November 2013. More information about Marina Rubin, including contact information, can be found at www.marinarubin.com



Flour in The Sky

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.

Burned by a Blue Flame

Julianna Siemssen

A thousand cerulean candles
glow boldly against the scab-black sky,
lifted by pale hands whose veins pulse
with royal blue blood.

Well-trained roses with their thorns bred out
smell like old vegetable peelings.
Their scent catches the breeze
and floats into the nostrils
of a man and wife in gleaming inky garb,
who, clutching hands, look on
as attendants wheel a small coffin forward.

"It had to be this way," someone says.
"She's happier where she is now," says another,
and tears are shed and hugs exchanged with
flowers and cards and gifts

and the wife remembers

how she held her Isabella down
and bashed her head against the wooden floor

until her cries grew silent
and her hands would never again
paint galaxies in the air—
and a cry rings out
and fists beat the coffin's wooden walls
begging to escape—

silence.

The coffin is hauled off to the crematorium.
Speak the name, please,
of she whose ashes nourish thorny, fragrant roses
of how her stomach rose and fell
as her mother hammered nails
through the coffin lid,
of the dolls she loved and how she flapped her
hands
and the bite scars on a bully's arm
and the window she broke while fleeing—

Speak,
and steel yourself against the blue bruises
from the blows of unlistening ears.

Julianna Siemssen is an undergraduate at the University of Washington. She currently writes for UWT's student newspaper, the Tacoma Ledger. This is her first published poem.

dandelions like life rafts

Edward Clarke

Song of the drowned Boatmen

Slatted whitewashed would never make a good kill room.

The weeds were a stormy sea in that fenced yard. The dandelions sat on their spines like survivors lost in the void. Like salt water lily pads. He was the sole boatman of these grasses, and spent his days watching the dandelion rafts slowly wither and crisp under the sun, sinking into the waves like kneeling children.

Sometimes, he would float on his belly and peek into the neighbor's yard, the neighbor's ocean. There was another boatman there, an older boy whose textbooks were thick and had hard covers. This boatman had a cat.

A small thing that treaded water with testing paws.

Titanic in life

One day, as winter heat sharpened itself into the clouds, the good boatman spied through the fences this older boy and this cat. The boy was squatting in the waves, his thighs pressed to his chest, chin on his knees, the younger boatman likened him to a small cannonball.

Curling around his leg was the kitten, its tail silver and pointed like the birch tree. It slithered around the boy's calf and he picked it up, holding it above his head as the clouds began to fall;

drizzle mist fell into his eyes. The boy behind the fence blinked, and the cat began to squirm in the other boy's hands. It began to slap at his wrists and face, leaving sheer red twine curling around his hands and cheeks. The little thing had its mouth wide open, as if to yowl, but nothing spilled from its throat. A loud crack shook the sea, and the pet went limp in the boy's hands, its neck sprouted from the base of its skull.

It was flung into the woods by the tail. Rainwater gathered in the crater.

Heavy skies

That night, the young boy dreamed that his sea had filled with drowned kittens and fallen clouds.

The Children's Crusade

Later on, his father stole a portion of his sea for chickens. The wire mesh seemed to be a nail driven deep into the palm of his ocean, and the chickens were flies picking at the god flesh. They were not supposed to be there. His father shot one for Christmas dinner, and the yard again filled with the snapped and shot dead in the boatman's dreams.

9,000 racehorses flatten the field

He crushed his goldfish with his father's boot clutched in dark hands the day after his ninth

birthday. The thing scraped from the floor
where he'd smashed it; its skin had splayed
like a rug. The young boatman threw up in the
hallway; his bare feet stung in the bile.

Titanic in death

That summer, his lawn shriveled and fell in a
drought. The dandelions sunk one by one into
the void, and his ocean dried overnight.

Edward Clarke is a sophomore creative writing student in a performing and visual arts high school in Texas. His work has previously been published in the Menacing Hedge magazine.

Northern California

Ron Riecki

“THEY EVEN, I READ ONLINE, they even hide the sign to the city there. Because they don’t want peoples going there. It’s just across the bridge.”

“So you want to go there because they don’t want you to go there?”

“Of course. It’s probably—do you listen to me?”

“Just give me your hand.”

She put out her hand and closed her eyes. She knew the game. She was Emily.

Bhumibol Adulyadej, the King of Thailand, was on the wall, next to an eight-armed woman riding a lion, so Emily was happy. Hinduism and panang—little could make her happier. She’d just returned from Hat Yai, a city where she said every restaurant was good. It was impossible to have bad food there.

The game was simple. Rob would draw letters on her palm and she would guess. She would feel for a letter like—

“B,” she said. She opened her eyes.

Rob nodded yes.

“Boba!”

Bubble tea was an addiction between the two. They’d actually make pacts not to drink it for a week and one of them would inevitably cheat. They would call it crack, heroin, meth. There was nothing more addictive than tapioca

in Oolong.

“The close or the far one?”

Rob knew the close one would take less than a minute. The far bubble teashop would be a half hour walk across town. There was no rush. The farther shop’s tea was just plain better—a mix of cold on top, warm on the bottom, a higher grade of tea, and somehow cheaper. The kind owner looked like a Benetton model, with kobicha skin as smooth as night.

The shops were all closed or closing. Walking down the street, Rob and Emily appeared on security cameras with the screens facing the doors so that they watched themselves walk by. Rob was tall, lanky, in a way that Emily said would make the girls in southern France pounce on him. But in the U.S., Rob was too skinny, especially obvious when he’d tuck his shirt in his pants tightly. This was six-pack ab America where half of his high school basketball team did steroids and, Rob thought, you don’t even need steroids for basketball.

Emily was pale and pudgy, embarrassed by her weight that attracted Rob immediately. She was curvy and sometimes giggly and always wore a scarf that moved in the wind so freely that it seemed to represent her spirit. On their initial date, she had flipped off a taxicab that

beeped at them. The cab driver actually got out of his car and approached them as if he was ready to fight, but Emily took out a rape whistle and blew it so hard that she complained of a headache on their return walk. Rob and Emily then went to her apartment and made out so passionately that for hours after they'd stopped kissing they could still feel the other's lips. Emily told him two dates later that a Harvard study had shown that first dates where both partners are aroused emotionally, whether positively or negatively, had twice the likelihood of going on a second date. The only thing evil, Emily had said, is boredom, which is exactly, Emily had also said, what college towns tend to be.

