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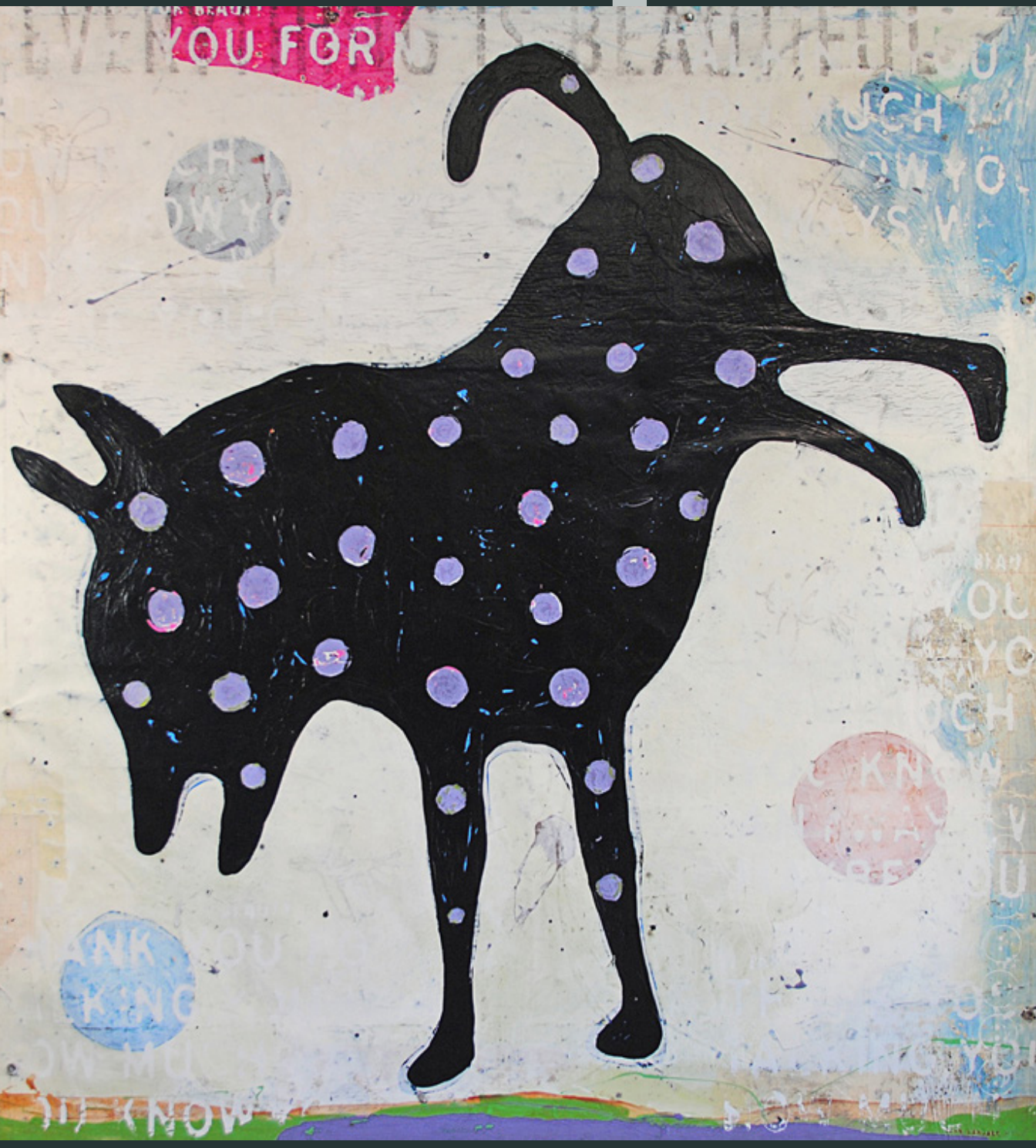

SPRING 2020

Dog Park

COVER

John Randall Nelson

John Randall Nelson received his MFA, Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, Arizona State University. His work has been shown extensively, having appeared in the Gebert Contemporary, the Conrad Wilde Gallery, FP Contemporary, Sue Greenwood Fine Art, Grover/Thurston Gallery, Chiaroscuro Gallery, among others.

"Nelson embraces the concept of artist as story teller. His symbolic amalgamations, which often consist of a central image superimposed over a collage of symbols and text (anything from art criticism to nursery rhymes), make intuitive sense of the inundation that we experience in what Nelson sees as our "over-communicated, how-to world. The strength of the work lies in the terrain between the narrative and the abstract, between what is immediately accessible to the viewer and what remains obscure. Masked in Nelson's faux-naive style is a complex formalism designed to both present and obscure meaning. "Ambiguity and metaphor are central to my work," says Nelson, "I think the ambiguous is more interesting, more engaging. Because there is always something more to discover it reveals itself more slowly and it has greater longevity."

—Deborah Sussman

His work can be found at **whonelson.com**

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DISCLAIMER

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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The Polydactyl

Hayden Moore

'My father named me Autolycus; who being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles'
(William Shakespeare: The Winter's Tale Act IV scene iii)

SHE STARED at the weathered image of The Fool hanging loosely on the cinder block wall next to the rusted boiler just as she did every morning. When she was a baby—long before memory had become the parasite of the everyday that twisted what was into whatever it pleased for tomorrow—her mother painted The Fool on the burlap sack. She could tell where her mother's fingers had failed, where the need to stay awake just one more day smothered any kind of grace. Now she was just as old as her mother had been when she had her, a Janus-faced girl who felt trapped between youth and worry over the next meal. Now her mother had been in the dead earth in a Potter's Field for half as long as she was old.

The image of The Fool winked at her with amphetamine eyes. Autolyca winked back. Just as she always did, Autolyca used her thumb to count along her fingers until she reached the 'five' of her pinky. She nodded at the number and headed out of the basement and up into the streets of Brooklyn.

Winter was a time when modified gloves hid Autolyca's gift. Six wool fingers on both hands, even with the tips cut off for dexterity, failed to garner notice. But when the linden trees were in bloom and made her block smell like honey, her bare hands could have been neon signs announcing her mutation.

One Night Only: The Polydactyl
(The Twelve-Fingered Girl)

Autolyca clenched her hands into fists as the honey smell failed to calm her nerves as she headed down towards the East River. There, the idyllic skyline of Manhattan so overused in cinema dumbed down the tourists who were already dazed from the gluttony of the night before. It continued to amaze her that people were so astounded to see something in reality that they saw on screen as if the world were some kind of projection and movies and television shows were the source.

Autolyca had made it a rule to herself never to steal from the locals. Besides, the moment she was branded a thief amongst her own, all twelve

of her fingers would be as useless as a classical guitar without strings. As she strode down Franklin Avenue with her hands in her jeans pockets towards the ferry dock, Autolyca looked like just another girl enjoying the spring after a hard winter. She had learned to live with half-truths, even if the true half of it was the worst.

Thirty-something men and women pushed strollers along the sidewalk where bodegas abutted yet another boutique coffee shop or children's book store. Joggers trotted by in groups of threes and fours while checking their smart watches. Pure breed dogs or the occasional smiling pit-bull pissed and shit on their respective spots knowing full well their distracted owners would still manage to pick up the pieces with a plastic bagged hand. Hipsters and old Polish men nursed hangovers separately, the former with green juice and the latter with a tall boy of Budweiser. Precocious toddlers zipped by on their streamlined scooters with the words of yesterday's child psychology appointment drowning out their parent's perfunctory pleas to slow down. Autolyca walked amidst the latent joy of morning in Greenpoint as she passed through the crowd like a neutrino heading relatively north.

There was something childish and brilliant about the names of the streets of Greenpoint. Just as she counted her fingers every morning, Autolyca would name the streets in her head starting from Newtown Creek, the edge of the end of the world of her neighborhood: Ash, Box, Clay, Dupont, Freeman, Green, Huron, India, Java, Kent… While the relative mathematical precision of the grid system of Manhattan beginning at 14th Street had its virtues, the emptiness of numbers shined through every time for her. Here, random names in alphabetical order instilled a moment's peace that there was some kind of thoughtful order to a place, a thoughtful order with a bit of mischief. But the feeling passed as soon as she turned left on India and towards the ferry dock.

The wind off the East River reminded Autolyca of the long winter. While it was April according to the tilt of the Earth and its point in space, February lingered in the rushing waters of the river. Her empty stomach cringed as she wiped a little stream of snot from her upper lip with the back of her hand as she scanned the concrete dock leading to the ferry. Her appointed place was open, a space between a row of raised gardens bearing parsley and green shoots of summer flowers to come. Autolyca thought of herself as a limpet trudging back to that place that would shape her for the rest of her life, a place that was waiting for her before she was even born. But unlike the limpet, she would not wait for her next meal in patient silence.

Autolyca, singing:

Concrete hard as winter's chill
Plane tree mottled as pickle dill
Fingers sixes as a polydactyl
Look and see and laugh at the fact til'
Your faces as red as drunkards noses
Sorry I cannot stand those roses
Do not pity this hungry lass
But if you do you're not an ass
Take a picture with this singer
For a star, I'm a dead ringer
Come smile with me, come smile!

As Autolyca continued to sing—lyrics coming and going like words in a dream—she watched as the ferry passengers passed on their way to gawk at approved graffiti and drink ten dollar beers at bars made to look like outposts from the 19th century. She smiled at a passing smile and winked at those who gawked at her many fingers. When the confusion of the crowd boarding and those who were disembarking became as unruly as a wind-tossed sea, Autolyca began to dance.

Hunger devoured everything, even the self-self-consciousness of a teenage girl. Of course, the first season of her performances were wrought with failure and embarrassment. But now, in her fifteenth year in Brooklyn, Autolyca danced and sang knowing everyone was watching. She swirled amidst the half-conscious crowd as witty lines made them laugh and her limber grace bewildered their eyes. She brushed the shoulders of men and women, she flipped and high-kicked to the delight of the children. She played with the nuances of notes in her four-octave range and sank into false melancholy when the laughs were too great. People watched as the ferry departed, forgetting whether they had come or had forgotten to go. Autolyca held her outstretched fingers to her face and smiled between the twelve, one spectator asking another: 'How many of those does she have?' Amidst the song and dance, somewhere between where her jeans met her stomach, a collection of trinkets was filling the space where the food should have been. Wallets and watches and earrings and purses, another leap and all would be revealed.

"Encore!" A middle-aged man yelled, nudging his wife a little too hard.

"Yeah, encore!" Others yelled, as a good portion of the crowd was dispersing.

"Thank you, thank you all," Autolyca sang. "And I beseech you, I am only here to bring a little mischief to your day. I bid you, adieu," she smiled, bowing.

"Wait! Here's a little something—" The middle-aged man mumbled.

"No, no. I'm actually a spoiled rich girl just trying to do something kind," Autolyca laughed pensively, backing away.

"Where the hell?" The man mumbled, patting himself down. "Sweetie…do you have my wallet?"

"No," his wife said. "It's always in your back pocket. You just had it. I just saw it."

"I just had it," he said, still patting himself down to his ankles.

"My earrings!" A young woman cried. "My fucking diamond earrings," she shouted, pulling at her earlobes. "You six-fingered bitch! I know what you're doing!" She pointed, as she pulled out her phone. "I'm calling the fucking cops, you feral cunt. Fucking dirty city. I wanted to go to the Bahamas! Well…someone frisk her! Fuck! Do I have to do everything?"

Just as the wind can die and turn a sailor's joy to sorrow, so the spectacle on the dock had turned from wanton entertainment to abject anger. As another ferry drifted into dock, Autolyca tightened her belt and ran. Her legs bound like they were blessed by the winged heels of Mercury. As two of the male spectators pursued her, the purloined wallets flopped against her stomach while the earrings and watch were tucked away in her strategically tight underwear. In spite of the awkward ballast of treasures shifting and poking her, Autolyca ran with a seeing abandon towards the beginning of the alphabet of Greenpoint. She felt in her bones that if she made it to 'A', she would be free.

When concrete became asphalt, she turned left and soon found Huron as two pairs of pursuing steps became three. When she reached Green, she looked back and saw five men in pursuit. Freeman was followed by Eagle, Dupont somehow failed to appear and Clay became Box. Another glance back revealed a cadre of men in pursuit as if the ferry had been some kind of pirate ship and Autolyca was the town and treasure to be plundered. As Ash Street unfolded, Autolyca ran through a patch of manicured grass tended by pigeons and saw the end. The toxic waters of Newtown Creek loomed over the aluminum railing marking the precipice of her world. A dozen men stomped to a halt as they

heaved the morning air.

"Just give me back my wallet," the first man said, panting.

"And my wife's earrings," said another.

"And my youth," said a third.

"And my hair," said a balding man.

"And my wife," said an unseen one.

"And my lost dog."

"And my cigarettes."

"And my hope."

"And my sex drive."

"And my pride."

"And my—"

As Autolyca searched within herself for the lost things being named to her, she found herself pressed against the railing above the creek. With every cry for something lost, the group of men took another step closer to her. It was a Broadway musical without a soundtrack, a dance with only one step. She half-expected them to start snapping their fingers before the chorus joined in. But demands for all the things life carried away like flotsam kept spilling from the men's mouths as they drew closer. Somehow she had become the synecdoche for the great nameless thing that stole things away. The men's eyes burned like dark stars as they carried on without blinking. When one of the men was close enough for Autolyca to smell his breath, she began to sing softly.

Have you lost your watch or wife
Either way, you still have life
Hair is thinning dog is lost
At least you are not tempest tossed
Hope is chimeric pride a sin
Sex is fickle I've more than ten
Have a smoke and forget the jewelry
Rhymes are fleeting I speak truly
Now get you gone you pirates fake
I only took what I had to take
Now turn around and walk away
For life is brief as the buds of May

Over the course of her song, the men's eyes drifted back into their heads. Their slow march halted and they listened. When the whites of their eyes gave way to vision, they looked around in confusion. Clasping the railing with all twelve of her sly fingers, Autolyca watched as the group of men became a collection of individuals wondering how they had gotten to the edge of the end of Greenpoint. One man departed and was followed by another. Some kind of hidden custom sent each one away with an exhausted resolution. By the time the last of them had taken a right on Box Street, Autolyca let go of the railing and counted her fingers with her thumbs. All of them were still there.

A dozen or so pigeons pecked at an open pizza box while the ferry sounded its horn on the river behind her. Autolyca smiled and approached the wall-eyed pigeons. She knelt over them and began to sing softly to them. As she instructed them with a playful lilt to her tune, the pigeons listened and knew exactly what to do.

Hayden Moore was born and raised in Georgia and has lived in New York City for the past twelve years. In the past six months, he has been published five times for his short stories: twice in Corner Bar Magazine, once in Metonym Literary Journal, once in Drunk Monkey Literary Journal and again in Fictional Cafe. He lives with his wife and cat on the waters of Jamaica Bay in Queens.

