

T H E

oddtville press



S U M M E R 2 0 1 9

Untitled-Color

C O V E R

April Friges

April Friges (b. 1981, Cleveland, Ohio) is a conceptual artist based in Pittsburgh, PA, whose artwork uses basic photography principles to explore the boundaries and characteristics of photographic materials. Her most recent abstract color prints and sculptures, CMY RGB & Untitled Color, explore the ways in which photography is designed to function and the materiality of the photograph itself. At its core, Friges' work is about photographic paper. This amazing material is usually made invisible by photography; we see an image on the paper, but never the fiber, plastic, silver, dye and gelatin that make the paper itself.

The images are not from a camera; Friges works in the darkroom with only photosensitive paper and light to develop a complex and imaginary language with the mediums in exploration. Friges strives for colors in their purest form. She is inspired by the subtractive primary colors; cyan, magenta, and yellow, which are used in the darkroom to create the additive primary colors; red, green and blue. In total, these colors are the bases of all color photography.

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

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S T A F F

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D I S C L A I M E R

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

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Thrashing

Tom Franken

“You would make a good therapist!”

I have thought of it. You think of everything during twenty-two years and eleven months of not knowing what to do when you finally grow up.

I could fit the stereotype. Sweater-clad, pen resting against chin, hour-long nodding, actually making a difference in someone’s life.

But I could never.

I could never give advice like I wasn’t living on the other side of an aquarium, submerged and thrashing against the glass while pretending to breathe easy.

I could never give advice when I am surrounded by piles of laundry, growing and expanding like my waistline and unread group messages and shame.

I could never give advice while saying no to the bar and the field and fun, but say yes to sitting in silence, room illuminated only by that ominous screen: “Are You Still Watching?”

Yet I know that I can continue to love and be loved, to improve and lose and gain. There is a reason why I am here, why I bear this burden.

I could simply collapse under the weight of the water, let the tides take me where they may.

But I could never.

Tom Franken is a graduate of Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. He is the co-founder of *bone&marrow*, an upcoming online literary magazine. His work has appeared in, or is forthcoming in *Penguin Review*, *Havik*, *Hare in Flight*, *The Magnolia Review*, *Dirty Girls Magazine*, *Volney Road Review*, and *Transcend*. You can follow his ramblings and memes on Twitter and Instagram [@TomFranken21](#)



Last Time I Dreamed

Hollie Savage

Hollie Savage is a photographer from the scenic Puget Sound region of Western Washington. Hollie is a mother of three who manages a family business

The Podge Situation

Jonathan Gotsick

FOR THE RECORD, whatever that may be:

Following the adjournment of the August 2012 meeting of the Pumpkinberry Heights Neighborhood Association, I was summoned into an antechamber to attend an emergency meeting of the Association's Executive Council. As per usual custom, the meeting took place in the home of Gwen and Fred Harlish, and the antechamber into which I was summoned was actually an expansive and well-appointed screened-in porch, complete with padded lawn furniture, portable Bar-Kart, and Hawaiian-style overhead fans. Present at this meeting were Association President Gwen Harlish, Vice President Fred Harlish, Secretary-Treasurer Mona Thompson, Sergeant-at-Arms Camden J. Wofford, and myself, journalist/detective Everett Snee. The reason I'd been summoned, and in fact the reason for the emergency meeting itself, was to discuss what Mrs. Harlish cryptically referred to as "the Podge situation."

I would soon learn that the situation had only been a situation for twenty-four hours. Prior to that, it had simply been a thing—"the Podge thing." And before that, it had simply been "Podge," which was the last name of Neville Quintilius (N.Q.) Podge, a previous resident of Pumpkinberry Heights and something of a thorn in the side of the Executive

Council. I'd contacted Mrs. Harlish after receiving a quite interesting letter from Mr. Podge, who had enjoyed my investigative piece on counterfeit soup that had appeared in the *Underbelly Review* in 2008, prior to that fine publication's demise. In the letter, Mr. Podge had made several allegations, as well as at least a few statements that could reasonably be construed as threats, and I was keen to hear the Association's side of the story. After hearing some choice excerpts of the letter over the phone, Mrs. Harlish suggested that we meet at my earliest convenience. I informed Mrs. Harlish that I was a journalist/detective, and therefore, my earliest convenience was now.

Twenty-four hours later—obviously due to the council's delay, not mine—I found myself sitting in the aforementioned screened-in porch. On my person I had the usual accouterments of my trade: pen-and-paper, concealed weapon, and a half-full flask of Bubble Scotch, along with the letter from N.Q. Podge. Mrs. Harlish offered me a beverage, (which I refused out of habit, having once been roofied and blister-packed while working as a cub reporter for the now-defunct *Cleveland Whistler*), while the rest of the group sipped Arnold Palmers through bendable straws. Miss Thompson had compiled a dossier on Podge,

and she distributed them for review.