Emily was studying biomedical engineering. She found it easy, possibly because her goal was to get the minimum passing grade for each class, content as long as she would end up with a diploma. A professor had told her she would be hired immediately no matter her grades, so the incentive wasn't there to get anything higher. Rob, on the other hand, was doing a literature degree and a professor had told him no jobs would be available once he graduated, but, intent on finding something, he'd turn in novella length essays at the end of the semester. His latest lingering essay was on final-girl tropes in post-millennial zombie films. A professor had assured him it would be published, saying that "zombie anything sees print these days." The problem was that the rewrites based on his professor's notes seemed endless and, even more problematically, delving so heavily into the subject matter was shifting Rob's worldview. He found himself startled by mirrors, realizing the reflection wasn't a murderer but rather his own face. He told Emily he wanted to do comedy studies to switch things up, but his professor told him there was no such thing.

Rare for her to do in public, Emily held his hand while they walked. She could tell when he was tense. It was nearing midnight. College was in between summer A and summer B courses, a dead time where the city was finally warm at night. Ironically, the students would all leave when the air reached nighttime perfection.

There was almost as much activity now as there normally would be mid-semester, as many people on the moonlit street, but they were locals, people far removed from the college. Rob called them the carnies, because they were tatted and loved piercings and had a nomadic, circus feel to them. Emily, on hearing Rob's nickname for the townies, got offended because she was all of those things. Interested, Rob asked to see her tattoos, so she showed him and this led to sex. Rob never understood why the slippery-slope theory was a fallacy. It seemed to him that one thing always led to the next. The world was uncontrollably causal. Things escalated, especially if you didn't want them to.

Rob heard glass breaking in the distance, somewhere, faint. Maybe it was glass. Maybe it was something else. A couple across the street looked at Rob, as if the sound had come from him.

The closer bubble teashop was up ahead, then next to them, then behind them.

Rob stopped.

"You want there?"

Emily's English was often short, chopped, tossing out words and parts of words. She made plural things singular. She'd ask Rob if he thought people could tell if she was a foreigner and he would say yes and she would smack his shoulder. Rob would tell her that here he was a foreigner as well. They could tell by his accent. Emily would ask him what his accent was and Rob would say that on the other side

of the U.S. people spoke an entirely different way. There is more than one America to America, Rob would say. Rob was learning this in class. The college was liberal, very liberal, especially with the English department where Rob was being inundated with terms like carceral mechanisms and commodity fetish and male gaze.

“Yeah,” Rob said. “C’est presque.”

“Proche,” Emily said, “It’s close. Proche. Say it.”

Rob would switch to French only when others were around, as if no one else could speak it other than Emily. The problem is that she would often correct him, using English. It was like giving away a secret code.

The bubble teashop was empty. During the semester, on a night like this, it would be filled with talk of things like “community and polity” or “goddamn neutrinos.” The students would talk loud sometimes, trying to declare their worldviews on the nearby world. Massive, on the wall in front of them, was a Cheshire-like cat that was the mascot of the two-city boba franchise. In the winter, it promised them warmth from the midterm March. During final exams, it was the vision of their reward for a day spent in the catacombs of the library. But now, with the chairs upside-down and the smell of cleaning liquid, half of the lights off, it seemed to be about to open its mouth and show a throat the size of Emily’s body.

The tea was good though. Emily would take her straw and start at the top, working her way down to the bottom’s warmth, mixing the temperatures. Rob would take the cap off and guzzle it, the ice hitting his teeth. He bit down on a cube and the cold hit a nerve. It felt a bit like his student debt that was accumulating. Emily was on a scholarship. She was smart. She chose the right major. Rob, truth be told, felt like he was going a bit mad with worry. Or

not mad, but nervous. Anxious. There were times when he wanted to break things. Sometimes he did. He found a collection of used neon lights behind the local Walmart one night and threw every one at its back wall. Later, he’d find glass in his shoelaces, in his hair, in the heel of his foot.

Rob wondered what it must be like for the old man who approached him now—was he drunk, not drunk, a limp? Once passed, Rob turned around. Emily pulled Rob along. Her apartment would be around the corner, a corner where a homeless man lay every night; it was his spot. No one ever challenged it. Rob wondered what he’d done to earn it. There was no streetlight there, so the man could lie in darkness, two bushes enclosed around him, maybe so that he could hear the rustling of anyone approaching.

Emily said, “What that?”

Rob looked down and saw a cat looking up at them. He laughed.

The cat ran in front of them.

“It’s hungry.”

“It’s pregnant.”

“You think?”

Emily approached the cat. It was brown and white, stripes slapped on carelessly.

“I can’t believe people just move and then leave their cat. I mean, who would do that?”

“We should get milk if she’s pregnant.”

“Maybe that’s cancer.”

“She’s pregnant.”

Emily hurried to the door. Rob caught up. The doorknob was loose. She struggled with the lock.

Emily’s apartment was nearly unfurnished. Everything she had, except the mattress, was given to her by other students or found at thrift stores or garage sales. Her table cost her a dollar. She bought a perfectly good lamp for twenty-five cents. Books were lined in her

closet and a bookshelf was filled with folded clothes.

Rob sat in a beanbag that he called The Blob. When he sat in it, he was Steve McQueen. Emily preferred Kevin Dillon.

Cupboards open and closed.

“What do cat eat?”

“Je ne sais pas,” said Rob.

“Everyone knows that,” Emily said.

“Then you don’t need me.”

A cupboard closed. “Google it.”

“I don’t have my phone.”

Emily entered, tossing her phone to Rob.

“She’s probably down the block by now, stalking somebody else.”

“She wasn’t stalking. She was hungry. I’d be too if I was that pregnant.”

“Or had cancer.”

“What do the phone say?”

“Cat food.”

“I don’t have cat food.”

“Or tuna. Fish.”

“Sausage?”

“No, give it meat. And not weird meat.”

“I’m giving her sausage,” Emily said and went to the door.

Rob lay back, the bean bag loud.

“You’re not going to help?”

“What would I do?”

Emily left.

There was one thing hanging on the wall: a mirror. Rob didn’t look at it. He looked at the floor, counting floorboards. He lost count and started over. The door opened.

“I heard something.”

“What?”

“A scratching.”

“Cats do that.”

“No, like a person.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like a person scratching in a trunk.”

“What?”

“In a trunk. Like there was a person in a trunk. I don’t know. Come.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I’m not going out there at this time of night if you think someone’s trapped in a trunk. Call the police.”

“And tell them what?”

“A person is trapped in a trunk.”

“But I don’t know that. Come.”

“No.”

Emily walked away, into her bedroom.

Rob pushed himself up, looked in the mirror, and followed after her.

Emily was searching in her book closet, pulling out boxes with nothing in them.

“What are you looking for?”

“A lampe de poche.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know the word.”

“What does it look like?”

“It’s a light. To see what’s hidden.”

“A flashlight?”

“Yes, flashlight.”

“No, don’t go out there.”

Emily went to a dresser, pulling out shelves and stirring the contents inside.