Dandelions That Grow From Concrete

Michael Fisher

Has yellow ever glowed against a dull gray
like a spot of sunshine that disrupts the clouds?
It is done by finding mercy in wind,
grace in rain that trickles to cracks,
and the mess of compost we tried to forget.
Some people are embarrassed by yellow
cursing the pest of it—they find the leaves
to be too jagged, the stems too thick.
They know no whimsy of dandelion seeds
spread like an ocean of fluff unbeknownst
and attached to their hair. A dandelion
can be desperate to wind. It can pierce
through stone we create, or ride
gentle as a guest on its own.

M. Kowalczyk-Fisher lives in Barre, MA with his wife and son. He holds an MA in English from Clark University and a MFA in Poetry from New England College. His collection *Libretto for the Exhausted World* is available from Spuyten Duvil press.

Drummond Mt

Michelle Osman

Michelle Osman is best known for her oil paintings of storm clouds that eddy and churn over narrow slices of land. The turbulent sky is both an arena for distraction, meditation and reprieve from the day to day, while the land and our small existence on it pull the viewer back to the stories hinted at in a pair of headlights in the waning light. She returned to the west to earn her BFA and MFA from Montana State University. Osman has traveled extensively in the Western United States, rafting 400 miles of the Colorado river, living in San Francisco and exploring the abandoned architecture of the small towns in between. The encompassing beauty of these places and the stories of the people in them are an ongoing theme in her work. Osman lives in Bozeman, Montana. Her work can be seen at **michelleosman.com**

Mexican Leg

Mark Jacobs

PAQUITO WAS TALKING about solving their problem. Again. He'd been talking about it off and on for the last hundred years. He always made it sound like it was one single problem the two of them had, it was something they shared. In the opinion of Carson Crewe, that was a false statement. Their problems were similar – maybe they were identical – but they were separate. It had to do with money. Neither of them could get enough ahead to make the down payment on a decent life. In Carson's case, the life had to include Maria Estela. She was his daughter. Lately he'd been admitting it was his fault that Suela took the kid away.

The night that Paquito was supposed to come by with a new plan, Carson fell. He had been drinking, but the real problem was his leg. It wasn't there. And a strange thing happened. In the second and a half it took him to hit the kitchen floor, he saw everything. The beginning and the end of life and everything that came between them. With details. The history of Planet Earth. The hundred forms and flavors of love. The blueprints of destruction, the saints of patience, the devils of desire. More, an endless amount of more.

So maybe it wasn't God himself, maybe it was a subcontract to angels on overtime. Maybe it was just the brain fart to end all brain farts. Still, one way or another it was a message. *Get your act together, Carson.*

The pain of falling made him scream. Suddenly he was just there, lying on the floor observing a dead cockroach belly up under the table. This was what came from not having a leg to stand on. *La cucaracha,etc., ya no puede caminar…* If he had been in his right mind he never would have let them take his off.

Now his hip was broken, he'd put money on it. The pain was purple. He had every reason in the world to panic but postponed the meltdown. He summoned the Spanish word for hip. *Cadera*. If he heard footsteps out in the hall, he'd holler. First, *Help!* Then, when he had their attention, he would put together a Spanish sentence that included hip, and hurt, and maybe *gin tonica* just for grins. Carson in his time had caught fifty flies with honey for every one that dropped in vinegar.

He waited for Paquito, who was his ex-brother-in-law and had somewhat of a car. Their friendship had survived Carson's divorce from Suela and catastrophes too numerous to keep track of. Waiting, he looked hard at the dead cockroach. It wasn't just his imagination,

the way he had of wishing unlikely things true: one of its little legs was missing, just like in the song.

Footsteps in the hall. *Help,* Carson called. Called again. The footsteps stopped. The person they belonged to listened. Moved on. *Maldito cabrón,* Carson whispered so as not to be heard.

More footsteps in the corridor. Another heart-rending call, *¡Socorro!* Another Mexican neighbor who wasn't getting involved. Carson suspected a pattern.

He must have slept. He was a foot, dream was the warm sock he crawled into. Cockroaches slept on their backs alongside him, eyes shut, some of them lacking legs. A ploy to get his sympathy. It worked.

Then here was Paquito shaking him awake, and Carson was doing his best not to cry, and with equal amounts of pain and fanfare his former brother-in-law got him out of the apartment and into his bottlefly-green Focus. At the hospital they treated him with casual contempt but gave him the good news that his hip was not broken after all, just bruised.

Back in the car, Carson wiped away tear gunk and told Paquito, "When I fell, I had a vision."

"A vision of what?"

"It's hard to explain. But it meant something."

"I'm listening."

"It meant I'm supposed to get myself back in Maria Estela's life. I need to go back to being her father."

Paquito sighed. It was like air going out of a balloon very slowly. He was a squatty individual with round shoulders and the saddest black eyes in the State of Jalisco. In appearance and character he was nothing like his sister Suela, whose light put out the sun.

"My sister," he said.

"What about her?"

"Hombre, she's tough. You know how tough Suela is."

Tough enough to leave Guadalajara to get away from Carson, go north to Mexicali on her own, get work in a maquiladora, make a life for her and Maria Estela that did not include a Yankee bartender who was no good with money or promises.

"It's the goddamn leg. I mean not having one. It's holding me back."

"Listen," Paquito said. "I know a guy."

Paquito always knew a guy. His superpower was making deals that did not work out.

"Who's the guy?"

"He sells body parts."

"Legs?"

"Legs, arms, hands, you name it."

"I'm short on cash," Carson admitted.

"Don't worry, *cuñado mio,* we'll work something out."

Which was how they wound up in front of a warehouse on an unmapped dirt street while the sun was coming up and a couple of yappy yellow dogs with pointed ears were doing their unlevel best to knock Carson down in a frenzy that was the animal equivalent of hate.

Nothing like a foreign sunrise to make you feel forlorn.

Paquito kicked one dog. Then he kicked the other one. He was wearing cowboy boots with pointy toes, and the dogs stayed kicked.

The guy Paquito knew obviously was not the owner of the fake body parts warehouse, but he had a key. Hilario wore a clerical collar and a gigantic crucifix on a leather thong around his neck. His stubbled chin had a sanctified look.

"Man needs a leg," he said, shaking Carson's hand, "God's representatives on earth

make sure he gets one. All part of the divine plan, brother."

Being inside a warehouse full of prosthetic devices creeped out the American. Hilario did not dare turn on a light, so all they had was what came through the windows, which cast a spooky morning glow over the damn things everywhere you looked. They were jumbled in boxes, stacked in plastic shipping bags, piled on chairs and tables, a sprawl of purposeful design made purposeless by overabundance. A fake meat market, invisible butchers. There couldn't be this many people in Mexico lacking a body part. They must be stockpiling against catastrophe. War with the North, more than likely. Carson had heard serious people talk about the War of the Wall that was coming south as surely as the *Bestia* train barreled north, stuffed to the gills with Central Americans seeking a little more, a little better.

Hilario ostentatiously pulled out a chair for Carson, and he and Paquito went about hunting up a right leg from the knee down. Ten minutes later the American was wincing at the pain in his stump as Hilario strapped one on with professional tenderness. He stood. It hurt still more.

"Give it a day or two," Hilario advised him. "You'll get used to it."

Not until they were outside did Carson get a good look at the leg. In full daylight he could not help but notice the color.

"This is a Mexican leg," he said. "It's brown."

Paquito shrugged. "What did you expect?"

Hilario bridled a little, informing him, "You don't want it, there's no obligation."

"No, it's fine," said Carson. "Surprised me a little is all."

It came with a foot. The foot needed a shoe.

In the car, driving away from the warehouse, he felt bad for having expressed dissatisfaction with the Mexican leg, but Paquito had already forgotten it.

"You ever been to Mexicali?" Carson asked his friend.

"My sister sent me pictures."

"I'll buy the first tank of gas."

"First we make a stop."

Carson didn't like the sound of that. "A stop where?"

"The leg was a favor. I got to repay it."

Carson was in no position to bargain, and anyway driving to Mexicali now, before he did anything to fix his broken life, was a fantasy. He unstrapped the leg to relieve the pressure on his stump. Paquito punched in a bolero station on the radio, and they drove in a blur of nostalgia for a world they never knew to the opposite end of the city, a neighborhood even sketchier than where they had found the warehouse. The houses were improvisations, amalgamations of cardboard and chicken wire and sheets of corrugated aluminum. The streets were dust and confusion. They stopped in front of a place that was more fence than house. A pit bull was tied to the gate looking mean and territorial.

"Stay here," Paquito told Carson, who had no intention of getting out of the car.

The way the dog took to Paquito, it was uncanny. The Devil could do that, walk up to a murderous animal and scratch it behind the ear and have it lick his hand. Carson watched the play that followed as though it were a telenovela: two bling-heavy weyes in baggy pants and do-rags, pretending to be pissed at Paquito for a good ten-minute discussion at the end of which one of them went through the gate and came back out with a suitcase and a warning. Paquito nodded, shrugged, nodded again, took the suitcase. He put it in the trunk.

"What's inside?" Carson asked him.

"You don't want to know."

"This isn't going to do either of us any good."

Carson thought Paquito might bust him in the mouth then, but nothing happened. They drove out onto the paved road heading for wherever it was Paquito had agreed to deliver the suitcase. Might have gotten there if his tailpipe hadn't been dragging, which drew the attention of two cops in a patrol car.

"What's in the suitcase?" Carson said as the cops pulled them over.

"Recreational aids."

"Drugs."

"Did I say drugs?"

The siren was going. So were the blue lights. Soon enough the trunk was open, and then the suitcase, and then Paquito and Carson were in the back of the cop car on their way to the police station.

Carson said, "I can't do this."

"Just keep your mouth shut," Paquito warned him. "What you don't want to do is panic. I'll work things out."

One of the cops was young and thin. The other was old and thin. At the station there was neither love nor charity in either of them, staring at Carson as he painfully pulled himself out of the car and stood there wobbling, holding onto the car door. A pale American in a red Western-style shirt, one leg of his jeans cut off at the knee to reveal a brown leg with a brown generic foot. A rotten job impersonating a Mexican, all concept, no follow-through.

Carson's stump ached like bad love by the time they locked them into a cell with a huge man wearing a polka-dot neckerchief who was snoring on his back on the brown brick floor, his belly rising and falling like a demonstration: *this is how earthquakes begin*.

The disgust Carson felt was completely and totally real. "What happens now?"

"You got a watch?" Paquito said.

"No."

"Then estimate. Inside fifteen minutes they'll come get me. These guys are as crooked as the bad guys, only greedier."

He was right. When one of the thin cops showed up and took him away, Paquito looked back at Carson from the legal side of the bars and told him, "Relax. It's under control. I'll be back."

"When?" said Carson.

"I'm telling you, relax."

There was a mattress. It stank of urine, so Carson sat on the floor, removing the leg and propping it against the wall. He did his best to copy the breathing pattern of the snoring man, and it worked. There was nothing to be gained, just then, by staying conscious.

Light was coming sideways through the cell's high window by the time a cop with a predictable mustache and an old-fashioned key ring shuffled down the corridor and unlocked the cell and told the American prisoner to take his leg and go. Out on the street, Paquito's expression of satisfaction was more than Carson could tolerate.

"What just happened?" Carson asked him.

"One hand washes the other, brother-in-law. It's the way of the world."

"What did you give them?"

"Information."

Stump aching, Carson understood with a flash of white insight that the suitcase had had nothing to do with his new leg, it was just Paquito hustling, looking for his main chance. And he had sold out the blingified dealers with the mean dog, promising the cops a mountain of free dope they could distribute through their own tax-free distribution centers.

Paquito said, "I need that money you were going to buy gas with."

"What for?"

"It's hard to explain."

So Carson gave him some cash. They got back into the green Focus, and Paquito drove to another neighborhood Carson did not recognize. As the sun went down he waited in the car in front of a house under high-branched trees full of fidgety black birds. At one point a plump girl named Betti came out and sat beside him and put her hand on his thigh and told him she'd heard he was lonely. She smelled of chilies in hot oil and would have pleasured him as a favor to Paquito, but he was preoccupied thinking about what to say to Suela that would convince her he had changed, he was a better man now, and reliable. Betti was just as happy to go away after five minutes.

Eventually, after the birds had settled in for the night, Paquito came back out stinking of liquor, and Carson told him he was too drunk to drive to Mexicali, it was dangerous.

"Chinga tu madre," Paquito said.

There were ways and ways of saying that to a person. This was one of the terrible ones. It was the sort of oath that got a person banished for good from the Garden of Eden, no second chances sneaking in through the back gate. There was a science to knowing what would set the guy off that Carson had not fully mastered.

They drove to Paquito's, a room tacked onto the side of an acquaintance's mother's house. He had a pallet on the floor, which he gave to Carson in a gesture to make up for the ugly curse he had recently flung at him under those strangely birded trees. He disappeared, and Carson lay on the pallet for the longest time retracing the path that had brought him here.

In high school he got straight Z's, flunked everything he put his wobbly mind to. Then one day who was there but the old man, stropping his razor ready to cut out Carson's heart out for a minor infraction. Meantime, his mother tickled the ivories in the parlor, those old-time blues she knew all about. She was no help unless you counted background music for the family drama. He left. Drove a truck, had an accident. Drove a forklift, a different kind of accident. Tended bar and sampled too much, too often. But he was good at the work, good talking to lonely people. Accounting problems at the tavern, a till that rang up only odd numbers.

All of a sudden Mexico sounded like a solution. And was. For quite a while. His daiquiris were liquid legends. Then came diabetes and, after showing him horrible pictures, they tied him down and cut off his leg at the knee. After which, lacking a leg to stand on, a bottle of tequila getting the better of him he fell and made things worse than they already were.

His memories of the U.S. were bones, mouldering as he disconnected from the stranger who had lived them. That was okay. There was no reason to go back. He liked Mexico. Most of the time he liked Mexicans. It was good, being on their side of the border. The sun liked them better, you could tell by the way it shone on the countryside; God's permission to play favorites.

In the morning a little girl brought him tortillas and beans on a plate, along with coffee in a chipped cup of pale blue enamel. She refused to tell him her name.

"I've got a daughter," he told her.

She stared. It was not a hostile stare.

"Look, I'll show you a picture of Maria Estela."

He pulled out his phone, where he kept eight photos, each one a miracle of beauty and grace, how they worked together. But his battery was dead, and the girl went away. He lay there thinking about jobs he could do

that would give him the stability Suela would demand, if he was going to be in contact with their daughter.

Because he was thinking, the morning passed easily. Paquito was capable of disappearing for a couple of weeks, but he was back early that same afternoon explaining that he needed a little more money.

"I need to know what I'm investing in," said Carson. "That's fair, isn't it?"

"It's a motorcycle race. Out in the country. A friend of mine told me who's going to win."

"The race is rigged."

"Factor of five," said Paquito.

Meaning for every peso Carson put into the venture he was guaranteed five in return. The American bartender had four hundred pesos in his jeans pocket, the thin margin between him and destitution. He closed his eyes, entranced by a kaleidoscope of dark lights and shifting colors making inscrutable patterns. He was going to hand his money over to a man whose deep flaws revealed themselves every day in poor choices, bad judgment, uncontrolled impulses. No wonder they got along.