"This guy's from the fringe," Fred Harlish said. "He's not like you or me."

I'd been warned by Mrs. Harlish ahead of time that her husband had taken a quasi-professional interest in the Podge situation. He was an accountant, which he fancied was a lot like being a detective, and he also watched television crime procedurals quite often, so he had, he liked to say, a clue about clues. Mona Thompson, she predicted, would go along with the rest of the group almost to a fault, and Camden Wofford, a former high-ranking diplomat, would almost certainly suggest a course of action involving violence.

I, too, was given a copy of the dossier, but I'd done my own research on Podge already and was unlikely to discover anything new. "Let me speed up the curve on Podge here," I said. "Miss Thompson, I hope I'm not stepping on any toes."

"No, no. Not at all."

Mona—I was already calling her that in my head—was rapidly endearing herself to me with her agreeable nature, sturdy hips, and elegantly frosted, caramel swirl hair. Her glasses could've been cleaner, but I like a little dirt. I go for a certain kind of wildcat, it's true.

"Podge. Neville Quintilius," I began.

"Sometimes goes by the initials N.Q. Age 44. Born in Lyford-upon-Gilth, England, raised a few miles away in West Blarf, population 539. Father was what we would call a mailman; mother made a fortune in ornamental pans. No siblings. Educated at Eton and Oxford, but mostly kept to himself. Apprenticed in costumes/makeup and props/lighting departments at the Theatre Guild in London, was terminated from employment for reasons unknown. Began to exhibit increasingly bizarre behavior after the death of his parents in a twenty-eight balloon pileup at the Isle of Wight's Hot Air

Jam! in 1993. Traveled extensively in Europe, mostly on foot, occasionally on a Segway; emigrated to the United States in 2007. Relocated to Pumpkinberry Heights from Boca Raton a year and a half ago. Enjoys croquet, topiary, Sudoku, and culinary arts. Has significant cash and trust fund holdings both here and abroad. I.Q. of 193—what MENSA unofficially calls a Super Duper Genius. Went off the grid completely circa July 4th of last year."

I pulled out my flask and took a quick pull of my Bubble Scotch. "That about cover it?" I said.

"If that isn't the fringe, I don't know what is," Fred Harlish said.

"I'm not here to make judgments, Mr. Harlish. I'm here to find out what the hell's going on with Podge, and if I'm lucky maybe make a few new friends."

Mona smiled, and I was tempted to give her a wink.

"Okay then, why don't we go ahead and move on to the letter," Mrs. Harlish said. "It really is the crux of the matter here. Normally, Mona would provide copies for all of us to read, but at Mr. Snee's request, the letter will instead be read orally. By Mr. Snee."

"I don't trust copiers," I said. "Information...gets out, if you know what I mean."

Fred Harlish nodded. "I'm with you on that, Mr. Snee. Better to minimize the paper trail."

"That's right. And a little less work for Miss Thompson."

"You can call me Mona. We're very informal here."

"We'll also dispense with taking minutes," Mrs. Harlish said, "if everyone agrees."

Mona nodded.

Wofford hadn't said a word, but I wasn't concerned. A lot of people don't like journalist/detectives, and based on Podge's letter, the

man was facing plenty of exposure. We'd tango soon enough. Of that I was sure.

I pulled out Podge's letter, which was written out longhand in an elegant cursive script, and I began to read:

To whom it may concern:

At some point in the future, once I am fully recovered from my injuries, I will return to Pumpkinberry Heights. It might be after midnight, under cover of darkness, or it might be precisely at the magic hour when the fireflies are just beginning to wink and frolic in the late summer dusk. I might be driving a panel truck or a pace car or a semi-tractor trailer, or maybe I'll simply plummet from the clouds above. But I will return to Pumpkinberry Heights, and when I do, woe—oh woe!—unto those miserable spores who banished me.

"Spores?" Wofford huffed. "Spores?"

"It gets better," I said.

Pumpkinberry Heights was to be my Valhalla, you see, a place to retire to, to conduct my studies and pursue my diversions in private, be free of the madness of the city. Arriving at 402 Spaghetti Squash Lane, a quaint Victorian home I would soon dub Podgeberry, I was home.

My arrival in the cul-de-sac, so much a cause for celebration in my own view, occasioned little fanfare from my fellow sac-dwellers. In fact, it was greeted with a veritable tumult of indifference, not a sousaphone in sight. Sprinklers sprinkled, birds nibbled at feeders, and closed doors remained closed. As I surveyed my suburban future, I was seized by a kind of bittersweet melancholy, but the sensation dissipated quickly when I looked across the street and noticed a curious feline looking directly at me from behind a large picture window.

"Across the street? Who's he talking about?" Wofford said.