Rob put his shoes on. When he tied the last shoe, he could see Emily’s legs before him. They were not officially a couple. Emily had told him she would never marry anyone. Then she told him she occasionally had thoughts of marriage. They would have sex with condoms sometimes, sometimes without. Emily said she liked to play Russian roulette with having a baby. Rob said that was the most vulgar way possible of putting it. They would volunteer together at one of the nearby homeless shelters, helping with the food preparation. They would feel unneeded there, superfluous.

They would keep returning, sporadically, eating the food, talking to the men who seemed to consistently say the unexpected. One had a Ph.D. and never spoke of it again. Another had served time for a double-murder and never spoke of it again. They seemed to have done everything and nothing. Rob felt like that too sometimes.

Outside, there seemed to be a hum. The soft hum of the city that is always there. An electrical hum, distant, foreboding. The street was filled with empty cars. There was a van across the street, its windows covered. Emily came out, shoeless.

Rob looked from car to car to car. He turned and saw Emily walking directly for the van.

“Don’t go there,” he said.

She continued to walk.

“Don’t!” There was a loss of control in his voice, the reaction bigger than needed, as if she were about to be killed, as if he were about to do it. Was there an echo?

There are moments where the personality gets revealed. It doesn’t take much in terms of pressure. Something as little as an unknown van. Rob saw Emily looking at him differently, studying him in the moonlight, understanding that there was a different person underneath all of that skin than she had thought all of this time. Rob wondered how far she would withdraw. It was like that with people. You could lose them in so many ways.

His throat itched.

As if Rob had never existed in her lifetime, Emily continued towards the van.

Ron Riecki has work in several anthologies including The Best Ten-Minute Plays 2012, The Best Small Fictions 2015, The Best Men’s Stage Monologues of 2016, and Poetry in Michigan/Michigan in Poetry. Riecki’s story “Accidents” was given the 2016 Shenandoah Fiction Prize. He likes listening to Chvrches and the architecture of churches.

Live and Learn

Madeleine Swann

“HAVING A CLEAR OUT.” All Lindsey had wanted to do when she got in was free her bunions and watch TV, but instead she was chatting with her new neighbour, a lady with an aggressively tight white bun and thick make up. The woman had been lugging plastic containers of full milk bottles out to the recycling while wearing a miasma mask, catching Lindsey as she tried to sneak in through the high-rise’s front door. The sky was the colour of the dirty concrete surrounding them and Lindsey hadn’t wanted to get rained on after eight hours of watching customers in the supermarket.

“Marcus invoked His name,” said the woman with forced joviality, nodding to her recycling. “My grandson. He’s too young to understand.”

“Milk doesn’t look spoiled,” Lindsey offered, wanting to be nice, to help her avoid spending unnecessary money.

“It is,” snapped the woman. Her foundation cracked with guilt lines, “you’re new here, aren’t you? I’m Mrs Gifford.”

“Lindsey. Yes, from Sheffield.”

“Oh, nice. Nice to have younger people about.” Lindsey knew she should do something about the awkward pause, even opened her mouth to speak, but shyness plugged it up.

Mrs Gifford got there first, “you’re opposite Jenny Baur aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure, not met her yet.”

“You’re lucky,” Mrs Gifford’s face darkened, “she’s an odd one. If I didn’t know better I’d think she was...well, you know.” Lindsey did. “But,” Mrs Gifford’s eyes widened, “you didn’t hear that from me.” Lindsey assured her she wouldn’t breathe a word, feeling like she’d been let into a secret club. Mrs Gifford’s lips twitched in approval. “Oh, and we’re meeting with the local paper tomorrow about the new skate park. It’d be good to see you there.”

“Right, yeah, sounds like a good idea, give um summat to do.”

“No,” the forehead creases returned, “imagine what will happen at nights. Meetings, sabbats...” she said the last word as if it was the filthiest thing she could think of – which it was.

“Right, well, I’ll be there,” said Lindsey, turning to the main door of the tower block before anything else could be said. Mrs Gifford waved cheerily and Lindsey returned the favour, watching her pick up newspapers littering the ground and shoving them into the recycling. One headline read: “Romp With Satan Lasted Three Days’ Says Accused.” Lindsey ran upstairs, fear boiling her stomach.

She sat heavily on her threadbare sofa, enjoying the silence. Her fingers twitched for the phone but she couldn't – not yet. She pushed aside memories of angry faces and painful words. Her mind completed a successful call home, laughter, tears, reconciliation, but her body remained inert. There was a desperate feeling in her chest. She distracted herself by switching the TV onto the Prophecy channel and zoning out to rolling predictions. A man in a heavy black cloak sat in an armchair in the centre of a stage decked out to look like a front room, while two anchors filled time between predictions, "you can just imagine what kind of scenes are rushing through that amazing brain of his, Tom."

"You sure can, Katy," smiled Tom, "who knows if it's the location of a missing cat or... world destruction?" they guffawed together.

Unable to shut off her thoughts Lindsey went to the flat's computer, typing in information on the local church. In the sidebar she noticed a scandalous story on the uncovering of a Pagan commune and clicked on it. Then she remembered stories of forbidden rituals and looked them up. Down and down she fell, clicking and reading and watching and clicking. The time for bed neared, then arrived, then passed until, after watching a supposedly real clip of human sacrifice, Lindsey turned the machine off with a shiver of self disgust.

The next evening, on her way back from the supermarket, there was Mrs Gifford carrying a plastic soldier to the recycling. "Marcus couldn't recite the Lord's Prayer after we bought it for him," she said. Lindsey gave a half nod of understanding though the woman was clearly over zealous. "Oh," she squawked, "I need to discuss something with you." She shuffled towards Lindsey like an anxious hedgehog, "we try to be careful of the things we read in this building. It's a shared internet space and...

the children..."

Lindsey wanted to remain breezy and bright but her face betrayed her, burning brightly. It was as though the entire building had yanked down her underwear and were discussing her parts with distaste. She coughed before she could speak, "I didn't realise, sorry."

"Not a problem," said Mrs Gifford, then she was gone.

That night Lindsey awoke to a baby crying furiously through the walls. She thought of the day Sammy had been born and her arms encompassed her own body to make up for their emptiness. She scrunched her face against thoughts of him, her sister and mother. The baby wasn't quieting and now she heard bickering from the couple. She decided that, if it continued tomorrow, she would do something about it.

The next night she knocked gently on their door, a tube of hare's brain and willow bark paste in hand. What she presumed to be the father answered, handsome for all his bleary eyes and unkempt facial hair. Before he thought she was there to complain Lindsey held up the paste. His eyes took a few seconds to focus but, when they did, it was like she'd put a blanket around him. "I'm so sorry about this," he said, shifting the baby to take it. In a room behind him she saw a cot surrounded by a chalk circle on the ground and an iron hammer dangling from the top of the bars. They seemed like responsible parents.