Carson, uncatholic for decades, was aware of the sacramental nature of his decision. It was, in its way, right and just. It was his offertory prayer.

"One condition," he said.

"What's that?"

"I go with you to watch the race."

Paquito pretended that had been the plan all along, and after cadging food from the mother of his acquaintance's kindly mother, he tied up the dragging tailpipe on the Focus with some wire he scrounged from a neighbor. It was the kind of job at which he was surprisingly competent and somehow led to the wave of optimism he and Carson surfed, driving out to the country where twenty riders were gunning the throttles of twenty dirt bikes as a couple of hundred spectators drank beer and horsed around, making a party out of the materials at hand, human and environmental, which were adequate to the task. To Carson's chastened eyes, the scene was the elegy for a life he had reached for but never quite touched.

They snagged a spot near the finish line. Paquito brought them cold Estrella Jaliscos. Handing Carson a bottle he told him, "Number seventy three. Red and blue Kawasaki."

He had already placed the bet.

The sun was brutal. The air was full of dust. People's cheering voices were hoarse, like so many ravens foretelling a traditional death. All the women were angels with black wings, luridly sexual. The men were citizen soldiers, secure in their sense of mission. The dark kaleidoscope turned and turned in Carson's succulent imagination. Not until later, back in the city, did he learn what he expected to learn, that the Kawasaki ridden by number 73 had locked wheels in a tight turn with a competitor's bike, causing them both to crash out of the race.

Carson slept for a day and a half on Paquito's pallet. His dreams were thin clouds puzzled by a shifting wind. Periodically the unnamed girl brought food. He ate little but was transfixed by her. Did she have a father? Was he a good father? Did he provide for her and tell her she could grow up to be a savior of the Mexican people, leading them to victory against the wall warriors?

After a couple of days Paquito came back with a brown oxford shoe for the fake foot. The shoe fit perfectly, just like downtown. It was the first time Carson had known his cuñado to express regret for anything, the first time Paquito ever acknowledged the disastrous

consequences of one of his plans. The gesture moved Carson despite his resentment of the man. But he refused to accept the shoe.

"It doesn't go with my real shoe," he pointed out.

Normally that would have pissed Paquito off royally. This time there was docility, even humility, in the manner with which he accepted the brown oxford from the American's hand. It was morning, and he looked pathetic. He needed a shave and a shower. He needed clean clothes and a run of better luck. He went meekly away, and Carson slept on the pallet like a saint in the Bible who'd been up forty days and forty nights, standing vigil for God's missing star.

At some point that same day Paquito reappeared, bringing an expensive pair of cowboy boots. The tooling in the leather featured designs of vaqueros and lassos, proud bulls and plucky cow ponies. Not so much a pair of boots as an evocation of a way of life that had cross-border appeal.

"Where'd you get these?" Carson asked.

"You don't need to worry about it. The main thing is, do they fit."

They did, especially after Carson stuffed a couple of sheets of balled newspaper in the boot for the fake foot. He had never owned such fabulous footwear. A luxury, an extravagance. The boots rejoiced him not just for their splendid craftsmanship but because they were proof that Paquito was capable of change, even of growth. Until he saw the boots and tried them on, Carson would not have believed a guy like Paquito could be anything other than a disappointment, obedient to a universal law of low expectations. As little as he wanted to, as much as he resisted it, he felt cheered by this new insight into human nature. It suggested he, too, had a future.

Which was why he listened with more or less an open mind later that evening when they were sitting out in the yard listening to the neighbors' radio and drinking Estrella Jaliscos and Paquito assessed their situation.

"I've been thinking about what you said, Carson."

"What did I say?"

"About being with Maria Estela, up in Mexicali."

"And?"

"Hombre, it's a good idea. It's a plan."

"It's not a plan, it's a goal."

"Okay. It's just, I know my sister. She's going to want some proof that you've changed. Things have to be different for real."

"She'll believe me if I have some money."

"Exactly. So here's how it goes: you've got the goal, and I've got the plan."

There was hard resolve in his voice. It did not sound like the Paquito Carson knew, and it chilled him.

He waited. Three days later Paquito said, "Do you trust me?"

"I trust you."

"Pues bueno, let's go."

The two men drove to a supermarket on the outskirts of the city. It was a busy spot with all kinds of simple and complicated business being transacted on all the corners and down all the side streets, on one of which a band was playing awful rock & roll, the bass line like a weightlifter's muscles repeatedly flexed.

"I'm changing my mind," said Carson.

"Chill, man. You got a better idea?"

He was busy folding a blue bandana the way bandits in movies folded them. He pulled out a pistol. "It's not real. Feel it."

Carson felt the handle. It was plastic. "It looks real. Wait. You don't have to do this, brother-in-law. Forget it. We'll come up with something else. Something safe. This is a mistake."

But Carson saw that Paquito's mind was

made up, and that his decision was an essential part of the process of atonement for losing the dirt-bike bet. It was a question of integrity.

"The last thing they're expecting right now is me," he said with a confidence that was three-quarters genuine.

But as soon as he left the car, heading for his target of presumed opportunity, a feeling of powerlessness came down on Carson. It was as though everything that was fated to happen had already happened, and what they were doing now was a reenactment, mysteriously necessary but lacking drama. So he was not surprised, five minutes later, to see Paquito come running out of the supermarket with his bandana askew, chased by a security guard who aimed a pistol at him. A lucky shot in the leg brought him down. Paquito pitched forward, and a crowd quickly formed around him moved by sympathy and the strict logic of street justice. The confusion was total. A minute or two later, Carson heard a police siren rising above a ragged cover of Wooly Bully.

Time to go. He climbed out of the Focus. Before he took the first step in the direction of escape, his attention was drawn to his new boots. They looked handsome, down there on the pavement, they looked uncannily right. The rightness was what gave him his idea.

Esteban Vega's Cielito Lindo. He had worked there six months, six or seven years back. It was a tourist magnet, and Esteban had liked having an American bartender. The misunderstanding that had led to Carson's leaving was a small thing, getting smaller as he thought about it now, walking away from the crowd in the supermarket lot and his bleeding unlucky friend, who had no more talent for bank robbery than for any of the other ventures he had tried. Carson had had a reputation, at the Cielito Lindo, for inducing tourists to eat and drink lavishly, dropping tips to match. It was in his personality, a trait for which he had been insufficiently grateful.

He was struck by how affectionate he felt toward Paquito. The bond between them was a thing of beauty. Paquito's bullheaded gesture of friendship, his desire to make a bad thing good, took Carson's breath away. It was the spur, really, for the resolution he came to as he turned the first corner and left the confusion behind.

He would call Esteban, talk him into taking him back at the bar. Learn to walk naturally, as a man walked. He would buy a pair of jeans with two complete legs so the fake leg would not be so obvious. He would keep the cowboy boots so beautifully shined that if you glanced down you saw your face in them.

He would visit Paquito in jail. Every week.

And he would change. Change so much, so deeply, that Suela would have no choice but to relent and let him back into his daughter's life. He would watch Maria Estela grow up strong, the first woman president of Mexico. She would use her amazing strength to face down the wall warriors, make them tuck their gringo tails between their legs and go away whimpering. And he, Carson Crewe, the father who cherished and had always believed in her, would be there on the sidelines, cheering her on. With a bright internal thud he realized he was home. Home, for a person like him, was where you learned to walk on a Mexican leg.

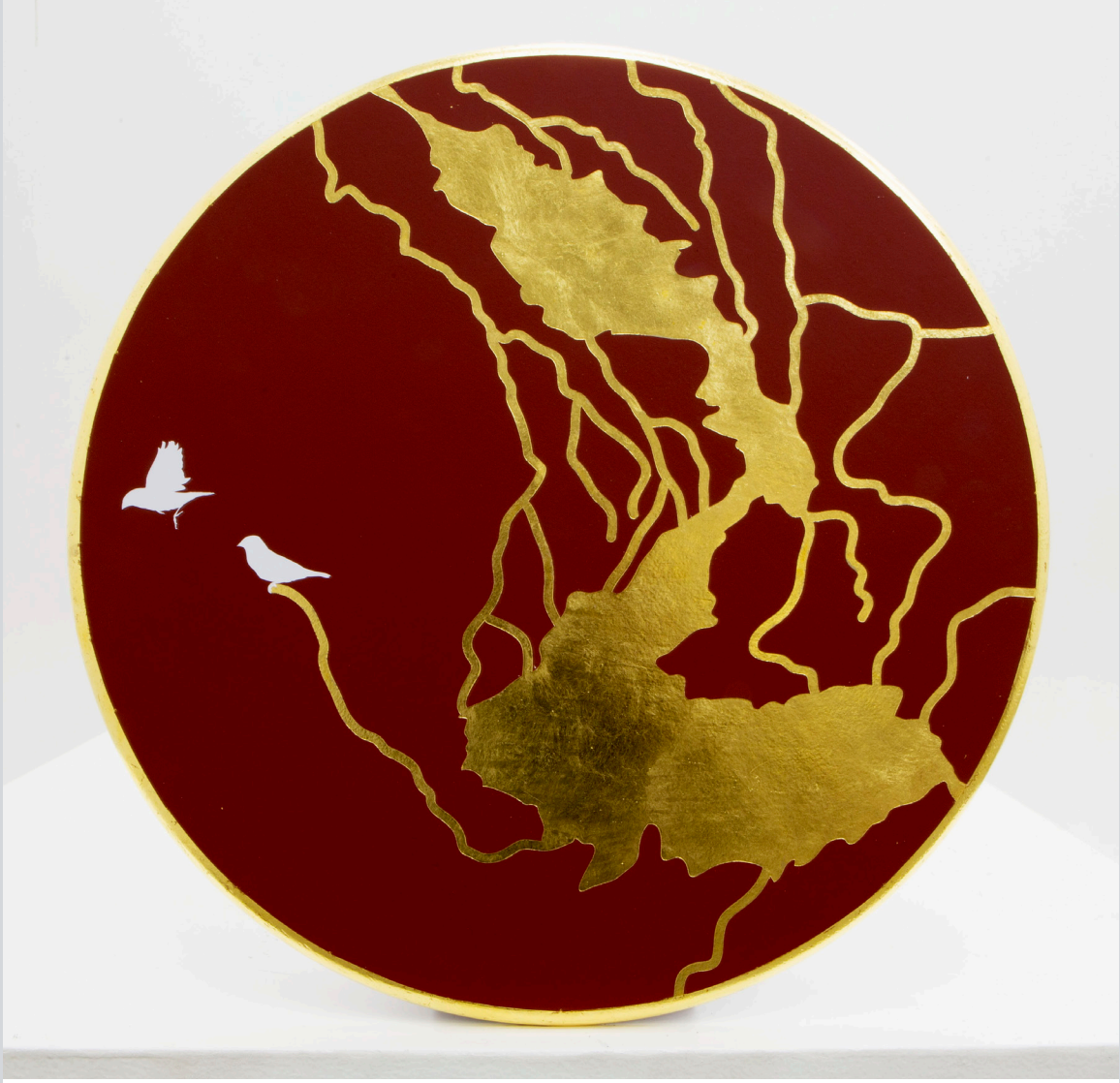
Mark Jacobs has published more than 150 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic, Playboy, The Baffler, The Iowa Review,* and *The Hudson Review.* His five books include *A Handful of Kings,* published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy,* by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

Lost and Found

Larry Oakner

I inherited a Mexican silver brooch,
that I wore on my lapel,
Kukulkan captured in an oval rimmed with little suns
given years ago to my mother-in-law,
now both her and the pin gone.
And when archeologists digging in an ancient cemetery
unearthed a baby's mummy, it still clutched
in its tiny hand a corroded copper coin,
fare for the ferryman to take her soul across.
These trinkets, memory's currency,
are the exchange for what we lose,
so that we may find hope everlasting.

Larry Oakner is the author of three books of poems, *SEX LOVE RELIGION* (Blind Tattoo Press, 2018), *The 614thCommandment* (Blind Tattoo Press, 2019) and a chapbook, *Sitting Still.* His work has appeared in *The Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine, Tricycle: Buddhist News, The Shambhala Times, The Jewish Literary Review, Lost Coast Review* and *The Long Island Quarterly* ,as well as many other publications over the years. Oakner received his M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of California at Los Angeles. He is the co-editor of *The Poem Shop,* an open online poetry website.



Bird's Eye View

Hannah Bartman

Hannah Bartman uses her role as an artist to portray images that question and reimagine places. Through the stories of Ancient Greek myth or American history, Hannah inserts symbols of place—such as maps, native species, and icons—to retell their meanings and to rework her own female identity. Hannah has worked with vinyl sticker illustrations in paintings, murals and sculpture. Graduating from Whitman College in 2016, her work has been shown in outdoor installations, hotels, and galleries throughout Washington, North Carolina and Indonesia.

Just the Usual Horses

Adam Matson

for Zoë G. Burnett

MAINE, 1881

Daniel stood at the back door, watching the barn, boots caked with dirt from the fields. His chores weren't done yet. He still had to feed the horses.

In the dining room, silverware scraped the wooden table. He could smell his mother's stew: rabbit and potatoes and carrots. He was starving. But as he stared out at the evening darkness, at the barn looming like a gray ghost, his appetite slithered away. November was a dark month. The fiery leaves had fallen, coating the hard ground, leaving skeletal trees to fend for themselves against the forest fog.

"Daniel." Father's hand on his shoulder. "Supper arrives. Tend the horses, son."

"Father, there's something out there, spooking the horses," Daniel said.

"Enough of that."

"These last few nights especially."

"I said enough."

Daniel heard footfalls on the soft wood, knew Rachel was listening somewhere.

"Rachel," Father said. "No eavesdropping."

"I wasn't."

"You'll help Daniel in the barn. Hurry, ye both. Supper arrives."

Rachel clomped across the floor, stepped into the work boots perched by the door. Daniel stepped outside and headed for the barn. He did not need his sister's help.

"Daniel, wait."

He walked straight for the barn, and she ran after him. "I said, wait."

She caught up with him, and together they went into the barn. Daniel set the lantern down on the work bench, painting warm strokes of light across the barn's towering crossbeams. There were three stalls, one for each of their horses. He pulled two of them open, and Rachel opened the third.

"I can get the door," she said.

"Oats first."

They found the sack of oats beneath the work bench, lifted it together to pour a cascade of dry food into the feeding trough of each stall. At eleven, Daniel could just reach the wall-mounted troughs. Rachel, a year younger, grunted under the weight of the feed sack.

"Don't spill," Daniel said, just to take his sister down a peg.

"I never spill."

They replaced the feed sack, walked to the broad, swinging door to the horse pasture. Daniel grabbed the cold iron handle and yanked the door open. It rumbled on its iron

hinges, a deep sound like rocks shifting under water. They stood in the light of the doorway, staring out at the pasture. The night stared back at them like an expressionless face, a huge open mouth ready to swallow.

"Come on, y'dumb beasts!" Daniel called. "Come git it!"

"They ain't dumb," Rachel whispered.

"Hush."