"The Dorlands. Larvis and Becky."

"This is old news, Gwen. We're wasting our time."

"Please, Camden, just please listen."

The feline's triangular, mottled head was tilted slightly sideways, as if it was considering my lineaments or sanity, and as we contemplated one another a gentle breeze wafted through the azaleas and forget-me-nots of Spaghetti Squash Lane, and a set of unseen wind chimes clinked out a dolorous, untitled tone-poem.

"That really sounds lovely."

"Mona, please," Gwen Harlish chided.

"Yes, I'm sorry. Do go on, Mr. Sneer."

"Everett," I said.

Mona smiled. "Everett."

When the breeze subsided, the flowers resumed their static poses and the tone poem concluded, and the cat jumped down from the window and out of view.

Then, one airy Saturday morning some time thereafter, I ventured away from Podgeberry to attend a garage sale several streets over on Watercress Way. I'd seen a notice in the weekly PennyPincher mailing, and feeling as though Podgeberry could benefit from a fresh infusion of felts and baubles, I put on my loafers and went. I arrived a few minutes before eight, and a moment later an elderly woman sporting a crew cut came out the front door, an unlit cigarette dangling from her lips. She wore sunglasses, a black visor, and a purple t-shirt with the words BALL BUSTER written on the front—

"Bev Mumford," Mona and the Harlish's said in unison.

—and as she stood facing me like a gunfighter, I realized I was the only customer there.

"I said no early birds," she offered in greeting.

"No early birds?"

"No early birds," she repeated, removing her sunglasses. "That's the policy."

"I'm N.Q. Podge," I said. "A bit new to the neighborhood."

The woman squinted as she lit her cigarette. "You got money?"

"How much for this?" I said, pointing to a gravy boat missing its handle.

"Dollar," the woman said, tough as tree bark.

"Would you take fifty cents?"

"Sold."

I pulled two quarters from my change purse, paid her, and continued to browse over her goods. For fourteen dollars I secured the gravy boat, a nail-grooming kit, and a mechanical fish that the woman assured me would sing a holiday song if I put batteries in it and mounted it on a wall. "Nice doing business with you, Podge," the woman said. "And your nasty little friend."

I looked down, and there, nuzzling my feet, as if she'd found a scratching post or divine protector, was the feline I'd seen in the window several weeks prior. I knelt to pet the beast, and as she gazed at me with her strange, beseeching eyes, we formed an immediate, unbreakable bond. "I'll call you Midge," I said. "Midge Klein. And perhaps we'll meet again."

As I stood to depart, I found myself standing face to face with a man and a woman with sour countenances and questionable style. One too skinny and the other too fat, they stood directly in my path, and Midge Klein hissed madly.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait just a second here, buddy," the man said. "Where the hell you think you're going with that cat?"

His companion spoke next, to the yard-seller. "I thought you said no early birds, Bev. What the hell?"

The yardseller lit another cigarette. "Cry me a river."

"I asked you a question, buddy," the man said.

"I'm going home, to 402 Spaghetti Squash Lane. If Midge Klein should come along, I have no objection."

The man squinted his eyes and glared at me. Gears were turning slowly inside his brain, but their power source was clearly overtaxed. "402 Spaghetti Squash Lane? That's right across the street from us."

"Then we're neighbors," I said, extending a hand. "My name is Neville Podge."

"Goddamn it, Larvis. She said no early birds. I wanna see what he's got."

"He got a soup boat and nail clippers and one of those singing fish," the yardseller declared. "Drove a hard bargain, too."

The man leveled his gaze at me, such as he could. "You don't wanna mess with Larvis Dorland," he declared. "Or my woman or my cat."

"Indeed I do not," I replied. "Midge must've followed me, and it seems we've developed a rapport."

"That's our goddamn cat," Dorland growled. "And his name ain't Midge. It's Scratchoff."

I offered Dorland an insincere smile and knelt to give Midge Klein a parting pet. Immediately, Dorland threw what appeared be a burlap sack over Midge, grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, and quickly forced her inside. She yowled and hissed mightily, but alas, there was little I could do.

"Next time could be you," Dorland offered with a malevolent glare. He and his partner belched away to their car, and disgusted and distraught, I soon trudged home.

"The Dorlands are exactly what happens when new money is allowed to move into the neighborhood," Gwen Harlish declared. "We really need to revisit our application process."

Wofford stood up. "Tell me again, Gwen,

why are we here? The Podge thing is over and done.”

“Check this out, Mr. Wofford,” I said, and then resumed reading.

Later that evening, I was paid a visit by the Community Association’s resident bilge-breather, Camden Wofford. “Mr. Podge,” he said. “I’m Camden Wofford, from the Neighborhood Association. I understand there was some trouble with the Dorlands. Care to tell me about that?”