"Honestly it's fine." She turned red again and left him staring after her.

The next evening Mrs Gifford was slicing at the patch of grass in front of the flats with shears. She straightened up and her face told Lindsey all was not well. "We missed you last night." Lindsey remembered the newspaper shoot.

"I was at work." She glanced desperately

at the front door.

"No, I'd already said hello to you after work."

"I'm sorry, it slipped my mind."

"That's OK, don't worry about it," Mrs Gifford smiled, making Lindsey think of pink liquid candy pouring over beetles and centipedes.

"Ok, see you then." Lindsey was gone before anything further could be said. Hopefully that would be the end of it and she'd never be asked to do anything again.

She removed the weight watchers meal from the fridge, the taste already in her mouth. She was just placing it into the microwave when someone knocked. Imagining Mrs Gifford with more sweet-worded complaints, she must have looked terrifying when she threw open the door. It was her neighbour and on seeing her his eyes widened and he almost took a step back. In front of him was a pushchair with a very different baby to the one she had met the night before. "David and I just wanted to say thank you."

"Please come in," said Lindsey, over compensating. Her breath barely under control, she ushered him in to the tiny kitchen and smiled at the cooing child wrapped against the cold, "he seems happier."

"He is, thank you so much." Lindsey went to turn the kettle on but he guided her to one of the chairs around the table, "let me do it, it's the least I can do. You know," he flipped the switch, "the hardest part is knowing there are things that exist purely to harm. I mean, Crissie and I just want to go about our day like anyone else."

"Bloody Faeries," Lindsey agreed, "why they'd want to shoot arrows at such innocent little things I'll never know," she pitched her voice high, looking into David's big blue eyes. He laughed.

"I don't know," said her neighbour, placing

a mug in front of her and sitting, "Crissie and I were starting to think it may have been more than faeries, it may have been..." he didn't want to say it and he didn't need to – Lindsey shivered. "Sorry, I'm Mike," he smiled, and Lindsey tried not to notice what interesting teeth he had. She was aware of her lack of make up and hair dragged into a ponytail.

"Lindsey."

They popped in the next day, and the next. Crissie, said Mike, was a call centre manager and had asked Mike to stay at home with the baby. Lindsey knew the bubble in her stomach when he knocked on her door was a warning sign but it was a stampede she couldn't hold back. She was certain his eyes lingered on her when she filled the kettle, certain he too stretched out a finger to brush hers when he accepted the drink. Weeks passed and they grew so close she even told him about Gavin. On a Tuesday in March they watched some old crime programme together on the sofa. The faux-bumbling detective had tricked the murderer into entering the same room as the body, and of course the corpse bled profusely in accusation. "Why do you think it's doing that, Mr Jones?" said the detective in his coarse Bronx accent. Lindsey was aware of the screen and the things happening, but she knew only the warmth from Mike's body.

"I love this guy," said Mike with childlike joy, "I used to watch him as a kid."

"Me too," said Lindsey, though she hadn't.

She was collecting the post from the communal doorstep when she caught Mrs Gifford's eye as she bustled in carrying an armful of recycling bags. Lindsey was siezed by a warmth towards this eccentric lady with her frightening face and neat gardening gloves, so she said "hello." The response was an awkward, breathy hello back. No sermon, no

requests for local action, just her sagging rump disappearing into her ground floor flat. Lindsey thought about it all day at work while she watched the kids mess about too closely to stacks of fizzy drinks and she thought about it the whole walk home. Maybe the old woman couldn't be bothered to socialise with a person lacking such public spirit, but it seemed somehow more than that. Mike didn't come in the evening. She switched on a chat show where Celtic men and women argued against the audience, insisting they weren't speaking the Devil's tongue. "I've never seen the Devil in my life," raged a Welsh woman.

"Maybe he calls you on the phone?" said the host cheekily, provoking delighted baying. Lindsey flicked onto the Prophecy channel. She went to the computer and switched it on before going back to the sofa and staring at the phone, which she didn't pick up. Worry bubbled in her veins.

On her way home she passed the chemist, checking about her before going in. The Chemist, hearing the jangle of the bells hanging from the door, appeared from a side room. Her blue uniform spoke of knowledge and soothing attitudes. "Can I help?"

"Um," Lindsey tried not to look at the neat packages of strange, bloated parts and bloody pieces, tins of crushed worms for bruises, plastic packets of hangman's rope for headaches and jars of cow's breath for bronchitis, "someone I know...well she told me about..."

"You're single?" Lindsey nodded and the chemist's eyes sparkled with a shared secret. "Your womb is overflowing with your own seed." She stepped out from behind the counter and plucked several cartons from the shelf. "Daisy Juice," she said, "does wonders for settling unpleasant urges." Lindsey paid and scuttled out, hoping she would get indoors safely without seeing anyone, squeaking when

Mrs Gifford opened the main door.

"Didn't mean to surprise you," she said in a way Lindsey wasn't sure she liked.

"You didn't, it's fine," she wished she had said yes to the brown paper bag and tried to hide her wares behind her back. The old woman's eyes were immediately drawn to the movement.

"You might be wondering why Mike hasn't popped in to see you the last couple of days."

"What?" blood burst into Lindsey's face.

"Their baby died the other night." The clatter of the sentence, and the way Mrs Gifford shifted onto one leg and studied Lindsey's reaction, made her want to push the silly old bag onto the floor. "We're having a jumble sale to raise money for them," she continued, "if you wouldn't mind leaving some things in bags out front at some point we'll take them over."

Lindsey tried to think but nothing came together, "why don't I just take the bags there myself? I'd like to see..."

"We...don't know where it's being held yet," Mrs Gifford answered too quickly before darting past. Lindsey went upstairs and slammed her door. The sobs came quickly and lasted more than an hour, until finally she packed a few things into black bags, waiting until night to leave them by the main entrance.

Two days passed in silence. She barely noticed misbehaving children in the store and smiled politely as ever to those in the building, including Mrs Gifford. On the third day, though, a police man and woman came into the store. Both looked so ordinary, like people she wouldn't glance at, but they gave her a feeling almost like heartburn. She watched them head for the counter and speak with Mr Pritchard, idly wondering if they couldn't find what they were looking for when they headed towards her, "are you Miss Stevens?"

"Yes."