Eventually they heard the clopping of hooves. Two of the horses materialized out of the mist. Rolly, the workhorse, and Misty, the gray mare, loped toward the barn. Daniel and Rachel stood aside. The horses jogged past them like giants. Each found its way into its own stall.

"Come on now, where's Chester," Daniel said. He did not want to go out into the pasture to look for their aged third equine, Chester, the retired work horse their father just could not bring himself to shoot.

"Chester!" Rachel called.

"Hush."

"Hush, what? What are you scared of?" She glared at him defiantly. "I'll go out there and get 'im."

"No," he said. "We'll go together."

He retrieved the lantern from the work bench.

"I can see in the dark," Rachel said as they padded out into the pasture.

"That's witch talk."

"No, it ain't. I'm just not scared, like you."

"You're simple."

The barn receded into darkness behind them. Beneath their feet the grassy fields were slick with autumn mud. Daniel glanced back at the farmhouse, the twin glowing lights of the kitchen and dining room. He wished he was inside.

"Chester," he said, firmly. "Come git it."

They stood perfectly still. Daniel squinted into the darkness. As his vision adjusted, the pasture expanded around them, a pool of deep shadows. There were stars above, but no moon. Across the field he could distantly make out the stone wall at the edge of the farm. Beyond which lay the endless sprawl of the forest.

Something moved by the stone wall. "I see him," Daniel said.

"I don't see-"

Suddenly Chester chugged out of the night, nearly crashing into them. Daniel jumped out of the way. The horse huffed, thundering toward the barn, oblivious.

"You old dingbat!" Rachel cried.

Daniel shuddered, glancing back toward the stone wall. Rachel stood still, pointing to the distant line of trees. "You said you saw him over there."

"I thought I did."

"But he came from this way," she indicated with her thumb. "What'd you see?"

Daniel looked at her. "Come on," he said. "Father won't be kept waiting."

He turned and walked back toward the barn. After a moment she followed.

"You're telling lies," Rachel said. "Father's right about your fibbing."

Daniel grabbed the lapel of her blouse. She stiffened, her hands clenching into fists. "I don't tell lies," Daniel said. He let go of her blouse, stalked into the barn.

She hurried after him.

There was fog for a week, every morning and every afternoon, each day a little darker than the last. Rachel spent long hours with Mother, peeling and canning potatoes, skinning the papery lumps until her hands cramped into painful claws.

"Mother, how long do we have to eat potatoes?" she asked.

Mother sliced the peeled potatoes into chunks. Mary, Rachel's younger sister, shoved the chunks into jars.

"Until May, if we're lucky," Mother said.

"My hands are soon to fall off."

"Finish your pile. Then bring in the dry linens."

Rachel wished she was in the orchard with Father and the boys, picking apples for the cider. Eating fresh apples off the trees. Not skinning dirty little ground turds for the evening stew. She peeled through her pile, then set down the paring knife. "I'll get the linens now," she said.

Outside, another foggy afternoon bled into evening. Rachel pulled her coat around her shoulders, buttoned it at the neck.

The linens sagged from the clothes line, damp and heavy, always damp this time of year. She would hang them by the fire to dry during supper, but her bed would still be wet and cold.

One of the horses trotted through the fog, appearing like a half-formed thought, vanishing.

"Chester, where are you going?" she mumbled. But the horse had not looked like Chester. It was deep brown, not auburn-gray.

Rachel left the linen hanging, and walked out into the pasture. Gray swirls of mist circled around her. She walked across the field, where the horse had gone. She arrived at the corner of the stone wall, and stopped short. Daniel stood facing the woods, his back to her.

"Daniel, you scared me," Rachel said.

He did not respond. She stepped toward him. "Daniel…"

"I heard you. Hush."

She stood beside him. His face was pinched and alert, his eyes narrow, scanning the trees.

"What are you doing out here?" she whispered.

He turned to her. "What are you?"

"I saw a horse, and I don't think it was Chester." She felt her chest tighten. "I think it was a horse."

"Brown-colored. Like dirt?"

"Yes."

He raised a thin finger, pointing into the trees. Rachel squinted, saw nothing. A wisp of cold air nipped at her cheeks. She stepped closer to him, her fingers fumbling at the hem of his coat. "Is Father keeping Mr. Crother's horse for him, like last summer?" she whispered.

"No," Daniel said.

She followed the direction of his finger. In the trees, a shape moved. It was nearly indistinguishable from the thick mass of trunks.

"That's a deer," she said. "Let's tell Father. We'll eat venison till Christmas!"

She started to turn, but he grabbed her arm. "It ain't a deer," he said. "It's a horse. A ghost horse. It's what's been spooking ours."

Rachel pulled away from his grasp. "It ain't a ghost horse," she stammered. "And you're fibbing again, just like Father says. I'm going to tell him it's a deer!"

She ran back across the field, heading straight for the house. She knew her father was in the orchard, picking apples, but she wanted to be away from the pasture. Distantly she heard the soft whinny of a horse, and she ran faster.

"I saw the brown horse again today," Daniel said, as they sat down to dinner. "Rachel saw it too."

Rachel kept silent, watching their father. Father's eyes closed for a moment, his whiskery jaws chewing slowly.

"Daniel," he said. "We have but three horses on this property. Always have had."

"I think there may be another," Daniel said.

"What you're doing is causing trouble," Father said. "I've seen no such horse. Your mother-" He turned to Mother for confirmation, and Mother curtly shook her head. "Your mother's seen no such horse. I've told you repeatedly about lies. Now account for your behavior."

Daniel glanced at Rachel. She stared down at her stew. The younger children watched them both.

"Every night when I feed the horses, they're restless," Daniel said. "I went to the barn yesterday, found tracks all over the place. No shoes on the tracks, Father. Our horses are shoed."

"If Crother was missing a horse, he'd be over," Father said.

"I might have seen a deer today, Father," Rachel said.

Father turned to her. "You see one again, you come find me."

"Yes, sir."

"Daniel," Father said. "I'll hear the Lord's prayer in triplicate from you, before bed time. And I'll hear you ask forgiveness for telling lies. There are no strange horses on this property. Just the usual ones."

That night Daniel lay in the children's bed, brooding. He didn't like his father to think he wasn't truthful. They were taught in Church to tell the truth, to respect their elders, and Daniel took pride in his inclination to do both. Reverend Wilkes had never called him a liar. Tomorrow he would find the brown horse and prove his virtue.

He kicked Rachel beneath the damp bedsheets. "That was not a deer, you simple idiot," he whispered.

Rachel kicked him back. "It was," she said. "You're blind as a fool."

"You saw a horse. You said so."

Rachel squirmed away from him. The other children breathed deeply in the bed.

"You're just trying to scare me," she huffed.

"You'll be sorry you didn't believe me," Daniel said. "When the ghost horse tramples you in your sleep."

He turned away from her. After a moment he heard her muffled whimpers, and he felt even worse.

After chores, Daniel stuffed four apples into his coat pockets. He went into the barn, retrieved the spare lantern his father hung above the work bench. He pocketed a tinder box and a pouch of gunpowder. It was another foggy afternoon. He had been watching the pastures all day, had seen a large brown shape flitting across the stone wall, leaping into the woods. He was half-convinced that Rachel was right- it was a deer they had seen- but he would never tell her so. Not until he had ventured into the forest and found the creature. If it was a deer, he would delight in watching Father shoot it.

"What are you doing with the lantern?"

Daniel turned and saw Rachel peering at him from one of the horse stalls.

"How come you're always where you ain't wanted?" Daniel replied. "Father told you not to eavesdrop."

She stepped out of the stall, hands on her hips. "Father told you not to fib."

"Father told you not to piss in the yard."

Rachel's mouth dropped open. "I'll piss anywhere I please," she said. "What are you stealing the tinderbox for?"

"I ain't stealing. I'm going to look for the horse."

"What horse?"

"The ghost horse."

"That was a deer."

"Now you're fibbing."

Rachel ran up to him. "I don't want you wandering around in the woods. It'll be dark soon."

"That's why I'm bringing the lamp."

"I won't have it."

"You, you, you." He pushed her chest. "You can stay here, yard-pisser. I'm going to find the horse. I won't be called a liar by Father, by you, or by anyone."

He walked out of the barn, glanced around to make sure Father wasn't watching out for him. Father was across the pastures, deep in the orchard, picking the cider apples. Mother was in the house teaching Mary and John their lessons. The pasture was gray and empty, fog curling out of the forest. He expected to hear Rachel's footsteps following him after about ten paces, and when he glanced back around, there she was.

Wet sticks crunched beneath their boots. The forest was coffin still. Black trees tilted around them, hemming them in. Tendrils of fog curled through the damp air. Daniel wished he hadn't brought the lantern. It was needlessly heavy, though he'd be grateful for it if they didn't find the horse by dark.

"How do you know I piss in the yard?" Rachel griped. "You must be watching me."

"Everyone knows," Daniel said. "Reverend Wilkes sermoned about it Sunday last."

"Liar!"

"Father says only men can piss outside. It ain't ladylike."

"Mother says it helps kill the crab grass."

"Mother does not talk about such things."

"She does too," said Rachel. "When you and Father and John are in the fields."

"Well, I'll not have you pissing in the yard if we're married someday," Daniel said.

Rachel scoffed. "Brothers don't marry sisters. That ain't how marriage works, ya ignoramus."

A nickering sound broke the stillness of the woods. Daniel froze. Rachel bumped into him. She grabbed his coat. "What was that?"

Daniel scanned the trees. Gnarly brown trunks in every direction.

"It wasn't a deer," he said.

They stood still. Something cracked nearby. Daniel swung around.

The horse stood twenty yards away, head bent forward. Pawing the dirt. Canon blasts of breath exploded from its nostrils.

Daniel felt his heartbeat in his ears. The horse shook its heavy mane.

Rachel stepped behind him. "Daniel-"

"Hush—"

It charged them. Rachel screamed. Daniel grabbed her, pulled them both to the ground. The horse pounded through the trees. Branches snapped against its chest. He could smell its musky bulk, felt a rush of air brush his face. There was a moment of silence as the horse leapt over their crouching form. It landed inches from Rachel's dress, took off at a gallop into the woods.

Rachel clung to him. "Is it gone?"

"I don't know where it is."

"I want to go home."

"We'll go. Take my hand."

She gripped his hand so tight it hurt. Daniel held the lantern out in front of them, like a weapon. Their only defense, and not even lit. Darkness was closing in.

He realized he had no idea which way led back to the farm. They could not see the pastures through the trees. He knew that the sun set south and west in autumn, but there was no sun, just a thick wall of fog.

They climbed over a fallen trunk, their feet sinking deep into soft dirt.

"Now I'm stuck," Rachel said.

The horse stood fifty feet away, perfectly still. Rachel gasped, a whisper of breath escaping her mouth.

It stared right at them.

"Run," Daniel said.

"I can't! I'm stuck!"

He dropped the lantern, grabbed her ankles, and wrenched her feet out of the muck. She fell backwards with a cry. He pulled her up, and they sprinted into the trees. Rachel's legs tangled in her dress, but he did not release her hand. He would not abandon his sister.

Galloping footsteps thundered behind them. The horse whinnied madly, the wild cry of a crazed thing. They ducked their heads and ran faster. Daniel's breath choked in his throat. Beside him he heard Rachel crying.

They tripped over wet branches, crashing to the ground. Daniel felt his ankle twist. Rachel stood up, lurched forward, fell again, her dress clinging to her legs.

"Stop," Daniel said.

She stopped, breathing hard. He grabbed a low tree branch and pulled himself to his feet. The forest was dark, the mist closing around them like a fist.

"Where is it?" she asked.

He looked around. He could see nothing, could barely see Rachel a few feet away. But the forest smelled funny. Like a barn. Like-

The horse nickered beside them.

He grabbed her again and ran, this time in no direction at all. His ankle smarted with each crashing step. Branches snagged their clothes, nicked their faces. They pushed through a clump of thick brambles, fell forward into a clearing.

"Daniel, what is that?"

Daniel caught his breath and stood. A rotten barn stood before them, tucked into the edge of the clearing. He had never seen the barn before. He and Father had walked all over their property, in summer, when the forest was golden green and alive. The barn croaked out of the forest floor like a tomb, its doorless maw a gaping black mouth.

"What is this place?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know," Daniel said. "Let's go inside. We can hide."

They ran into the barn. It was smaller than their own barn, much smaller, just a single square room with a loft above. A rotten table and chair sat in the middle of the room. A frayed rope hung from the rafters. They leaned against the wall. Listened.

Outside they heard a coarse whinny, not the sound of a healthy animal, but the rasping breath of decay.

Daniel found a rotten ladder leading up to the loft. He squeezed the soft wood. "We can hide in the loft," he said.

He climbed, and Rachel followed. The loft was empty, but for a few brittle straws of hay. They huddled together on the thin wooden floorboards.

"Father will kill us," Rachel said. "If that monster don't kill us first."

"It can't get up here," Daniel said. "It can't climb a ladder."

"We'll miss supper, and the horses will go unfed."

Daniel stared out into the dark forest. He could see absolutely nothing. It would do no good to try to hike back to the farm. They would have to spend the night in the empty barn.

"We'll go home in the morning," he said, not at all confident that he could find the way. He wished he had not dropped the lantern. Without a lamp the tinderbox and powder in his pocket were useless. He reached into his coat and pulled out two apples, gave one to Rachel.

"Thank you," she said.

They ate in silence, then sat together, listening to the night. There was no wind, no rain, no owls. No footsteps or nickers. Nothing but the sound of their own breathing.

Eventually they lay down and tried to sleep. Daniel felt Rachel's shivering body, and he pulled her close against him. She smelled of damp hair, and potatoes. He kissed her forehead, and for a moment she stopped shivering, and soon she was asleep. Daniel closed his eyes.

He awoke to the gruff nicker of a horse.

"Easy," said a low male voice.

Daniel sat up. Rachel breathed gently beside him. He peered over her.

An orange glow emanated from the room below them. Daggers of light danced across the walls. A lantern.

"Easy," said the man again.

It was not Father. Daniel sat perfectly still.

The horse nickered again.

"You're on your own now," said the man. "Ye can have this cursed land all to ye'self. I'm done."

The man whispered something Daniel could not hear.

Rachel stirred. Opened her eyes. Daniel put a finger to his lips.

"I've failed myself, failed my family, and now I've failed you," the man said.

"Father?" Rachel whispered.

Daniel shook his head. Her eyes widened.

"Let's see you grow potatoes in that soil," the man said. "Let's see you grow anything. Maine soil ain't nothing but rocks. Should never have left Boston."

More mumbling. Daniel heard what sounded like liquid sloshing in a bottle.

"Well, I quit. I'm sorry to do this to you, old friend. But I quit."

There was a wooden groaning sound, like furniture moving around. Daniel heard the man reciting something quietly. It sounded like the Lord's prayer. Then there was a heavy tremor, and the barn shook. The horse nickered and whinnied. Pounded its hooves on the dirt floor. A rhythmic creaking sound seeped through the barn, like a ship bobbing at anchor.

Several minutes passed, and they heard no more sounds from the man or the horse.