You can perhaps imagine my incredulity at this introduction and query. “Trouble with the Dorlands,” I said. “Of what nature?”

“Something about kidnapping their cat.”

“The cat is missing?”

“Was missing earlier, Mr. Podge. Mr. Dorland contends that the cat was missing and that he found it with you.”

“Perhaps you should ask the cat what happened, then.”

“I’m generally a patient man, Mr. Podge,” Wofford replied, “but I do have my limits. And I’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Well played, Camden!” Mr. Harlish interjected. “Regardless of the outcome, well played!”

Our paths crossed again the very next week, as I’m sure the Association’s Executive Council will recall. The occasion was the Pumpkinberry Heights July 4th Barbeque Extravaganza, held in the form of a block party on Spaghetti Squash Lane. In attendance amidst the banners and bunting was virtually the whole of Pumpkinberry Heights. Beverages were drunk, sizzling meats devoured. At nightfall fireworks blazed hot and jingoistic, and shortly after the show’s crescendo and finale, the crowd’s attention turned itself squarely on me.

Midge Klein and I were sitting on my porch, watching the horde disperse after the final pyrotechnic had dimmed. The street was in sham-

bles. The acrid scent of sulfur hung in the air. And then a voice rang out, “That’s our cat! That English fuck’s got our cat!” I spied Larvis Dorland advancing, his Neanderthal brow pointed directly at me. A milling crowd coalesced and followed his lead.

Midge Klein and I did not linger to tell our side of the story. We retreated inside Podgeberry, and I locked the front door. Moments later a thunderous pounding ensued, and with the door buckling, we fled to the basement and I locked that door, too. We were trapped, but a vantage point presented itself in the form of a ground-level window at the underground rear of the house. I lifted Midge to the sill, and together we watched a mob circle. We saw whiffle bats and sparklers. Uncle Sam approached on stilts.

The beating at the front door grew louder and still louder. Glass smashed above us, and Podgeberry was breached. “We’ll meet again, Midge Klein, in this life or another,” I said, and then I opened the tiny basement window and pushed out its screen. Midge fled headlong toward the woods at the edge of the yard. The whiffling flank followed, but she quickly bounded free.

I looked up from the letter, folded it and replaced it in my jacket pocket.

“That’s it?” Wofford said.

“More or less,” I replied.

Wofford turned to Gwen Harlish. “You called an emergency meeting for this, Gwen? For that?”

“The letter continues, does it not, Mr. Snee?”

“It does,” I said, “but the rest of it, as I suggested over the phone, regards information of a particularly sensitive nature. It’s essentially a blackmail document. Mr. Podge demands your resignations and immediate expulsion from Pumpkinberry Heights or he says he’ll be forced to act.”

“Act? What the hell does that mean?” Wofford said.

“It means he’ll release extensive documentation and surveillance material relating to the Harlish’s murder of an undocumented Panamanian maid—”

“The man’s insane!” Fred Harlish protested. “Silvia was Guatemalan!”

“—as well as materials pertaining to sexual acts perpetrated against various domestic animals by Larvis Dorland, Becky Dorland, and one Camden J. Wofford.”

Wofford took a wild swing at me; I knew exactly when it would come and I knocked him out cold. He lay bleeding on the marbled stone floor. Fred Harlish was sweaty

and clammy, mumbling gibberish, possibly having a stroke. Gwen Harlish’s thirty-year reign as president of the Pumpkinberry Heights Neighborhood Association was coming to an abrupt and ignominious end, and she knew it. Wrapped around her husband, she groped for anything that seemed like justice.

“What about her?” she screamed, nodding at Mona. “She’s not even a woman!”

I took out my flask, took a nice pull on my Bubble Scotch, and smiled at Mona, who at that moment I think found me pretty darn attractive.

“Mr. Podge,” I said, “has no issue with Miss Thompson at this time.”

Jonathan Gotsick is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh’s MFA program, and he currently teaches writing in California. His fiction has appeared in *The Drum Literary Magazine*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *The Adirondack Review*, and elsewhere. He’s currently working on a novel set in the American south, where he grew up.



Untitled-Color

April Friges

Certainly, There Must be More

James Lynch

When the sun pushes the fog to the horizon,
Revealing with her beams the icy chill of
The crystallized earth, which, in its perfection,
Awaits a presence to dance away its uniformity
In a series of coordinated crunches,
I would expect such a rise from bed
To bring life to my veins, a stretch
And a yawn characteristic
Of a passionate man.

But with each passing arcsecond,
The sun frowns at the blanketed turf below,
As my hat and gloves have not been gifted
To a frozen, tightly-packed man. His pipe is
Smokeless, his wooden fingers frostbitten.