“You do not have to say anything,” said the female, “but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.” Lindsey laughed, the woman looked so serious it could only be a joke. Neither laughed back, and the pain when they grabbed her wrists and cuffed her was more than real. Lindsey made a strange, helpless noise, a silly half grin on her face as she was led from the store to the police car, her innards melting under the stares. She floated through the station booking, not hearing when asked to go from finger printing to mug shot taking. “Lindsey,” said the police woman in a mocking sing-song to get her attention. Furious tears burnt Lindsey’s eyes as she complied.

“Have you ever tried to self harm or commit suicide?” asked the man behind the desk.

“Um, no,” said Lindsey, trying not to think of Gavin.

“Is there anyone you’d like us to call?”

Lindsey remembered her mother’s advice before leaving Sheffield, “a solicitor.”

She was led to a tiny, bare cell with a toilet and coverless bed. “Do you want any tea or coffee?” asked the desk man. Lindsey knew he asked everyone the same thing but at that moment she knew she would be eternally grateful to him.

“Um, tea please,” she said. Moments later he returned with a cardboard cup and left again, locking the door behind him. She wrapped her hands around the cup, trying to ignore the young drunk in another cell who yelled and banged like an animal. She tried to think of her favourite music videos and things that made her laugh, squeezing her eyes against everything else. When the liquid cooled she drank it and lay down on the bed, convinced she would never sleep. It seemed

like moments later the door opened but the clock showed hours had passed.

The solicitor waited at a table in a small side room. Though he had kind eyes and a sharp suit he was worryingly young. Lindsey watched the policeman disappear and with him her chance to ask for someone more experienced. Meekly she sat opposite him. “Ok,” he said, his voice calm but firm, “they have a few statements from people and something they’re not disclosing, but it’s likely nothing to worry about. Why don’t you tell me your side from the beginning?” Lindsey picked at her little finger nail, trying to think of where to begin. After giving an edited account, she was led further into the building.

The interview room was cool and grey. It would have felt like a job interview were it not for the violence of Lindsey’s pulse and the grip around her throat of an unknown entity. The police man and woman sat opposite her, three tape recorders running simultaneously. “Before we begin my client has a prepared statement I’d like to read,” her solicitor turned to the typed page on his laptop while the officers watched, a hint of irony on their lips. The hand around Lindsey’s throat tightened. “My client, Miss Lindsey Stevens, does know a Mr and Mrs White but only by association of living in the same tenant block. They were friendly to each other but not close, and Miss Stevens has never been inside their flat and therefore knows nothing of the incident.”

The male officer looked down at his notepad, “Mr and Mrs White have made claims of witchcraft and death by enchantment. Now, can I ask how well you know Mr and Mrs White?”

Lindsey’s eyes flicked to her solicitor who typed furiously on his keypad, “no comment.” The officers exchanged the briefest of glances.

“Did Mr White ever visit you while his wife

was at work?"

"No comment."

"Did you ever handle their baby?"

"No comment," Lindsey knew she should tell someone she could barely breathe but she was afraid, so afraid it would be seen as further evidence.

"Did you place hexes beside his cot?"

"No comment," Lindsey hoped the horror in her eyes told them all they needed to know. They shifted in their seats, and this time the woman took up the questioning.

"Do you know a Mr Gavin Tirrik?"

Lindsey's hands clasped, shaking, "no comment."

"Did you attempt to take your life when he rejected you?"

A tear rolled from Lindsey's eye, "no comment."

"Did you place a love charm in his jacket pocket without his knowledge?"

"No comment."

"Is that why you had to leave your home town so suddenly?"

Lindsey's entire body was shaking. She knew it made her look bad but she couldn't stop, "no comment."

"Shall we have a break?" said her solicitor. Back in the little room he looked her in the eye, his kind face tight, "why didn't you tell me about the hexes around the cot?" Lindsey opened her mouth to protest, to tell him that she had never even been in their flat, but it was no good. This must be her punishment for Gavin. She was silly to think she could move away from it all.

"I don't know."

"OK," he turned again to his laptop, "we need to change tack."

Back in the interview room he read aloud so quickly that Lindsey was surprised the police heard any of it, "My client does know Mr and

Mrs White and was a friendly neighbour to them. To that effect, when she noticed their baby appeared to have been swapped with a changeling, she placed several charms secretly by the cot in the hopes of bringing the true child back. No malice was intended." Lindsey heard the words and wanted to laugh. She knew they weren't true and so did everybody else. She wanted to scream that she had done no such thing, that if anyone placed charms anywhere it was the child's mother to incriminate her. Her lips pursed. The solicitor's insistence on the Changeling Defence had seemed like her only chance in the little room but, under the hard lights of the investigation room, her hope wilted. Another round of no comments ensued and, after several hours, she lay once again on the hard bed in her cell charged with Witchcraft. The last thing she expected was an officer to unlock her door and announce casually that her bail had been paid.

No-one was lurking when she scurried through the front door of the tenant building and nobody saw her hurry up the stairs to her flat. She locked the door, pausing for a moment to appreciate her luck, however small. She picked up the receiver and dialled a number both familiar and alien. "Hello?" said the voice of a little boy.

"Sammy?" She could see him as if he were there, but the little boy she remembered from a year ago already sounded much older.

"Yeah?" The unfamiliarity hurt.

"It's Auntie Lindsey, is mummy or nanny there?"

"Hello, sorry, he likes to answer the phone," another familiar voice laughed.

"Jan?"

"What do you want, Lindsey?"

"I...just wanted to thank mum. For the bail."

“Yeah, well, she can’t really afford that kind of money you know. She’s had to use her savings. And she didn’t really appreciate the call from the police neither.”

“I know,” Lindsey tried to stay calm, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t have anyone else to contact.”

“That’s not our fault,” and the phone slammed down. Lindsey replaced the receiver, willing the tears to fall but nothing – she was frighteningly empty. She went to the kitchen and filled the kettle, sprawling on the sofa while it bubbled, expecting devastation to hit but feeling nothing. Then she heard the first smash downstairs. She ran out of her room and peered down at the front entrance to see a group of local lads tearing through her charity bags, kicking the contents about as if they were footballs. An old ceramic caterpillar Sammy hadn’t liked very much had shattered against the wall.

“Stop it,” said Lindsey, but her words had no effect. “Stop it, stop it, stop it!” She shrieked, unable to watch her things and Sammy’s things and her mother’s things being laughed at as if they were soiled underwear. A door at the end of the corridor burst open and Mrs Gifford, backed by her husband and a younger man, hurried to the scene.

“Enough,” said her husband.

“Those were for the Whites,” wailed Mrs Gifford. Gentle hands grabbed Lindsey’s wrist from behind and tugged her to safety. She

followed Mike into her front room, uncertain if he was a wish or truly there. He sat her on the sofa, taking her hand in his. His eyes were so beautiful, so soft, that she wanted to kiss them. Outside the yelling increased and more things smashed but she was with Mike and everything was alright.