"Don't move," Daniel said. He crawled to the edge of the loft, peered down into the room. He could not see the entire space, but there was a lantern, lit, and a table, with an empty chair. He followed the creaking sound, gazing up to the rafters. A rope dangled from the crossbeams, and a man hung from the rope. Boots swaying back and forth, just above the ground.

The horse stared directly at him. Blew steam from its nostrils. It seemed to be waiting for something.

Daniel crawled away from the edge of the loft.

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

"The man left," Daniel said.

"Is the horse still there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He lay back down beside her, pulled her close. "It can't get us up here," he stuttered, his lips like two pieces of ice. "We'll leave in the morning. Go back to sleep."

"I can't sleep with the demon down there."

"I won't let it get you."

She buried her face in his jacket. His lips found her ear, and he whispered Hail Mary's until they both fell asleep.

In the morning the barn was empty. No man

hanging from the rafters. No lantern. No horse. No footprints on the dirt floor. They climbed down from the loft. Mercifully, the morning sun threw beams of light through the trees. Daniel knew the sun arced through the southern sky in autumn. He could find his way back to the farm.

They stepped outside the barn, and there was the horse. Watching them.

It looked smaller in daylight, older, its coat a faded brown. It pawed the ground listlessly, like it didn't know what else to do.

"What does it want?" Rachel asked.

Daniel remembered the words of the man from last night. "You're on your own now."

"It's hungry," he said. He reached into his pocket, found the two remaining apples. His stomach growled from his own hunger, but he stepped forward, held the apples out in his hand. The horse nickered and stepped toward them. Rachel grabbed Daniel's jacket.

"Be still," Daniel said.

The horse loomed over them, its snout fumbling over his fingers, its eyes like clouded marbles. It smelled of stale breath and rotten soil. It sniffed the apples, then gently opened its jaws. Daniel fed the apples into the horse's mouth, one and then the other. The fruit crunched in its teeth.

"He's just hungry," Daniel said.

The horse finished eating, and released a long breath. It turned and loped off into the forest. There was no mist this morning. Daniel and Rachel watched the horse vanish into the trees, there one moment, gone the next.

They found their way back to the farm before noon. Deep in the trees, Daniel stubbed his toe on something metallic, looked down to see the abandoned lantern. He picked it up. One less lashing from Father.

They emerged into the pasture, climbed over the stone wall. Chester loped across the paddock toward the barn. They could not see the other horses. Thin smoke trickled out of the farmhouse chimney.

"Father will wear out his belt tonight," Daniel said.

"I won't let him say you're fibbing," Rachel said. "If he calls you a fibber again, I'll tell him you ain't one."

Daniel stared off toward the barn. Their father emerged with a pitchfork. He saw the children, and stalked toward them. Rachel took his hand, and together they walked across the pasture, toward their father's uncomprehending wrath.

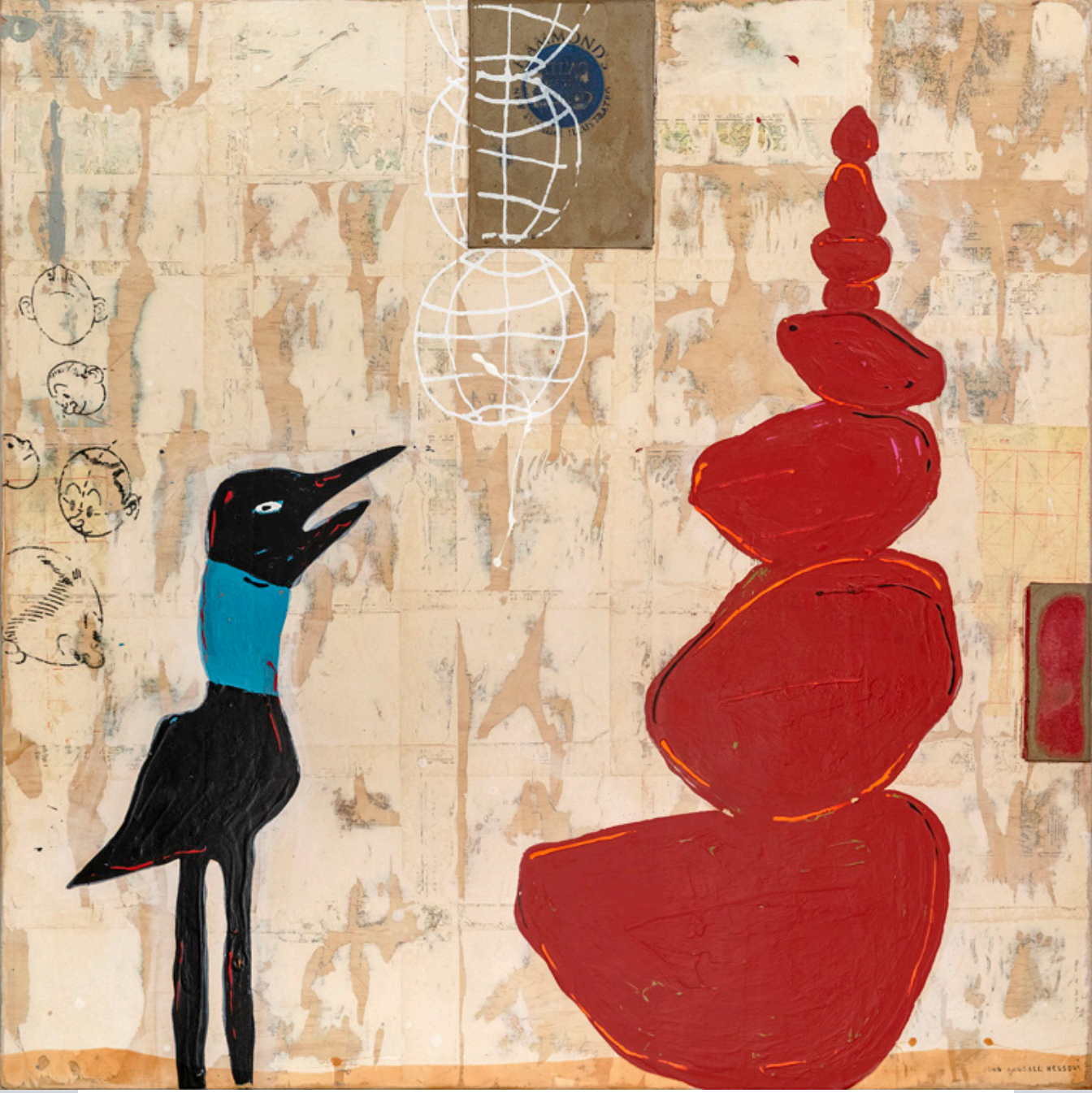
Adam Matson's fiction has appeared internationally in over twenty magazines, including *Day One, Straylight, Soundings East, The Bryant Literary Review, The Berkeley Fiction Review, Morpheus Tales, Infernal Ink Magazine, Crack the Spine,* and *The Indiana Voice Journal*. Matson has also been previously published in *The Oddville Press*.

Deerhorn Sprouting

Arlyn LaBelle

The orbital patter of polite
reproach which grinds the
semblance day into a soft
nub, deerhorn sprouting.
A hart mounted with glass,
my stunted reach, line by
flinch cast into such quiet,
such cold. They will not see
my words until I write them
with rivets in the gouache sky,
the ash on my tongue, mine.

Arlyn LaBelle is a queer poet and writer living in Austin, Texas. Her work has appeared in the Badgerdog summer anthologies as well as *The Blue Hour, LAROLA, JONAH Magazine, North of Oxford, The Oddville Press, Songs of Eretz, Grey Sparrow Press, Cease, Cows, Panoply Zine* and *The Southern Poetry Review.*



Holy Crow

John Randall Nelson

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Someplace Without Washrooms

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

IT WAS CLEAR TO CYNTH that the cute girl and handsome boy didn't want to kiss. Not with her sitting three benches away. Not with their pushy friend egging them on, camera-phone framed and ready.

The typical scene was written and directed by genetics. The girl was indeed cute, petite, armed with perfected feminine mannerisms, all packaged in a Fall outfit that teased of Summer treats; in a word, she was desirable. The boy was indeed handsome, a model without a magazine cover, the world ready for the taking, but waiting for testosterone to fill his head with the notion; in a word, he was desirable. Their pushy friend? In several words: fat, ugly, awkward, desperate, undesirable.

She was Cynth.

Which was why the urge to walk over to them, and tell the pushy friend to leave the possible couple alone propelled her to stand up.

But a thought weighed her back down: *Who the hell am I to say anything?*

And one resounding, troublesome question cemented her to the bench: *What if they recognize me?*

There had been a terrible snippet of her sorry life filled with judging stares and words of condemnation. Three years had dwindled, and though the eyes gradually passed blindly over her constantly-changing appearance without a second glance, she still felt the permanent pressures of temporary infamy.

Nobody recognizes me, Cynth tried to assure herself in that soothing, albeit unsteady, therapeutic voice she had worked so long and hard to construct, desperately trying to sound anything other than her trademark, albeit notorious, professional vocal fry. Of the three kids before her, no more than thirteen-years-old apiece, she guessed, she reasoned: *They're too young to recognize me. Too young to know what I've done.*

She smiled inwardly. *Nobody recognizes me.*

The thought used to haunt her, sprinting alongside morbid worries of living and dying alone and unknown, inside of a pathetic body people couldn't help but recognize, both for the comic relief and disgust it had provided.

Selfishly, she was grateful for the events of three years prior, for it had supplied her with ample motivation to lop off and straighten a lifetime's growth of untamed auburn curls, add

bleach, pierce body parts of her body she had grown up to believe were virginal, and, along with the cocktail of depression, anxiety, and guilt that felt intravenously fed to her via every available vein, dissolved nearly two-hundred of her three-hundred-and-twenty pounds. Her skin, however, remained an open canvas, and on the days when the cocktail's alcohol content was too unbearable, she strongly considered decorating some part of herself with a memorial.

And what would the tattooist say when I show the portrait I'd want? she challenged herself. *Wouldn't they recognize me, then?*

Nobody recognizes—

A child's laugh.

Cynth looked at the boy and two girls. The pushy friend lowered her cameraphone, laughing at something the photogenic pair's faces deemed unfunny.

Just go over there, and tell her to leave them alone, Cynth coached herself. Just go, and—

And what do I say?

Tell them about Jaley.

They don't know Jaley.

Neither do you.

The truth splintered that familiar place within her that had never fully healed.

Having visited the park on a near-religious basis for the last three years, listening to the radio program her obsessive memory played, Cynth rarely had any suitable players to perform the needy voices in her head. Some visits, she allowed the voices to speak through unaware mothers and their playing children. Other visits, she allowed the voices to speak through passing squirrels, pigeons, and dogs. Most visits, the park was empty, forcing her to replay the conversation solely in her mind.

Today, however, there was the cute girl, the handsome boy, and the pushy friend.

How perfect, she thought, and let the eager, three-year-old memory roll:

"We've got Jaley on the air," the pushy friend said. Her mouth was moving, but her lips were issuing different words, like a poorly dubbed film. Still, Cynth made due, hearing her own voice—the trademark vocal fry—inside her head, leaving the pushy friend's mouth. "You there, Jaley?"

A gust of wind passed through the park.

Static crackled over the radio in her head.

"Hellooo? Jaley?" Cynth/the pushy friend coaxed.

Jaley? Typical. Sounds skinny, Cynth, three years away from chiseling at her own skeleton, had thought then. As if the conversation wasn't punishing enough to remember verbatim, she painstakingly recalled nearly every thought she had conjured during the long-ago exchange.

The wind settled.

The static cleared.

"—ere, here, here, I'm here," the cheery, instantly loveable voice in her head said. To Cynth's eyes, the cute girl on the bench opened her mouth to respond to the pushy friend.

"Thought I lost you there," Cynth/the pushy friend said.

"No, it's my stupid phone," Jaley/the cute girl said. "Hi."

Probably don't even know how to use it, except for a shit-ton of selfies.

"Hi, back," was Cynth's/the pushy friend's equally cheery response. "So, Jaley, how old are you?"

"Just turned twenty-one last week."

That's a lot of math for you, isn't it?

"Awww, Happy Birthday."

Cynth could still hear the annoyingly loud noisemaker she had activated at the touch of a studio console button.

"Thank you," Jaley/the cute girl giggled.

"Now… you called 'cause you had a

pretty weird date last week."

"Yeah."

Good.

"Care to share with everyone?"

"'K,' so, like... I went out with this guy, and-"

"What's his name?"

"Guy."

"Guy?"

"Yeah."

"Creative."

Parents probably would've named his sister 'Girl.'

"Yeah, I know, right?" Jaley/the cute girl agreed.

"Okay," Cynth/the pushy friend said, "so, actually... before you get to the date, tell everyone where you met."

"Online." The undertone reeked of Duh! "We messaged for, like, a couple hours, and I guess we decided to meet."

Oh, a couple of hours is way more than enough time for him to see you're twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.

"So, then what happened?" Cynth/the pushy friend probed.

"'K,' so, we met at a cafe downtown, 'cause, you know, I'm not stupid."

Just twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.

"I just met this guy," Jaley/the cute girl continued. "I don't know if he's crazy, or if he's gonna look all weird, you know?" A slight chuckle.

"A girl can't be too careful, totally," Cynth/the pushy friend agreed.

Idiot.

"So, yeah, we met at the cafe," Jaley/the cute girl continued, "and he looked just like his pictures, so bonus."

"He cute?"

"Uh, yeah." Another dose of Duh!

What was I thinking? Someone named Jaley, twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable doesn't do ugly.

"So, you're at the cafe," Cynth/the pushy friend reviewed, "he looks like his pics—so he's who he says he is, which is cute. But not too cute about what he did next."

Glad he did it.

"I know, right?" Jaley/the cute girl proceeded: "So, he says he needs to use the washroom. So he leaves. And I'm sitting there, waiting and waiting, and I'm like, 'Don't guys just go in, do their thing, and come back out?'"

"You heard it here, guys," Cynth/the pushy friend broke in. "It's that simple. Unless you got long lines like us femme fatales, all you guys need to do is 'go in, do your thing, and come back out' to your date." Cynth/the pushy friend laughed, and then abruptly stopped for dramatic effect. "But what did he do?"

"He didn't come back out." Jaley/the cute girl sounded shocked.

Awww, poor skinny, fuckable you.

"You mean he ditched you?" Cynth/the pushy friend enforced.

Hope it hurts.

"He totally did," Jaley/the cute girl said, pouting cutely.

Good.

"And you called 'cause you wanna know why," Cynth/the pushy friend seethed, getting down to exciting business.

"Yeah, like, we were having a good time and all, and he seemed to like me."

'Cause you're twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.

"You tried calling him?"

"Yeah." More *Duh!* "For, like, three days."

"Girl, that's three days too many."

Fuckin' moron.

"Yeah."

"Well, let's see if he picks up when your gal-pal Cynth calls."

You would never be my gal-pal. Nobody who looks like you would ever want to be seen with someone who looks like me. And I wouldn't want to, either.