The ground weeps, washing away
Any hope for renewal, the salty streams
Pooling gently around the soles of my boots
As I rush past clogged drains. A misstep draws
A splash and a curse, and I am reminded
That the scribbled list of things that bring me joy
Has lost one of its few inky members.

Rest in peace, my winter's delight.
Perhaps one day I will craft a frigid sphere
Between the palms of my hands
And recall how I once scrambled out of bed
And ignored the smell of eggs to do the very same
With a Christmas Eve itch and an architectural eye.

And perhaps on this day I will remember with a smile,
Not with a snow-blinded sense of self,
But with the relief that there is indeed a part of me
That has survived the march of time.

Until then, I splish and splash
On a familiar hike to oblivion,
Taking not one second to play in the snow

Or to wonder where my desire even went.
And I search. Because certainly, there must be more.

James Lynch is an aspiring astronomer currently pursuing a degree in physics and mathematics from the University of Pennsylvania. He believes there is more to life than atoms and galaxies.

How to Break an Alien's Spirit

Trisha Ridinger McKee

MIST WAS NOT SURE who first guessed that she was an alien. It could have been Tommy during recess, or maybe it was Shelby during Reading. She did remember that when Ms. Miller left the classroom briefly, Walton had taken that time to insist it was the only explanation.

"She doesn't know how to use a computer. She doesn't even know what a cell phone is. So creepy. And look at her cheekbones—how sharp they are. They stick out. And she's got those large eyes. Hey alien girl, where are you from?"

There was a silence filled with only the scooting of a chair and some breathing before Mist dropped her head and answered honestly, "I don't know."

"Right. And where is your mom again?"

Following what she had been told by her aunt, Mist pointed upwards, and the kids gasped, some laughed. One boy in the back called out, "No freakin' way."

And so it began. Every move she made and every answer she gave fueled their fiery beliefs that an alien was among them.

"Hey, Misty—"

"It's Mist," she corrected, which drew more laughs from the group of boys in front of her.

"Oh my God," Paul exclaimed, his arm outstretched and finger-pointing. "Even the name is an alien name. Listen, did you watch any cartoons last night?"

"What are cartoons?"

More laughter. They then began the game of tossing out names of movies and television shows, and each time they cried out in amused shock when she shook her head. She had never even seen a television until recently, at least not that she could remember.

Mist knew that the kids were laughing at her, but she relished the attention. She had never been around kids her age—actually, she had never been around kids, period. So to have this attention lavished on her, Mist did not particularly care if it was negative or not.

"Wait a minute," Liz interrupted another debate on Mist's alien roots. "If she were truly an alien... wouldn't she know more things? Aliens are smart. They know technology. I mean, come on... spaceships!"

Terry considered this before he shrugged. "Maybe she's a different kind of alien. The dumb kind."

"I'm not dumb!" Mist snapped, and the group drew back. Rarely did she speak, and never did she use a voice above a whisper. But

this... she would not tolerate. They could call her an alien; they could call her weird; they could even call her ugly. But they could not call her dumb. She was intelligent. That was her one shining quality. It was the one thing she had. To have never been in a school before and never truly been taught anything and still place with her age group after a little work was quite a feat. Even she knew that. The work, her intelligence was something they could not take from her.

At lunchtime, Mist usually sat by herself unless the kids wanted some entertainment. Sometimes they were too busy asking her if she knew who the President was or who sang what song on the radio to even remember to eat. But she always remembered.

"Can I sit here?" A boy, Liam, set his tray down. She paused, her mouth full, her hand frozen in mid-air with the remaining sandwich. After chewing and swallowing, she nodded.

"You are so skinny. But you eat a lot. Didn't you eat before?"

And she knew he wanted to know if it was because she was an alien. She wished she could answer him, but she did not know. The past life, before being here, was a blur. Mist did not know what she was or how she got to this point. There were dark flashes, brief recollections, just enough to let her know it had not been good, and it scared her enough that she stopped trying to remember.

When he was met with silence, Liam shrugged. "That's okay. You look better than you did when you first got here. You could barely stand, and you were really thin." The young boy with the shaggy dark hair studied her with an intensity beyond his years. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

And Mist was not sure why he was apologizing. She was not used to someone being so kind, and immediately she was on guard. "I

don't have anything to tell you. I don't know what I am."

"That's okay," he assured her softly, leaning in so others around them did not hear. "I like you whether you're an alien or not. And I know you're smart. That Terry doesn't even know his state capitals, and you know every single one. I think that's cool."

She kept her gaze down, but her mouth curved up. It was such a new action that it felt weird, but then her face tingled, and her smile widened even more. The first day she arrived, she had noticed Liam with his soft brown eyes and wide grin. He was quieter than the other boys, and while he had shared the fascination with her origins, he had not harassed her about it. She had caught him watching her several times.

"If you want to find out if you are an alien, maybe I can help you."