“I’m not cross with you,” he said, “I understand and I’m not cross.”

“What do you mean?” Lindsey frowned, he wasn’t meant to say something like this, he was supposed to be on her side.

“Just tell them why you did it. Tell them why you enchanted me, that you wanted me and I only did as I was bidden.” She said nothing, shaking her head. “You enchanted me,” he repeated slowly as if to a child, “this wasn’t my fault. I didn’t suffocate him, you made me.”

“But I...”

“It’s important,” Mike placed a hand on the side of her face. It was so warm she could have cried. “You have to tell them that you did it and why.” A flash cracked through her head and she understood – it was her after all. Everywhere she went something like this would happen, and that was because she made it happen. All of this was because she’d wished it.

“OK, Mike.”

“That’s a good girl,” he said, and it felt so nice to hear.

Madeleine Swann’s novella, Rainbows Suck, was published by Eraserhead Press and my collection released by Burning Bulb. My short stories have appeared on the Wicked Library podcast and in various anthologies.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Erren Kelley

I took a left turn like
Bugs Bunny suggested
but I didnt run into him or any
nerdy, passive aggressive
chemistry teachers, turned
drug lords.
I ended up at a coffeehouse
In the hipster part of town
I was halfway into
a cappucino when I saw her,
my old biology professor
from many poems ago,
you know, the irish girl
with the black woman ass?
Back in college, she wore short
skirts when she taught lectures,
and the front row was almost always
full of guys.
She was a girl straight out
of a van halen song;
lightning rarely strikes twice
so, I went up and reintroduced
myself. This time, with every
intention of getting her
back into my life.

Things were going smooth
and I was about to close
the deal when Bugs showed up
out of the blue (tranported, maybe ?)
Bugs told me, that me and her
were a good fit, but it takes more
than game and moxie, to score with a woman
I noticed earlier, my friend
had a diamond on her hand
that had more carats than
Bugs Bunny's lunch
but she said she was single.
Bugs told me "you have to
Set yourself apart from
the pack, give her something different
other guys can't
and you also need some loot."
So Bugs pulled out a stack of C-notes
and gave it to me.
It would be enough for a good start.
Me and the professor went to a bookstore
and stole kisses as we browsed the stacks
then we took a walk in the desert, and she
became a perfect irish rose, in
bloom

Erren Kelley is a Pushcart nominated poet from Los Angeles. She have been writing for 25 years and has over 150 publications in print and online in such publications as Black Heart Literary Journal; Hiram Poetry Review; Mudfish; Poetry Magazine (online); Ceremony; Cactus Heart; Similar Peaks; Gloom Cupboard; Poetry Salzburg; the anthologies Fertile Ground, and Beyond The Frontier and other publications. Kelley is also the author of the book, Disturbing The Peace, on Night Ballet Press and the chapbook, The Rah Rah Girl, forthcoming from Barometric Press. She recieved her B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

Wider Boulevards

Andrew Chlon

HENRY OFTEN TOLD ME he'd begun to feel that his life was a dream, that soon he'd wake and be a kid (or maybe infant was the word he used) again. A lifetime of mistakes undone either way. How romantic.

After a certain day, a certain event he never spoke of, dreams became his only topic of conversation. I sought to spend less and less time with him, but he lived in the same arrondissement and we crossed paths often enough. We'd exchange pleasantries and catch up until he would inevitably maneuver the conversation to a point from which he could recount his latest dreams to me for as long as I would listen. I am a good listener—to a fault. It was around that time I began to smoke. He said he was allergic to it, but tobacco smoke never seemed to have any discouraging effect on him in my presence.

This was last August, one of the hottest on record in Paris. Everyone who had the means was desperate to get out of the city; the rest of us were just desperate. There was little chance of a vacation for me no matter how much of my stipend I saved, so I went down to the quays of the Seine often. Henry was there a couple of times, alone, wearing a dark Macintosh coat, impossible to mistake even from the opposite bank.

My impossible last summer of studying and teaching in Paris.

The summer before that, a few months into my studies, a mutual friend, Nadja, introduced Henry to me at a party. She'd been with Henry not all that long ago, things ending amicably. "He's in love with his mother or something," she told me. Less than a week later, Nadja fell into my bed and stayed there an invigorating two weeks before tiring of me.

In the course of the following months, Henry and I ran into each other frequently but never became friends. He was pursuing his master's in some dead end field of study as well. He never seemed to progress during the two years I knew him. His opinions and personality were unswerving.

He said his name was Henry, or Henri, and that he came from the "provinces" though he never deigned to specify which. His actual name was something like Gustav or Gunter, but I shall call him Henry as he wished. Out of an affinity for the painter Henri Rousseau, I believe. An extensive print collection of Rousseau paintings decorated his studio at least; I remember that, distinctly, from my one visit late in that last,

interminable, night sweat of an August.

My first summer in Paris we played tennis regularly, once a month. He was tall, had longish blond hair, blue eyes, and hammered the ball like Thor's bastard human offspring. A real athlete. I never won, so naturally I stopped playing him. The one time I pushed him to a fifth set, he became a bit testy but managed to hold me off. Post-match, he sat quietly in the locker room, his head hanging over his knees in absolute fatigue and would not make eye contact. While we showered, I started talking about women, Nadja and others, and he told me about the love of his life, a "girlfriend", whom I'd yet to see with him. To dispel any doubts, he showed me a photo over coffee in a nearby café of a pale, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl. She was otherworldly beautiful and clearly no more than 16 years old. "It is a old picture", he explained. We settled the bill and left it at that.

Upon reflection, I think Henry was a born surrealist; he was just about 100 years too late. His eyes had the requisite shocked wideness and his lips the proper pouting droop of a man riven in two by the waking and dreaming worlds. He spoke in a monotone-perfect French, subpar English. I would not say that Henry was my friend, but (and this is pure conjecture) I may have known him better than anyone in Paris at the time.

The August in question, my last real August as a young man, I had a summer cold half the time. The other half I was drunk or high, or some combination of the two. I had no classes to attend or teach, and I stopped answering calls from home. There was a shadowy something in Henry that I feared seeing in myself and so I spoke with him out of morbid curiosity, though it may have been healthier to ignore him.

My days were given over to two pursuits: fucking (or the attempt), and brooding over the closing aperture of my future. I was pretentious and lonely and desperate for a reason to stay in Paris.

The whole month I kept bumping into Henry. He was always stepping out of alleys, secluded ateliers, or abandoned lots, a full black plastic bag in one hand and a thin dog-eared book in his front coat pocket. Smiling. A wonderful, bleached smile. He was restless, constantly shifting and darting his eyes, and obsessed with the correctness of his clothes-patting, straightening, etc. Very touchy at the time, too. Obsessed with how I was doing.