The simple hip-hop beat looping quietly in the background was punctuated by dialed digits, followed by a ringtone.

"Least his phone works," Cynth/the pushy friend quipped, the latter lifting her cellphone, readying another attempt to snap a photo or capture a video of the cute girl and handsome boy.

A second ring.

A third.

"Maybe he's in the washroom," Cynth/the pushy friend jested.

Jaley/the cute girl issued a brittle laugh, cut short by: "Hi, you've reached Guy..."

"Guess you've heard this part before," Cynth/the pushy friend said over the standard voicemail greeting. With barely contained enthusiasm: "Let's leave a message."

"No," Jaley/the cute girl blurted, the former worried Cynth might keep her word, the latter swatting the pushy friend's cameraphone away.

Cynth cut the call before the tone Guy had promised ended. "Wow," she/the pushy friend said. "This what you been dealing with?"

Poor skinny, fuckable you.

"It's okay," Jaley/the cute girl said with playful disappointment.

Wasn't like it was love. There'll be plenty more, anyway.

"Let's try one more time," Cynth/the pushy friend urged.

A rapid succession of dial tones made Jaley's decision.

One ring.

"What if he doesn't like me?" Jaley/the cute girl offered weakly.

Two rings.

"Well, we're gonna find out," Cynth/the pushy friend said.

You don't sound so fuckable now, do you?

Three-

"Hello?"

He sounds fuckin' hot was Cynth's immediate thought.

"Hi. Is this Guy?" Cynth/the pushy friend inquired.

"Speaking." Caution coated his otherwise sultry voice.

If the handsome boy sitting on the bench with the cute girl and their pushy friend had been contributing to their private back-and-forth all along, Cynth hadn't noticed; she had been transfixed on the girls, the live mimes representing the female voices in her head. With the introduction of Guy in this familiar script, Cynth now fixed upon the handsome boy, and saw that he was speaking Guy's words.

"You're a hard guy to reach," Cynth/the pushy friend said. "Do you listen to the Cynthetic Cynth Morning Show?"

"Um... not really," Guy/the handsome boy said.

Didn't think so.

"Awww... that's too bad."

"Wait..." His voice peaked, hinting his forgotten pubescent years. "Is this... Am I on the show?"

"Smart cookie," Cynth/the pushy friend beamed, thinking Jaley's *Duh!* "You're speaking with Cynth, *on-air.*"

"Okay, cool. Did I, like, win something?" Guy sounded more excited than the increasingly frustrated handsome boy appeared.

"In a way," Cynth/the pushy friend said. "I'm calling 'cause I heard you went on a date last week."

"Oookay." A dip back into caution.

"You do remember being on a date last

week, don't you, Guy?"

"I do, yeah."

"You remember the name of your date, Guy?"

The looped background track filled his end of the conversation.

"Uh-oh. You're looking worse and worse here, Guy. Don't tell me you don't remember the name-"

"Are you there, Jaley?"

Cynth hadn't heard it then, during the live recording, but when she had listened back to the segment, she could tell his uncanny inquiry, spoken in that sexy voice of his, had taken her breath away. Even the looped background track seemed to break at the precise moment of his question.

Nobody ever said my name that way.

Jaley was silent. For a moment, Cynth thought she had lost her caller, and, therefore, the entire gimmick—and Jaley's punishment for being twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable—but she could see the line was still live.

"What makes you think Jaley's here?" Cynth/the pushy friend teased.

"Ah, she is, isn't she?" Guy chuckled, while the handsome boy scowled at the pushy friend. "I've heard shows like this before. Ah, man." More chuckling.

"So, you know what's up?" Cynth/the pushy friend asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do." He exhaled. "I'm an ass. Wait—can I say 'ass' on the radio?"

"I'll make an exception in your case."

More of that appetizing laugh.

I'm not twenty-one, skinny, or fuckable, but if I was, I'd be all over you. Even if you didn't look like your pictures.

"Why do you think you're an ass, Guy?"

"'Cause I ditched. "His breath rustled the phone, as if his sheepishness had rapidly produced an abundance of scraping wool.

"So, what's going on, Guy? Why'd you ditch Jaley?" Before he could respond: "*And* ignore her calls for the last three days?"

"I'm an ass," he maintained, matter-of-factly. "I'm an ass, Jaley."

She was live, but remained silent, as did the cute girl on the bench.

"Jaley, you still with me?" Cynth/the pushy friend asked.

"Yeah," a mouse on the other line said.

"Wanna ask Guy here what his deal is?"

A silence too long for radio.

"Trust me, Jaley wants to know what your deal is," Cynth/the pushy friend intervened. "*Everyone* wants to kn—."

The handsome boy abruptly stood, disrupting Cynth's mental program. She could hear his voice—a fight between current boy and eventual man for the vocal cords—but not specific words. His reddening face clearly had more to do with the pushy friend than the cold air. Cynth watched as he turned to grab the cute girl's hand, pulled her to attention, and flashed a middle finger in the pushy friend's face. The cute girl looked back at the pushy friend as she was whisked away, but said nothing. They were heading for Cynth, who busied herself with bird-less birdwatching. As they breezed by, she thought she heard the handsome boy say something reminiscent of "...none of her fuckin' business what we..." With that, they penetrated the woods, where Cynth dared not go.

Maybe one day, she told herself. *Maybe today.*

Maybe.

Cynth ignored an actual bird that had deserted the forest beyond, turning her attention to the pushy friend. The sulking mass sat on the bench, a forest of one, abandoned by lovebirds. She fiddled with her phone for a while, then stood, and walked without pur-

pose to the still swings, giving each a heartless push before leaving.

Cynth waited until the swings settled before reevaluating her surroundings. Confirming her solitude, she moved to the bench recently occupied by the trio. The worn, paint-chipped wood was cold, though she believed she could feel their warm ghosts wafting through the seat of her pants. She looked at each of the benches she had sat upon—*Experienced,* she liked to think of it—prior to the kids' appearance. There was the one with the loose plank, the one with the missing plank, the one half-sunk into the loose earth, the graffito's masterpiece, and the pigeon's toilet.

There was also the one closest to the forest.

Which one are you? she mused, as always.

They hadn't sat on the swings, toes and heels gently digging shallow grooves in the sand in romantic synchronicity. They hadn't roosted on the top or bottom of the slide. "We were sitting on a bench." Guy's words in print and on screen, unimportant, almost trivial, but paramount to Cynth.

But which one? she willed to Guy.

As part of the ritual, she closed her eyes, and tried to visualize a day she had never lived.

The entire scene unfolded in choppy edits: in one instance, she could see Jaley and Guy, sitting together on a bench comprised of sampled details of all seven benches, their faces pixelated, the way she remembered them on screen and in print; in another instance, she could see Guy *as* Jaley; she could hear his tantalizing voice—never Jaley's—not in the park's open, clean air, but as she had heard him on her morning radio show: filtered, human-like:

"We sat on a bench," Guy said, his acorn eyes piercing whatever colour Jaley's had been.

"I need to know which one," Cynth said, the trademark vocal fry some critics and listeners alike complained about and mocked substituting Jaley's cutesy cadence.

"We talked about how we were on that old, fat, ugly, unfuckable, meddling bitch's show," Guy said, ignoring her. He took her hands into his own. So strong. So masculine. So desirable.

"And then everyone recognized me," Cynth said, letting his thumbs massage the tender meat between her thumbs and index fingers. "Everybody wanted to skewer and roast the old..."

"...but thirty's not old..." Guy teased, caressing her hair now.

"...fat..." Cynth said.

"...you're not fat anymore..."

"...ugly..."

"...you're not ugly anymore..."

"...unfuckable..."

"...mmm, I'd definitely fuck you..."

"...meddling bitch," Cynth ended.

"Don't feel so bad," Guy cooed. "Jaley and I talked about how we should thank you for bringing us together."

Cynth tried to break his hold. "It's not my fault."

He held on, his luscious, kissable lips formed a seductive smile. "Thank you."

"It was just a show," Cynth rebelled, tugging harder, but not succeeding. "It was entertainment. Stupid entertainment for stupid people."

"Thank you." His lips drew closer to her.

"It's not my fault."

Closer. "Thank you."

"It's not my fault."

"Thank you."

She felt his breathy syllables as his lips pressed against her own. "It's not my fault," she heard herself scream, the words devoured

by his exploring mouth.

"Thank you," she heard him say in spite of their entangled tongues.

She closed her eyes, and received everything she wanted. And when she had had her fill, she opened her eyes, and saw what she had come to expect:

The six other benches, each with their own personality and history.

No kids.

No Guy.

No Jaley.

Just her.

And the bench she always saved for last.

She dreaded her self-imposed regimen, but knew her daily diet needed feeding.

Is that where they sat? Cynth pondered, inwardly cringing at the oddly pristine bench partially enveloped by the treeline.

Maybe.

Maybe it's the one I'm sitting on.

Maybe it's the one with all the bird shit on it.

Maybe it's none of them at all.

Maybe Guy was lying.

Guy had lied about a lot of things.

Guy had lied on my stupid show for stupid people.

She recalled the latter portion of the long-ago segment:

"Trust me, Jaley wants to know what your deal is," Cynth had said. "Everyone wants to know."

After a brief hesitation—staged, she knew now—Guy gave in: "Basically, I didn't think I was good enough for Jaley, so I said I needed to use the washroom. I saw myself in the mirror, which didn't help, and I guess I decided to just leave."

You chickened-out, she mended. But not the next time.

Cynth fast-forwarded through the remaining garb, skipping her relentless teasing of both parties, Jaley's shock and relief, and ending where she had spoken the words that had set her upon an endless string of park therapy sessions. "Just one recommendation, okay, you guys? When you guys go on your second first date, make sure you guys go someplace without washrooms, okay?"

"Someplace without washrooms," Cynth whispered to the park, where Jaley and Guy allegedly met.

The park was someplace without washrooms.

The forest hugging the park was someplace without washrooms.

Deep within the forest, the hidden clearing at the foot of a hill, lined with a pitiful stream, where Jaley's white, nibbled, lifeless fingers dabbled, was someplace without washrooms.

The other places, where other "Jaley's" had been found, were places without washrooms.

It could've been this bench, Cynth ruminated.

She sat in silence, allowing no certain amount of time to pass.

Feeling she had paid enough—for now—homage to the current bench for one sitting, she confirmed her isolation, stood, and proceeded to the final bench. As always, a pang of guilt, lighter than the heavier ambience, resonated throughout her body as her bottom covered the names of lovers come and gone, their etched initials smothered under what others, herself included, had used to call her "fat ass." She looked for "J+A," "A+J," their full names—anything—but knew they weren't there.

It doesn't mean they didn't sit here before he led her into the woods, she reminded herself.

Without a cast to play the roles of the enduring voices in her overcrowded head,

she heard a vocal-fried, old, fat, ugly, unfuckable, meddling bitch say: "We've got Jaley on the air."

A gust of wind passed through the park.
"You there, Jaley?"
Static crackled over the radio in her head.

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi has spent a decade penning award-winning short- and feature-length screenplays, while working as a full-time artisan baker. His prose work explores the trials and tribulations of ordinary people, slice-of-life examinations anchored in real and surreal settings. His short stories have appeared in over a dozen literary journals, including *Raconteur Literary Magazine, Scrittura Magazine,* and *The Helix Magazine*.

Population

Gabriel Sage

There is nothing left here.
    Except cellophane sky
    spackled by polka-dot clouds
    doused in the dense glow of
    a cough syrup sunset,
    stars that begin to appear like sparks
    flung from grinding metal,
    mountains the shape of a jacket
    hanging on the back of a chair,
    sand the texture of silk Styrofoam;
    the whole thing surreal and glossy,
    like an over lit photograph
    or a city fossilized in honey amber.
There is nothing left here.
    Except the tickle of sweat
    drip tracing the lines
    of vertical palms,
    a nacreous veneer always
    pressed together and up, begging
    the depthless azure for anything
    other than hues of disappearance,
    too ready to swallow
    the sour sorcery of sidewalk slabs
    and shallow alley asphalt,
    then spit the excited effluvia
    back into the gaped shadow's
    laughing mouth.
There is nothing left here.
    Except tilted back heads
    over those wide open throats,
    a safe place to hallucinate
    or maybe even dream,
    a gritty sharing of the void;
    bore out the well-trained skull
    so the gentle delusion can swell
    into something new,
    so the brave and helpless recoil
    can collide into something
    somehow human.
There is—

The writing of Gabriel Sage is a sludge-covered collision of consonants and conciseness; an examination of the delicate daily minutiae that becomes life. He attempts to trace the literary line that lies between order and chaos, but often ends up tossing words into a rucksack and climbing the nearest mountain. Gabriel is currently composing his second book of poetry while studying at UC Berkeley and was recently awarded the Yoshiko Uchida Prize in Writing for nonfiction. Strands of letters he arranged can be found in publications such as Ishmael Reed's *Konch Magazine, Eleventh Transmission, The Charleston Anvil* and *Adelaide Literary.*

I Birilli Del Torneo

Mario Loprete

Mario Loprete is a graduate of Accademia of Belle Arti, Catanzaro. His work focuses on the research and documentation of the world of hip hop. Mario uses concrete as the basis of his new works. His work can be found at **instagram.com/mariolopretе**

Milkshakes

Gardner Mounce

IN JULY, long before the school year started, the educational consultant came from the coast in a sleek silver Tesla. He wore a suit that fit him and cowboy boots that didn't—a pathetic attempt at ingratiation, the faculty of Tennesseeans thought.

On his first visit to the school, he stood on the auditorium stage tapping a cordless mic against a heavy onyx cufflink to get the high school teachers' attention. "I'm not here to make problems," he said. "But to solve them." He promised to raise their test scores, simplify the teaching process, and prevent burnout. The teachers cheered. But they were not prepared for his plan.

The consultant presented a system of high-tech wearable helmets called, pretty un-sexily, The Gestalt Memory Block Protocol Transference System. Through a process too complicated to explain, the consultant explained, the system of helmets transferred thoughts from the teacher's brain to the students' brains. To illustrate, he played a video in which a smiling educator donned a silver helmet and flipped a Learning Switch. Instantly, her classroom of helmeted students collapsed. Draped across their desks, slack-mouthed, they reached for the carpeted floor like they'd dropped pencils. The camera panned across the blinking green lights of their helmets, which telegraphed normal brain function, and the tidy system of cables that ran beneath their desks like the multi-colored routes of a subway map.

The faculty gasped. And laughed.

"Imagine," the consultant said, winning them back with the confidence of his voice, "a world in which you don't have to worry about lesson-planning or classroom management. A world in which teaching *Hamlet* is as easy as reading *Hamlet*. A world in which teaching Algebra II is as easy as solving Algebra II equations at your desk."

It seemed like a good deal until the week after, when the consultant arrived for the faculty's mandatory self-censorship training. He strode into the library, dropped an armload of gray stapled booklets on a table, and announced that from here on out the faculty would only be allowed to teach scripted lessons.

The faculty threw a fit.