Mist's head snapped up. "Really? How?"

"I'm not sure, but maybe just see if you have alien powers. If you can remember anything... I mean, if you want. Because like I said, it doesn't matter to me. I like you no matter what. But I've seen a lot of alien movies, and I've read some things... so I know more than anyone else here."

Mist glanced around the cafeteria, always amazed at the carefree ways of the other kids. They did not walk around like they had something plaguing them, like there was a heaviness that was familiar but not known. They shouted out greetings, laughed and chased each other, and charged through the day like they belonged. These kids knew who they were. Even at her young age, Mist envied that.

Her attention returned to Liam, whose persistent gaze confused her. The girls were prancing around with confident smiles, their shoulders tanned and rounded. Mist glanced down at her own body, her shoulder bones

looking like they would cut through her translucent skin. She was all severe dips and sharp angles. So why was this boy acting as if she was more than just a shadow of a human?

Mist felt her cheeks grow warm, and she looked away. Liam shrugged again. "I mean, do you wanna find out?"

She nodded, her gaze still cast aside, too afraid of that feeling, that buzzing inside of her, reminding her that she was very much alive. It filled her with unease because her short life had been void of such electricity.

"Then we can start with the first test." He scooted his chair closer to the table and leaned forward, his voice in a low whisper. "Aliens have powers. They can do things...with their minds. So..." He picked up his spoon and held it in front of her. "Use your mind and try to bend this spoon. Think about it bending... but just the spoon. Try not to hurt my hand." He waited, his tongue peeking out of the corner of his mouth as he watched her focus. "Anything?"

"I mean... I am thinking. Really hard. Trying to bend it." She furrowed her brow and clenched her fists, trying to send the thoughts to the spoon. "Do you feel it moving at all?"

He sighed. "No. But that's okay. You might just be a young alien that doesn't have those powers yet." Liam put the spoon down and gave her a small smile and shrug. "We'll keep trying. You know, you're on my bus. I think you live on my street. After school, we can work on this some more."

At recess, the kids asked her some more questions about what she did and didn't know, but then they were anxious to start a game of kickball.

"Hey, no aliens!" Terry yelled, pointing at Mist. The other kids started chanting, "No aliens," and Mist turned to walk away, as she did most days.

"Let her play!"

She turned as Liam ran into the middle of the field, his fists clenched at his sides. "She's nice, and even if she is an alien, she doesn't want to hurt anyone. Just let her play kickball with us."

"Whatever. I don't care," Terry yelled back. "Just don't put her on my team."

It was the first time the kids had agreed to let Mist play, but she whispered to Liam that she did not know how. He was patient, despite the other kids' teasing him for befriending an alien. He never lost focus as he taught her how to kick the ball, even as the other children made fun of her when she fell to the ground.

By the end of recess, the kids had grown bored of teasing her, as she did not react. She simply kept her attention on Liam, watching how he played and mimicking his actions. She could barely run, as it seemed she was moving through wet sand, but she managed to get to the second base before being whipped with the ball. Liam chased down the boy that had thrown it at her, but she was just happy she had gotten that far.

"How was school today? What did you learn?" Her Aunt Shirley asked curtly, grabbing her bookbag from her and rummaging through it.

Mist never broke eye contact. Her aunt hated when she looked down at the floor. Somehow she knew it was different than what she was used to. Although she could not remember details, Mist recognized familiar feelings, senses. Eye contact evoked fear. "It was good. We are starting to learn our Times Tables." As her aunt nodded, she felt brave enough to continue, "The kids keep getting my name wrong. They call me Misty. I keep telling them it's Mist-"

"Oh, for goodness sake!" Aunt Shirley brushed her flat gray hair out of her face. "Do not call attention to yourself! Just let them call

you Misty. Your dad's sense of humor- I swear. Just like him to leave us in this mess as well as dealing with that stupid name..."

The outburst almost silenced Mist completely, but feeling a surge of bravery as she remembered how brave Liam had been at recess in sticking up for her, she asked, "Aunt Shirley, what's an alien?"

By now the older woman was shuffling canned goods on the counter, getting ready to start supper. "Something weird. Not from here." She waved in the air, not even turning toward her. "Now go. Get."

Mist's doubts were obliterated with her aunt's answer. Because if she was anything, Mist was weird. And of course, she was not from here. There were not necessarily memories, only flashes and blurs. But even from those brief clues, she knew she was not from here.

While her aunt was distracted with cooking, Mist went outside and found Liam at the edge of the yard, waiting. "I think I am an alien," she blurted out, near tears.

After she told him about her aunt's answers, he bent forward to catch her gaze. "That's okay. Mist, it's okay if you are. I'm still your friend. We don't have to tell anyone else. The kids at school. Because you're learning fast. You already know how to sign on to the computer at the library and look up books."