We walked and talked and gave in to our pompous selves, discussing Sartre, De Beauvoir, Barthes, and Beckett, saying nothing of any import. I was in flourishing hate with life. A few times we drank together, but it seemed to have no effect on him while I ended up confessing my most tender vulnerabilities and fragile wishes. For that I am grateful to him. This was all early in the last August.

One night, around the 15th, I ran into Henry at a disco. He was alone, red-eyed, and dragging his feet near the stage in the section of the place made into a karaoke bar. I was there with a beautiful twenty-year old Cameroonian girl I'd met at a bistro near campus. She is still the sweetest girl I've ever met.

"So you are Paul's friend?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am," Henry said.

I smiled and nodded.

"Let's have a drink! To Paul's one friend," she said and pinched me. I grabbed her ass in kind.

"I can't," he said.

"I'll buy."

"Paul's going to sing..." She kissed me on the cheek again, and I melted. Drinks for everyone!

When she slipped off to the restroom,

Henry hugged me and said, “Beware the empirical dream. It cannot be proven. Love is as love does.” He was drunk and slapped my back entirely too hard when I moved toward the stage to deliver a rousing rendition of “What’s New Pussycat.”

It was a coincidence.

A few mornings later Henry sat down at my table as I consumed an early coffee and croissant breakfast. I cherished the quiet of my local café at this hour of the morning. The streets smelled of wet stone, and it calmed me to watch the waiters go about pulling the upturned chairs from the tabletops—a soothing, meditative activity. I never dared ask to help.

Almost immediately, Henry began to tell me about a dream he’d had last night about being in Texas, a place he had never been, and in Henry’s Texas he was running across the western plains, biting cooperative cows in the neck a la Chupacabra.

“Strange,” I said.

“Yes...strange...strange indeed,” he said. “What do you think?”

I offered no analysis, so we sat in silence for a moment. I noisily unfolded my newspaper to indicate that no comment would be forthcoming. He did not move.

“Have you heard? Or read it maybe? In the local papers?” He watched me with wide ejaculatory eyes.

“No.” I continued attempting to read.

“Cats have been disappeared—are disappearing in the neighborhood. Many. Beaucoup de chat. Murdered or kidnapped or...”

I said nothing after a fleeting glance to see how serious he was. Indeed he was.

“Some they have found in alleys, courtyards, or dumpsters, their bodies broken and

butchered. Etrange, n’est-ce pas?”

“What are you talking about? Where did you read about this...whatever? Cats? A cat butcher?”

“My concierge told me. She knows all the neighborhood news. Very nice lady. She says, well, the cats...” He faced me, grinding his chair closer to my own and making whisper lips.

You couldn’t look him in the eyes sometimes for all his earnestness. More than enough for me. I left tout de suite and descended to the Metro and paced the length of the platform, checking studiously that he had not followed until the next train arrived.

A few days later, I was making out with a young American study abroad student on the picturesque little bridge spanning the Seine near Tulieres. A windy night. She shivered in her summer dress, so I warmed her up. Mouth, hands, extremities. Tout. Things were going well.

Then someone ascended from the lower part of the bridge shouting and stomping. I looked up to see Henry charging maniacally toward me and Mary, or Mona (it started with an “M”). He was terrifying and long-tongued, speaking unintelligibly. I told “M” to be calm and pushed Henry back, but he kept coming at me. I had to punch him and made solid contact a number of times with his face and head. He fell eventually, not once defending himself, and we left.

Incredible sex that night. She returned to America the following week, leaving me her email address somewhere.

On August 30th, I went to Henry’s studio. I had free time after “M” left and wanted an explanation for his behavior. I got his address from Nadja after an awkward conversation in which both

of us made clear our firm wish not to renew relations. She hugged the opposite arm of the sofa throughout the conversation. Strange.

I rang the buzzer twelve times or so. It wasn't until the tenth that I noticed blood, or something else red and smeary, on the call box. He finally buzzed me up.

The door to his flat stood wide open, and perfectly centered through the doorway sat Henry, nude on a stool, in a classically pensive pose, inches from the wall. I entered without having thought of anything to say. He was admiring a print of Henri Rousseau's *Une Soiree de Carnival*. Tears stole down the sharp slopes of his face. His body was rain slicked, and there was a small puddle lapping at the legs of the stool. The one day it rained that August.

He noticed me slowly, awakening to my presence, and at last stood up, approached and hugged me.

"You came! You came... you must look," he said, pulling me by the arm further inside.

"Henry, stop. What's going—stop! You need to—" I broke free and shoved him away. He accepted my violence with equanimity.

Henry quietly took his seat on the stool again and seemed to forget my presence. I carefully moved into the main living space of the studio and noticed he had modified the print before him, pasting cutout photos of his face and his "girlfriend's" over those of the couple in the painting. It didn't surprise me.

The space was not as well lit as I'd thought it'd be based on the outside. The windows were covered with ratty newspaper pages and a strong scent of glue filled the air. A large cloth print of Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy* lay draped across his sofa, and I was drawn towards it.

When I glanced over my shoulder, Henry had spun on the stool and watched me. His expression was drenched in unbearable compassion. He cried still, and I had no idea as to why.

"Paul! Paul! Paul, Paul," shouted Henry.

To start once more, or better explain:

For a long time I went to bed late. I couldn't fall asleep, and so I went out and got drunk with acquaintances at the fashionable bars along any number of streets in Paris, spending a great deal of my stipend on red wine, brandy, Pernod and, from June to August, Ricard, for myself and others. It was also exceptionally easy to find a number of recreational drugs in Paris. Knowing Nadja was a big help. She knew everybody.

But that is only the most incidental part of my story.

I killed the first cat in the fall. She had such a sweet demeanor and gazed at me so tenderly that I almost couldn't do it. At Christmas I went home for the holidays. When I came back I bought fancier foods to attract them. Sweet, furry, and entitled. Every single one I brought to my flat for at least one night before I killed them.

They loved their Fancy Feast. They smiled pretty kitty smiles and then died. There's a kind of light that flashes in the eyes of dying mammals that you may never see, but once you have you'll be surprised to find it over and over again, and you miss it when it disappears. I gave them warm milk and petted them and then killed them, choking them with tears in my eyes, shaking because—no, I can't explain that.

I drank their pussycat love up because it took patience and was hard to get. I have only human regrets, and they are the remains of my human relationships. Everything ends, you see, and there are things I prefer not to think about.

The *Sleeping Gypsy* is a gorgeous painting and

has long been a favorite of mine. Even lying lumpy and misshapen over Henry's filthy sofa, it stirred me to anxious tears.