"You must understand," the consultant said. "While using the helmets, your every thought and feeling gets transferred to your

students. What are you going to do when your mind wanders to R-rated thoughts, as they're all likely to do from time to time? What are you going to do when you're having a bad day and pass along your anger?" For the system to work, he convinced them, their minds would have to be like empty rooms. For the rest of the summer, he led them through mindfulness training, emotional stoicism drills, and stray thought prevention exercises, until they could sit for an hour without having a single thought or feeling cross their minds or hearts.

But even a trained faculty found it difficult to prevent every stray thought from entering their minds. Ms. Clark, the physics teacher, was used to writing the word problems in her own words—emotional stories about the human condition with special care paid to the parts of that condition that were influenced by math. She was bored to tears by the humorless world of motion described by the scripted lessons. The speed of trains. The ellipsis of Mars. The parabolic arcs of baseballs. Why was it important to understand the path of planetary bodies? Why should anyone be interested in measuring the flight of baseballs? Who was riding all these trains, and why? The booklets didn't seem to care. The booklets presented physics as a baby whose attention could only be grabbed by stuff moving past it quickly.

At some point in October, she couldn't take it anymore. In a fit of boredom, she imagined that a word problem about a car in motion described her own car on its drive home, that peaceful half hour when she listened to podcasts and cut through the state forest on a leafy two-way. She imagined the twists and turns of the road that she had taken every day for twenty years in great detail. It was innocuous enough. They weren't R-rated thoughts. She was simply sprucing up a boring word problem with mental imagery of a rambling road and fall foliage.

That afternoon, her students clogged the two-way. They made their way through the forest to her house, following the mental route she'd transmitted to them. They double-parked in her driveway and circled her street, wondering why they had ended up at their teacher's house and what all their classmates were doing there, too.

The consultant made an example of Ms. Clark at the next faculty meeting. He explained that a student had no way of distinguishing between a thought that had originated in their own brain and one that had been transferred to them. He explained that transferred thoughts weren't added to their brains like items on a shelf, but were fully integrated like dye in water. "When you allow your mind to wander into unsanctioned territory, Ms. Clark, you colonize your students' brains with personal information. When you do this, you aren't teaching. You're claiming territory."

The embarrassment of being singled-out was replaced by disgust for herself. A few days later, all Ms. Clark felt was petrified complacency. She once again worked the booklets with the emotional detachment of a calculator, scared that any crumb of herself, once transferred, would fester in her students like black mold and proliferate. Too much and her students would cease being themselves entirely.

Ms. Clark wasn't the only one to accidentally transmit pieces of herself. In January, when Mrs. Gonzales' Pomeranian died, the American History teacher couldn't keep the grief out of her heart. Her students were seen collapsing against lockers with tear-streaked faces, blubbering the name of a dog they'd never met, lining up at Mrs. Gonzales' desk after class, not to ask questions about the lesson, but to offer consolation. In retribution, the consultant docked a portion of Ms. Gonzales' paycheck

and made her send a scripted email to her students' parents, in which she apologized for waging emotional imperialism on the young.

One good thing about the consultant was that he was true to his word. The state test scores that year were through the roof. While the scores of other schools in the state stagnated, their school's scores grabbed the attention of ranking websites and tech magazines. The school was beset by news crews, who interviewed the superintendent and consultant, and filmed classroom after classroom of students slumped over their desks in a stupor of learning.

When Spring rolled around and it was time to teach *Hamlet*, Mr. Campbell was relieved that he no longer had to wheedle his students with promises of movies adaptations or bully them into consent with reading quizzes and monologue memorizations. He simply flipped the Learning Switch and read *Hamlet* from the booklet, assured that Shakespeare's wisdom and poetry would flow into their heads without objection.

And when the horde of tenth graders stormed into Mrs. Tucker's class each morning, she no longer had to concern herself with governing their juvenile impulses. She flipped the Learning Switch and worked through a booklet in perfect silence. At class change, her students picked themselves off of their desks and ran hands down their faces like hungover Spring Breakers, exhausted by the sheer number of problems Mrs. Tucker had worked. It was hard work, thinking, she thought with satisfaction, even if they hadn't done the thinking themselves. Even if the thinking had all been done for them.

In May, the superintendent announced that the faculty would not be receiving step raises, as he planned on hiring the consultant full-time. "Think of it this way," he wrote in an email, "Rather than receiving a bump in your paycheck, you'll continue receiving bumps in life satisfaction. Can any of us honestly claim that we're more stressed since the arrival of the consultant? That we don't go home worry-free? That teaching hasn't become pretty easy?" A fringe group of veteran teachers penned a group email lodging their complaints, but they were outnumbered and ultimately ignored.

In addition, the consultant mandated helmet-assisted faculty meetings. From then on, the faculty gathered every Tuesday afternoon in the cafeteria to stupefy themselves. Wearing a helmet that sprouted thick dreadlocks of cables, the superintendent delivered the same pep talk every week: "You are educators. You are heroes. You are our kids' future. Don't turn your backs on them. You are martyrs. You are superheroes. You are champions. They need you." Many faculty members reported feeling energized by these sessions, while others feared that they were only being manipulated. How? They could only guess.

In the second year, the faction of dissenting veterans rallied themselves and revolted. They emailed a manifesto to the faculty, staff, students, and parents called, "We Are Monolithic," voicing their complaints against the educational consultant and the helmets, and outlining their plan to abandon the helmet program. "Teaching is an all-encompassing act of mind and body," the email began. "In the midst of a lesson, we are monolithic. The key knocks the tumblers into place and what shines through the keyhole is the spirit of Enlightenment."

They called themselves The Faction and could be seen in their classrooms reintroducing group work, class discussions, and hands-on activities. By stimulating and challenging their students, The Faction had convinced them-

selves, they convince everyone of the virtues of traditional pedagogy.

Any novelty in the classroom is bound to intrigue students once or twice, but after a week of group work the students became bored and irritated. They preferred the twilight world of the helmets, the numinous non-space in which learning happened without their input. Most students claimed that this non-space appeared as black as a dreamless sleep, while others reported seeing a star-spangled plane of purple smoke, humbling in its unendingness. Either way, they liked falling asleep and waking an hour later with a head full of facts. They complained to their parents, who complained to the superintendent, who threatened The Faction with unspecific disciplinary action, and by Fall Break the Faction had collapsed. The Faction wasn't without victory, though. In revolt, they stopped attending the helmet-assisted faculty meetings. The superintendent let it slide, knowing he'd won the war.

In December, the educational consultant scored another victory when the soccer coach unwittingly incriminated himself in an accidental memory transference to his sophomore Biology class. The coach had been falsifying the ticket sales ledger and skimming cash from the proceeds. In an accidental reverie, he transmitted a memory of himself scratching faint pencil handwriting from the ledger with a pink eraser and pocketing a thick roll of bills. The superintendent fired him, and the consultant wrote a press release acknowledging the helmets' incidental ability to fight corruption. The news story ran nationally.

In five years' time, once enough students had matriculated to universities across the nation and beyond that, to placements in the workforce, backlash against the helmets bubbled up at the edges of public discourse. Employers found these students with perfect GPAs and test scores to be sorely unfit for daily life in the workplace. They couldn't focus or take directions or delegate. They couldn't problem-solve or brainstorm or stick to deadlines. They were mostly found at their desks, staring off in glassy-eyed reverie, as if whatever thought they wanted to think might appear before them at any second. Editorialists called them a generation of entitled, unimaginative drones who expected others to perform their thinking for them.

Another blow to the helmet program came when a student, who had graduated and joined the salesforce of a shipping company, was fired and later found hanged in his parents' attic, where he lived. In his suicide note, he blamed all those who had failed to prepare him for a world of autonomy: his teachers, the superintendent, his parents, and even the educational consultant, all mentioned by name: Dr. Folk, Superintendent Gutierrez, Mr. Campbell, Ms. Tucker, Ms. Clark.

That same year, the school performed well on the state tests by every metric except one: growth. On the growth metric, they scored a one out of five. This was because they had achieved perfect scores for five years in a row now, and although five years of perfect scores suggested that the faculty's pedagogical efforts were dependable and effective, they did not suggest growth. The superintendent desired growth, even if growth on the state tests was now mathematically impossible.

By this time, every other public school in the state, and most of the private schools, had also adopted the helmet program. And so, between the increasing public backlash, the lack of growth, and the ubiquity of the helmets, the superintendent decided that new methods were required for their school to maintain its competitive edge. He asked the consultant to come up with something new.

It was again July, and the consultant stood on the auditorium stage tapping the cordless mic against his onyx cufflink to get the faculty's attention. "Education is about passing knowledge from one generation to the next," he told the faculty, who were dreading the possibility that they would be forced to start teaching the old-fashioned way again. "The worst thing that a teacher can do is horde her knowledge like a dragon sitting on a pile of gold."

The consultant unveiled his new plan: a system by which the teachers' brains would be sucked out, chopped up in an industrial blender, and fed to their students in flavored milkshakes. To illustrate, he played a video in which a smiling educator, possibly the same one as in the first video, poked her head inside a cranial drilling machine. A stainless steel bore breached her skull, and her brains were sucked out through a polyethylene pneumatic tube. Her brains were shot down another tube and collected in a blender, where in a matter of seconds they cycloned into a milky gray soup. A robotic arm snatched the blender from its base and placed it beneath a flavor spout, from which chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry flavors could be added. The robotic arm chose strawberry and then returned the blender to its base, where it cycloned into a gray-pink milk. The robotic arm snatched the blender from its base again, emptied the contents into a glass cup, and handed the cup to a bespectacled student. The student took a big chug, wiped his lips with his forearm, and recited the first fifteen digits of Pi.

The faculty gasped. And laughed. Many stood up and walked out of the auditorium. The superintendent swooped onto the stage and grabbed the mic from the consultant. "You are educators. You are heroes. You are our kids' future. Don't turn your backs on them. You are martyrs. You are superheroes. You are champions. They need you." The effect of this speech, which had been delivered to the faculty hundreds of times by now, was soporific. The faculty sat back down.

Ms. Clark, the physics teacher, had not heard this speech hundreds of times. She was sitting with her Faction friends at the back of the auditorium. In five years, her discontent had calcified into impenetrable cynicism. Whatever pride was gained from perfect test scores, it was lost in the long days, the drudgery of the drawn-out period, when her class went silent and spilled lakes of drool in search of inert knowledge. She rarely smiled. She still took pleasure in speaking with her students before and after class and with her colleagues during lunch period, but most often she sat at her desk, emotionally fossilized, measuring time by the rising stack of finished booklets. As she watched the superintendent debase himself before them, she decided that unless she came up with a plan, she would leave education for another career or else retire early. She motioned to The Faction, and they quietly stood and left the auditorium.

An hour later, Ms. Clark buzzed the office from her classroom. She requested that the superintendent and consultant come to her room immediately, for she had a solution that would solve their problems. A few minutes later, the two men stood at her open door, looking depleted in the fluorescent glare like clothes left for too long in direct sunlight.

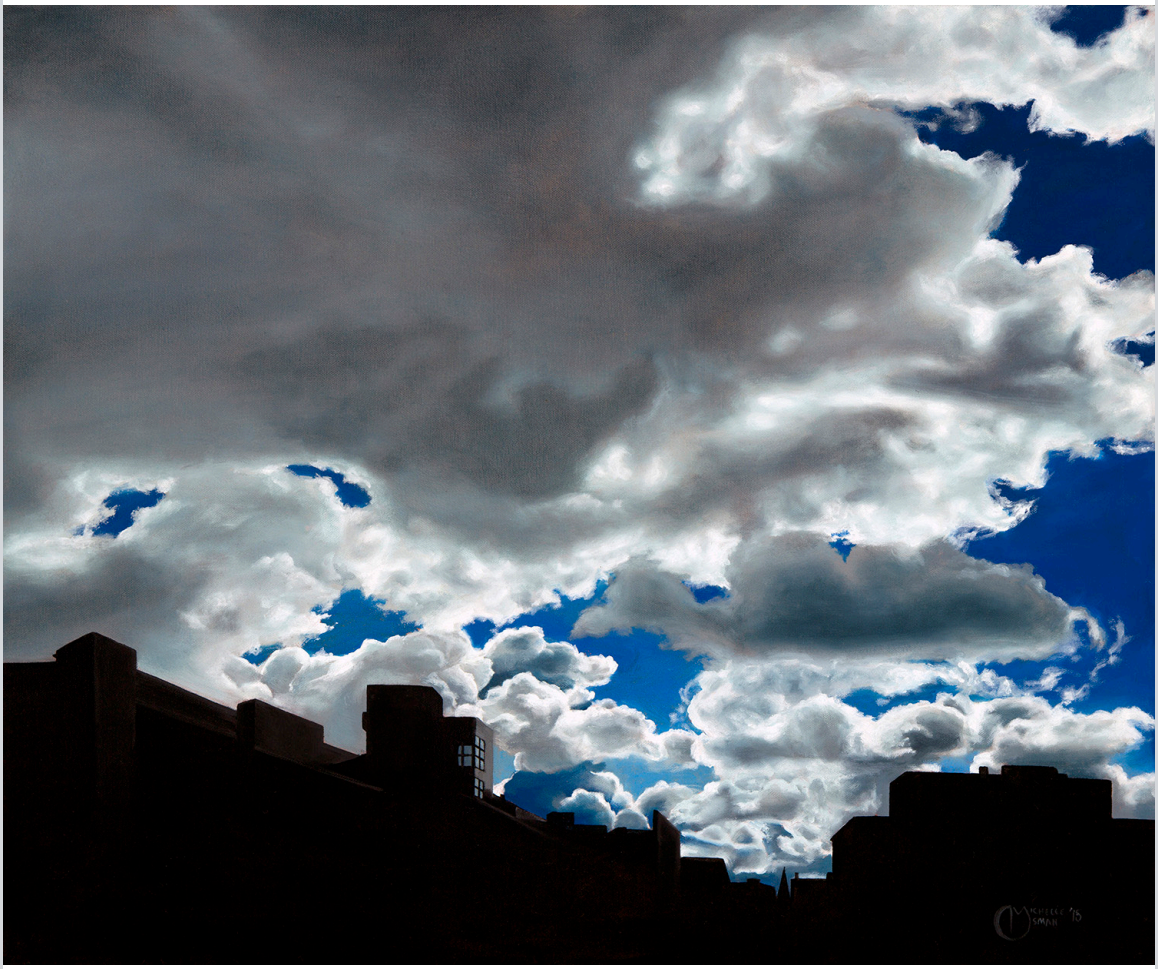
"Come in," Ms. Clark said.

As soon as they had entered her room, The Faction leapt from hiding places behind the cabinets and slammed helmets on the men's heads. The men tried to break free, but The Faction restrained them and snapped the chinstraps into place. Ms. Clark placed her own helmet on her head and flipped The

Learning Switch. A moment later, the consultant and superintendent lay slack-jawed on the floor.

The Faction closed the door, shut off the lights, and leaned the men's bodies against the wall. Ms. Clark sat at her desk, cluttered with booklets, and for the next three hours repeated a single phrase in the angry room of her mind. "I do not belong in education." After three hours of this, she flipped the Learning Switch off. The consultant and the superintendent peered around the classroom, with its dry erase board, posters of earnest encouragement, and rows of desks, like people who had just landed in a slaughterhouse. They fled without a word.