"But I'm still not sure what I am."

They walked towards the back of the house, out of sight from any prying eyes. Liam then suggested, "Let's go through the list. The signs that you are an alien. The signs that you're not. So first of all, we don't know where you were before. That's kinda alien. And when you first came, you really looked like one. Your skin was this grayish color, and you walked sort of stooped over. So maybe you are becoming human now that you're here."

By the time Mist heard her aunt calling for her, she was feeling better. And just before she ran toward the house, Liam stopped her and whispered, "I won't let any aliens hurt you. Okay? I won't let them take you. So don't worry."

The kids were beginning to grow bored with asking Mist questions, and they no longer tried to discourage her from joining in at recess. They did not welcome her with open arms, but there were fewer questions, less interest in her past identity. A lot of that had to do with Liam. He was well-liked among the kids, so the fact that he vouched for her meant a lot.

It was a chilly, rainy day, so recess was held indoors. The kids were taken to the gym, and a game of dodgeball was started. This game terrified Mist as the balls were flying all around. The kids soon learned she was a weak spot and targeted her. Liam placed himself in front of her, trying his best to catch and dodge all while ensuring she was not hurt. But it was not long before they both were out of the game.

They stood on the sidelines, Liam standing close to Mist, and Mist trying to stop the trembling coursing through her body. This was reminding her of something. The fear, the hiding, it was bringing back a snippet of a memory, a trace of darkness. As she wiped away a tear, Liam grabbed her hand.

"Does your aunt know anything? Can she tell you something?"

"She doesn't talk much about it. She gets upset." Mist paused, not sure if she should divulge anymore, but Liam was watching and waiting, so she added, "Aunt Shirley does say that everything that happened was my fault. I don't know what happened. I'm not sure what I did. But she says that what I went through was all my doing."

Before she could say anything else, Mist noticed the gym teacher lingering nearby, and by the wide-eyed look, she had heard the entire conversation. It upset Mist because she was never sure what she should say and what was not to ever be spoken. She knew there were questions that upset her aunt, and she learned to ask as few things as possible. Her aunt fed her, got her clothes, and ensured she had her homework done, but she never smiled or reassured her after any nightmares. She merely turned on her light and suggested Mist change sleeping positions to shift her thoughts away from negativity. There were no hugs or affectionate words. Sometimes Mist saw parents show up at the end of the school day, hugging their children and exclaiming how much they missed them, even though it had only been several hours. She watched as the parents beamed, taking their child's hand and leading them out, leading them home. And her eyes stung and throat closed up.

But Mist somehow understood that her situation had improved. Things were better. She somehow knew she was safer. Still, the sight of the parents with their kids struck some kind of chord. She wondered what that was like and why some kids had that and she did not. She wondered what it felt like to be so loved and adored. And would these grown-ups still love their kids if their kids were aliens? Is that why she was unloved?

On the bus ride home, Liam sensed her melancholy mood and mistakenly assumed it was due to her alien genetics. "Mist, listen, it doesn't matter. Okay? You beat Patty at hopscotch. You got to home base when we played kickball. You're becoming human."

His words, his support cheered her. He waited to get off the bus at her stop. It had stopped raining, and the sun peeked out. As the bus drove away, Mist stared up at the sky

and then grabbed Liam's arm. "Liam! What is that?"

He looked up. "That's a rainbow. You've never seen a rainbow before?"

"No!" She breathed, a giggle falling from her mouth. "That's beautiful. That is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Liam grabbed her and pulled her close, his arms wrapping around her in a tight hug. "I think you're beautiful," he whispered.

Before Mist could respond, her aunt was storming out of the house, stomping down the stairs. "What are you doing? Mist, you get in this damn house right now! You get the hell away from that boy, you hear me? Your daddy was crazy, but he was right about one thing. You're no good. Damn piece of trash standing out here with a boy, wrapped limbs and all."

Mist had jumped away from Liam as soon as her aunt started screaming, but now she looked at him, and she saw the fear. She saw the shame and disgust, and she noticed how he was stepping back, gradually preparing for escape.

And it hit her. This beautiful boy was willing to accept her as an alien. But this... this was too much. This he could not handle. And as he glanced at her as if he did not know her, Mist knew he would never speak to her again. She realized before he turned and ran that no matter what happened to her, he would keep his distance.

"Your damn nose teacher called me and told me what you've been saying at school. Telling them all about how hard you have it. Putting words in my mouth." She had a hold of Mist's arm and dragged her into the house. Mist did not put up much of a fight. She instinctively knew it would do no good. "Everyone wants to blame your father. Say he was horrible. But I think he had to do what he had to do. I think you forced him to take such drastic

measures. Sure, the man is an idiot and would have gone to jail no matter what. And who names their kid Mist for mistake? Just dumb. But you—I can't handle you the normal way.”