Henry rose and came to the center of the room. Yes, still naked. He inched towards me and took me by the shoulders and wept. He wept in the only way I could ever picture someone "weeping". To this day, I have yet to witness another person "weep" to such high standards.

I was speechless. My mouth felt furry.

All around me the walls were covered with two types of picture. There were Henri Rousseau prints, each of them slightly defaced by paint or sharp objects, and the rest of the wall space was claimed by large portraits of a woman, the same woman, made by pasting different colors and thicknesses of what appeared to be cat fur to the initial acrylic painting.

The resemblance was more startling the closer I looked. The woman depicted was Hilary. I was, and am, certain. She should have been forgotten by then, and there was no conceivable way he could have met her because she never visited me in Paris. And why should she have? She didn't love me.

Everywhere her face, her eyes, her smile, her untamable hair in different colors. She was there, and I felt like I'd been reduced to a beating heart, my beating heart, in a room filled with paint and cat hair. There's a joy, which I will not attempt to describe because you likely cannot relate to it, that overwhelms one when one wishes to kiss every face in a room.

For some time Henry had been whispering to me. He evidently felt sorry for me.

"Paul, poor Paul. Why? Why? We'll get you help, OK? Poor Paul. You are lost too. You

and I...you and I will fix this. See? I already did." He made a grand, one-handed gesture encompassing the room.

Over his shoulder I saw a partially completed collage on the coffee table. An overturned container of sticky paste drenched one corner of it and dripped disinterestedly down to the hardwood floor. The collage was composed of an inconceivable number of photos of his "girlfriend". In some she smiled, in others she laughed and teased the camera, and in a few she gravely stared down the lens.

"Henry, you're sick."

"No, no. Nous sommes malades. Tet-tet."

Life is neither as dense nor forgiving as cat fur. I must accept that.

Henry was in love with a dead girl. I was heartsick over a woman, who never loved me. Dead cats.

In three sentences, I can recreate Paris at those times.

Weeks later they kicked me out of my flat and rescinded my adjunct status. I still teach Romance languages. In Idaho now. The mountains are my Sacre Coeur and the trailer court my Montmartre. I believe that I am more right-minded than I've ever been. For that I am grateful.

Henry returned to the "provinces" and married a girl who I hear makes him happy.

Not yet, no. I am not happy.

Andrew Chlon is a writer and actor currently living in Los Angeles. He spent the majority of his life in the southern United States before heading west. He works part-time in a restaurant and has a B.A. in Economics and Spanish. This is his first published story.

Our Neighbourhood Santa

Ajay Patri

NOBODY REMEMBERS why we decided to erect a giant effigy of Santa Claus in our neighbourhood. We shooed away an old beggar who had taken to squatting in the neighbourhood square to make space for our forty feet tall Santa. The beggar cursed us as he wrapped a mouldy blanket around himself.

'I will never find a good place again,' He said. 'I'll die out in the cold.'

'Look cheerful, you good man,' We told him. 'This is for a good cause. Think of the happiness you will bring to the children of the neighbourhood.'

Our Santa was not perfect. His coat was more maroon than red and one of his eyes was smaller than the other. His hands, raised in welcome, were little more than misshapen clubs, the digits fused together. Even the colour of his skin was not what you would expect from a stereotypical Santa Claus. It was a shade that pleased the people of the good press when they thronged to our neighbourhood. They wrote paeans to the virtues of diversity and how we were the neighbourhood with the biggest heart in the city. We weren't sure about the heart but we definitely had the city's biggest effigy of Santa Claus.

The press weren't the only ones who were attracted to our Santa. People from all

over the city turned up to gawp at him like they were seeing something obscene. We pressed our goods into their hands and took their money even as their eyes remained glued to the monstrous smile plastered on Santa's face or on his rotund belly which eclipsed the sun every now and then like a bloodshot moon. When the children of the neighbourhood ran out into the streets to inspect the newcomers, we herded them back home like so many errant sheep.

'Can't you see we are busy?' We chided them. 'Go home now!'

Then the new year arrived with a cold wave that froze the bottles of milk kept outside our doors in the morning. The milkman found the beggar curled up by the side of the road two blocks from our neighbourhood. The municipal authorities said he died from exposure to the cold.

'Sad thing,' They said. 'If only he had a warm place to be.'

Then they looked at Santa, scratched their heads with their gloved hands and told us that he was falling apart.

He was falling apart. His hat was lopsided. His skin had paled until he was no longer an embodiment of diversity. Ravens had punctured one of his eyes to get at the straw stuff-

ing inside and, not content with their desecration of his body, had the gall to sit on his lumpy shoulders and whisper nonsense into his ears. He was no longer our affable Santa Claus. He was Odin, scarred god of war and vengeance. The crowds noticed this change as well and pestered us with their questions.

‘Why do you still keep him? Why don’t you take him down?’

‘He’s our scarecrow,’ We told them. ‘He helps drive the children back home every night.’

They didn’t buy this, nor did they buy

anything else we had to offer, shaking their heads and pulling down their woollen caps to cover their ears. We were sad to see them go but there was comfort in knowing that we were the neighbourhood with the biggest heart in the city. Then a rival neighbourhood across the city opened a shelter for homeless people and the press made a beeline for it. We surrendered our title with grace.

‘We still have the biggest effigy in the city of something that was once a Santa Claus,’ We told ourselves before going home to our waiting children.

Ajay Patri is a writer and lawyer from Bangalore, India. His work has been published in Every Day Fiction, Toasted Cheese Literary Journal, Muse India, among others. He is currently working on his first book.

if there were

Kurt Baumeister

I remember being five or four or three
Asking my mother if there was a Hell
And if I was going, I never got
A good answer. Never got
The one I needed. Though I know
She gave me the one I wanted.

I remember dreaming about nuclear war
Running and hiding in my mind's eye
Knowing the world was about to end
Two days two minutes two ticks
To midnight. Hoping it wouldn't
Still thinking maybe there was a chance.

To be a child was to cry and be confused
To laugh little, to dream of other lives
That might have been better still
To be a man is to put away the child
To know that Hell and nuclear war
Are only as real as we make them.

But you will never stop asking your mother
For the answers. Even after you realize,
She never had them, and she never could.
Still you will call, "Mom?" long after
She is gone. Still you will wonder about Hell
And nuclear war.

Kurt Baumeister has written for Salon, Electric Literature, The Weeklings, The Nervous Breakdown, The Rumpus, The Good Men Project, and others. An Emerson MFA and Contributing Editor with The Weeklings, his monthly Review Microbrew column is published by The Nervous Breakdown. Baumeister's debut novel, a satirical thriller entitled Pax Americana, will be published by Stalking Horse Press in early 2017. Find him on Facebook, Twitter, or at www.kurtbaumeister.com.