Gardner Mounce is a graduate of Clarion West Writers Workshop and holds an MFA from the University of Florida.



Rain Clouds

Michelle Osman

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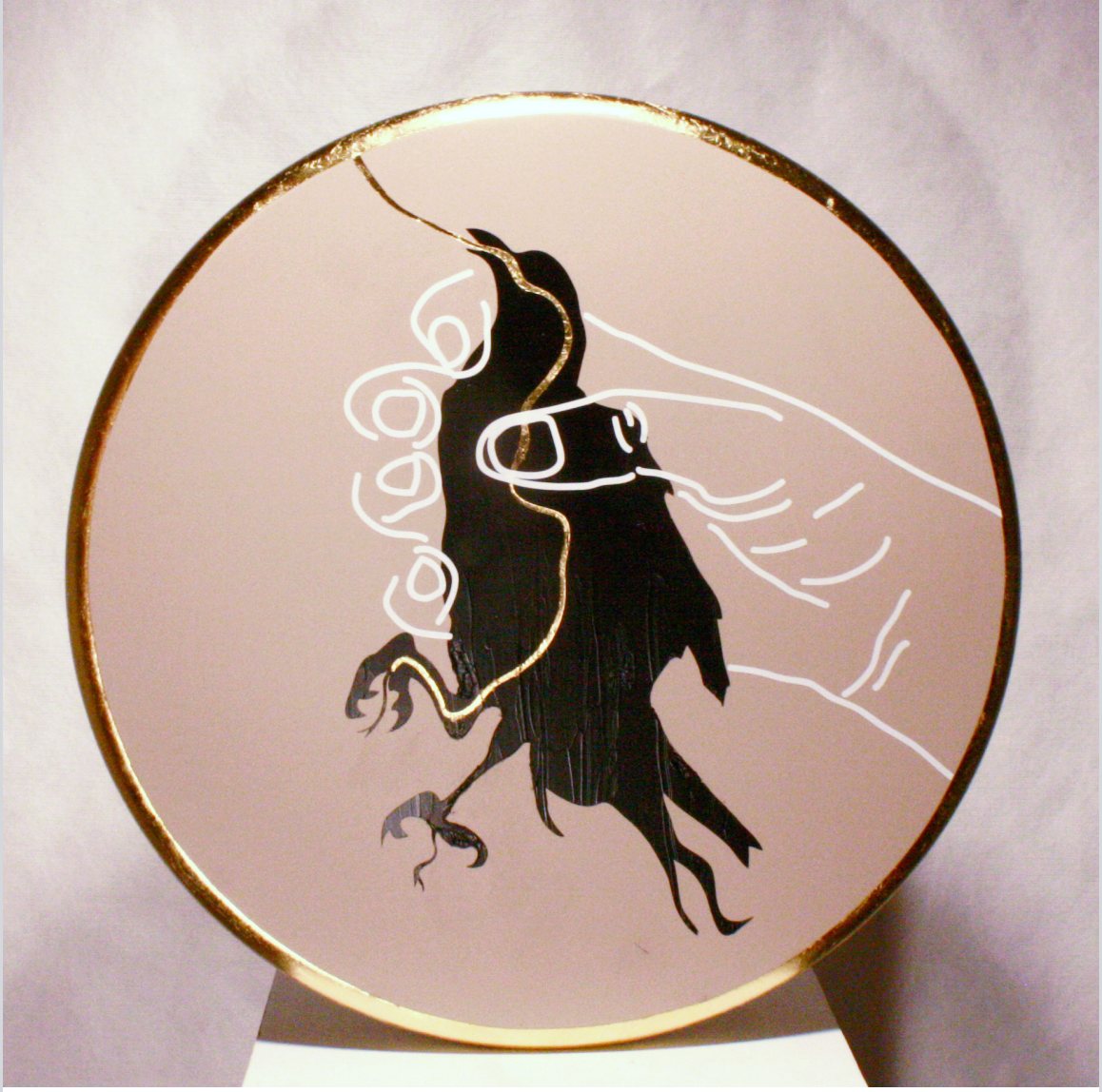
Unquiet

Arlyn LaBelle

My body made of glass shows
scars, a new courage.
Cuts catch the light like fishline,
a rain of them
on the walls of my kitchen. Was
it in my body
or in my birth that I would live
unquiet, a rolling storm
through windows, my skin a
season flashing.
I will call this mine.



Strong is What We Make Each Other

Hannah Bartman

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Cliffs

Zach Beach

Most people venture to peaceful beaches
where calm crystal waters lay at the lap
of soft white sand. But the adventurous
among us head to the cliffs. The improbable
unimaginable, monoliths that tower over the
tumultuous turbulence of an angry ocean
banging its watery head against the rocks.
The certainty of death from the fall,
the tenacity of the ocean, all overcome
by the stern unperturbed plateau, invite
us to a realization: maybe I too can
remain standing tall in the face of life's
pummeling. There is no more need
to jump.

Zach Beach is an internationally renowned yoga teacher, best-selling author, poet, love coach, and founder of The Heart Center love school. Learn more at **zachbeach.com**

Keep Away From People

Kevin Stadt

"DADDY NEEDS SOME ALONE TIME." That's what I said to my ten-year-old son, Nick, that warm spring Saturday when the world fell apart.

"Come on, Dad. Let's go see a movie. I don't feel like staying home. And anyway, I'm too old for a babysitter." Nick tried to give me the puppy dog eyes. My heart ached at how much he looked like a perfect mix of me and his mom, with her dark complexion and my freckles and gangly frame. Guilt knotted in my gut, the guilt of spending time doing something for myself. The guilt of being the parent that lived.

But I left him so I could spend the afternoon working on my stupid novel. I'd only been at a Starbucks in Naperville for an hour, and was brainstorming ways to make my protagonist more likable when the screaming started. I squinted out the front window to see—something—pulling a man up into a tree across the street and a woman on the sidewalk shrieking, her purse and shopping bag on the ground.

I raced to the glass door, my heart pumping waves of warm adrenaline. A six-foot-long millipede with hundreds of spidery, thin legs yanked the man into a tree. Two huge, black pincers in the front balanced out an arched stinger at the other end.

It backed up an elm tree holding the guy by the ankles with its pincers. He reached out toward the woman and shouted, "Karen!" and the thing snapped its stinger into his neck. He tensed up for a second, and then his arms dropped slack.

But he wasn't dead or even unconscious. I guess the sting paralyzed him from the neck down. His eyes got even wider and his shouts became more frantic. One of the other customers had opened the door, so I heard him clearly even over the blood thudding in my ears.

"Holy Christ, Karen, oh my God what the fuck someone help me Jesus don't just stand there—"

The creature dragged him to a high branch. Then, with the guy squealing nonstop, it crawled circles around him while working webbing out of its back end with a pair of extra-long legs near its tail, wrapping him tightly.

People yelled, took pictures and video, called 911, ran to their cars. Karen passed out.

Once he'd been wrapped, the thing started eating. Settled right on top of him and

chewed on his face. Its mandibles ripped into his cheek, his neck, and then worked with extra excitement when it got to his eyes. The guy alive, awake, screaming the whole time.

I sprinted to my car and almost crashed a dozen times on the way home. It was the same story everywhere, the radio said. I called home over and over, but no answer. When I got there, the sitter was gone and Nick shook in a fetal position under the bed.

After that, we found out just how fragile society really was.

The governments tried to hold it together at first, but the news reported that deaths by bugs ran into millions globally every day. They came straight out of the ground anywhere with no warning. Their hard exoskeletons made them tough to kill unless you got a clean headshot—no easy task, given how fast and erratically they moved. Worse still, the sheer numbers of creatures swarming the heavily populated areas utterly overwhelmed the police and military. Away from the cities, people hid, hoarded, and fought. Suddenly one morning, you couldn't get gas anymore. Static replaced the news and the power went off. You went to the store for supplies and found your neighbors shooting each other over Spam.

For a while we tried to hunker down at home. One day we went out in the back yard to pee. We stood back to back near the old oak, talking about what we'd cook over a fire for dinner, when Nick screamed. I hadn't heard anything coming, no warning. By the time I turned around, warm piss going down my leg, a hole in the ground had appeared where Nick had been and the creature had already pulled him halfway up the tree. I drew the revolver I'd taken to wearing at all times, but I knew with the thing zigzagging, I might hit my son. So I steadied myself and tracked them in my sights as the bug went to a high branch and began webbing. After it immobilized him, the creature neared his face and took just a slight pause, as if debating which part to eat first.

I put one of its black eyes in my sights, let out a breath, and squeezed the cold metal trigger. The crack echoed in my ears, the smell of gunpowder filled the air, and the creature dropped to the ground.

That was the only one I've ever succeeded in killing. It took me an hour to get Nick out of the webbing and back down the tree. He didn't talk for two days.

We took off, leaving our home in the suburbs behind to find a safer place, bullshitting ourselves that there was such a thing. At least staying on the move felt like we were doing something, taking action. Talked to a lot of people on the road. Heard plenty of crazy stories and theories. Some say they're aliens. Or ancient animals that were under us all along, dormant in the Earth.

Some say they're from hell, sent to punish us.

I don't know. But I did notice pretty early that every time people grouped up at a supposedly secure military safe zone or whatever, they got swarmed. Then one day Nick and I walked past a high school in West Chicago and saw huge words scrawled in red spray paint on the brick wall.

They never take people who are alone.

We stared at the message, frozen at the thought. Nick squeezed my hand. "That's not true, is it?"

"I don't know. No. Just some crazy guy with paint."

"We won't split up, right?" He looked even more terrified than the day it all began.

I hugged him. "Are you kidding? I need to stick with you so you can protect me. No way I'm ditching my bodyguard."

Nick buried his face in my sweater, his

shoulders jerking with the muffled sobs. I tried to reassure him. "Don't worry, buddy. I won't leave you, ever. No matter what."

But that night, as we camped out on the floor of a Walgreens, in the candy and snack aisle, I couldn't sleep. I listened to Nick's breathing, my ears straining to catch the sounds of digging or scratching beneath us. Could those things really be passing over single individuals? I thought back to all the times I'd seen people taken. Had any of them ever been alone, or were they always snatched from a pair or group?

My stomach turned sour with nausea and dizziness washed over me. I realized they were always with other people, the ones who'd been taken. Every time. Which explained why the governments' responses—groups of soldiers, groups of police, groups of health care workers—had been such catastrophes. Over the next few weeks, the message spread, scrawled on billboards, houses, pavement.

Don't congregate in groups.

Stay away from people!

They won't take you if you're alone.

We had to face reality. At first, I tried to make a deal with Nick, that we'd stay apart but within eyeshot. He'd be alone, but not far away. I could still make food or a campfire and leave it for him, write notes or yell to him.

But he was just a terrified kid. After a few days of separation, I'd always wake up in the morning to find he'd come during the night and curled up next to me.

Then one night, I woke up in the upstairs master bedroom of some random McMansion in Wheaton, my ears pricking up at the sound of a lamp getting knocked over downstairs. My hand grabbed the revolver and my feet took me to the bedroom door. I lay flat and peeked through the railing to see three of them skittering among the living room furniture downstairs, testing the air with their antennae.

We went out the window, the creatures right behind us, and ran until fire burned in our chests. This happened again and again.

That's when I knew. I had to leave him alone. I had to. Right? Is that right?

One night after he fell asleep, I put all our food in the backpack, along with the gun and shells, and left everything next to him. I knelt over him, my hand trembling, a sickness opening in my gut so horrible I have no word to name it, the periphery of my vision blurring and pulsing with my hammering heartbeat.

I wrote a note, drawing the pen heavily across the paper, each letter a quiet nightmare, knowing full well what losing his mother in a car accident three years before had done to him, knowing that this would be in many ways worse.

Nick,

You have to be strong, buddy. Be careful and keep away from people. Please. Just stay alive. That's all that matters. When this is over, I'll wait for you back at our house, okay? We'll see each other again.

Please understand. The only thing I want more than to be with you is to protect you.

I have to do this. You're the whole world to me.

I love you so much. So much.
Dad

I don't know how long I stood there watching him sleep before I left. A pretty long time. It was only then that I fully realized what they'd taken from us. Maybe they really were from hell, or maybe hell had come to Earth. How else can I explain a monster that hunts us in precisely the way that hurts us most, other than as some kind

of divine punishment? Don't most predators favor the lone prey over the herd?

I tried to keep an eye on him from a safe distance, hidden. He woke up in the morning, frantically searched and called for me. I lay in the dirt behind some bushes, clutching the cold binoculars, holding myself to the spot with gritted teeth, hot tears streaming down my face. Nick read the note and tore it up. He fell to his knees, sobbing and punching the ground.

He didn't eat for three days. I started to go to him a dozen times, but I said to myself, do you want to kill your son?

Then one day I couldn't find him. I'd made a fireless camp hidden about three-quarters of a mile away, as usual, watching him with binoculars. He made his own camp under the bridge by a small creek. I watched until he went to sleep, and long after. But when I woke up, he was just gone.

"No, no, no…" I ran to the spot, my breaths coming short and shallow. I screamed his name, spent the rest of the day tracking the creek in both directions, then going in big concentric circles to sweep the area, until I collapsed. No trace. I told myself I'd find him the next day, but I think even then I knew it was a purely functional fiction, a bulwark against losing my mind.

That was almost three years ago. He would be thirteen now. Is thirteen.

Three years of searching. Leaving messages on walls, trees, and signs: *Nick, are you okay? I need to know. I love you. I'm so sorry. Please don't hate me.*

There has never been word back, but I keep going because maybe there will be a day when the monsters are gone and I see Nick again back at the house. I pray that day comes. And that he understands why I did it. Maybe even forgives me.

I've had enough alone time.

Kevin Stadt holds a master's degree in teaching writing and a doctorate in American literature; he currently teaches writing at Hanyang University. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bewildering Stories, Dark Fire Fiction, Enter the Aftermath, Kzine, Lazarus Risen, Outposts of Beyond, Phantaxis, Spring into SciFi, Stupefying Stories, Utopia Science Fiction,* and many more. He lives in South Korea with his wife and sons, who are interdimensional cyborg pirates wanted in a dozen star systems.

Making Landfall

Bruce McRae

Out of the sea mist comes
Hecuba, barking like a dog,
her children dead on the sand.

Through morning's icy fog,
the captain of the Palantine,
all hands lost to the maelstrom.

This cold November dawn,
mist thicker than blood,
like a bad dream rising

and the dead wading ashore,
seawater in their eyes,
soldiers blooding the beach

for the promise of plunder.
The drowned explorers returned
with a lack of bounty.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with over 1,500 poems published internationally in magazines such as *Poetry, Rattle* and *The North American Review.* His books are *The So-Called Sonnets* (Silenced Press); *An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy;* (Cawing Crow Press) and *Like As If* (Pski's Porch), and *Hearsay* (The Poet's Haven).