She continued pulling Mist up the stairs and then down the hall to the shut door that Mist had never opened. Now her aunt dug a key out of her pocket and unlocked it. The room was dark and cold and in the corner was a large dog kennel.

“You know what to do.”

And suddenly it all came to Mist. Living in the kennel. Her dad screaming. Hitting. Her

bones cramped and sore, her voice cracking from lack of use. The books being her only escape. Reading and learning. And then her father being arrested and the authorities finding her there.

“I'll tell the school you are being homeschooled. Your dad got sloppy and got caught. Damn nosey officials. I know how to play the system. I tried to do things right by you, Mist. I tried. But you're just a lost cause.”

And as Mist dutifully entered the kennel, her first thought was that she wished she were an alien.

Trisha Ridinger McKee resides in a Mayberry-like town in Pennsylvania with her weary hubby, hippie daughter, and ferocious bulldogs. She enjoys road trips, energy drinks, and acquiring hobbies for which she already has no time. Her work has been or will be shown in *Tablet Magazine*, *Black Petals*, *Night to Dawn Magazine*, and has won the Story of the Month Award in *Fifty Word Stories*.



The Dirigible Woman

Matthew Stokes & Sophia Titterton

Matthew Stokes is a metalwork and leather artist in Bend, Oregon. Sophia Titterton is a painter who runs a custom crush winery in Walla Walla, WA. Matthew and Sophia met on that rare sunny day in the middle of the Walla Walla winter fog. At the time, Sophia was working on oil paintings that paired abstraction and figure painting together, but never fully achieving the effect she was seeking. On the flip side, Matthew was creating masterful rusted metal backgrounds, but looking for something more. It really was a perfect match. Together, they have shown these unique pieces in multiple exhibitions and local retail gallery spaces. Both are enchanted by the enigmatic evolution of each piece.

be where you are

Edward L. Canavan

momentary infinity
incremental
from the inside
out

alive
in the color and space
of emotion

beheld in the eye of the soul
our beauty
will become us

if only
we'd let it.

Edward L. Canavan is an American poet whose work has been published in *The Opiate*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, and *Harbinger Asylum*.



Untitled-Color

April Friges

Three Pools

Liz Colville

JEREMY SAT ON THE FLOOR outside the principal's office, knotting strands of green paracord into a bracelet, one end looped over his knee. Their principal, Brenna—she was too young to be called Ms.—had detainees come into her office in two-person shifts. Two desks flanked her door on the inside. The students sat at these like sentinels, expected to do their homework. First, Brenna confiscated music players and anything that beeped.

Tia sat across the hall from Jeremy while they waited to be let in. He paused his knotting to stare at her, his eyes beneath an overhang of brow. He asked her why she was sitting so far away from him.

Tia shrugged. "What did she get you for?"

"Oh, it was dumb," Jeremy said. Tufts of his hair flipped up and out to the sides as if it was morning.

"Mine too," she said.

He lifted his head.

"Six minutes late to English," Tia said. "That was Vivien's fault, though."

He seemed to be thinking about that.

"Ryan's mother," Tia said.

"Ah."

"I can't wait to get my license. She's always late."

The door opened. Twins, sixth-grade girls,

came out of the room, saying long goodbyes to Brenna as if they didn't want to leave. These were classmates of Lissie's, Tia's youngest sister. One twin had a shaved head just starting to grow out, in solidarity, Tia'd heard, with a neighbor or a cousin who had cancer. The other had a ponytail as long as her back, a yellow scrunchie clutching her hair just above her neck. Tia tried to imagine what had brought these girls to Brenna's office.

"Only 20 minutes today," Brenna was saying now, looking at Tia, missing the boy at her feet. "Oh, there you are, Jer. Hey, Tia. What are you here for?"

"You don't know?" Tia asked, as if this could be an out.

"Today was crazy. Sam just sends me the list. Come in."

Minutes passed slowly on Brenna's clock, which had a black face with their school's angry mascot, a hawk, standing with his wings on something like hips. Jeremy tried to reach over to Tia across the doorway, but the door swung open. Sam, the assistant principal, glided in with a sticky note, which he transferred from his finger to Brenna's. Then he was gone, but not before aiming a glance at Tia, then Jeremy. Brenna got on the phone to someone, and Jeremy reached over to Tia again, holding out a tin of gum.

"Nicotine," he mouthed.

Tia's hand hovered a minute before taking a tan-colored square. In her mouth, the gum's mint veneer quickly melted away to leave a taste like bitter construction paper. But then the gum started to do something else, like coffee, which Tia had only had once or twice. Her eyes bored now into the picture of a cathedral facade in her art history textbook. She rested for a second on each figure in the facade, souls trying to climb into heaven, one of the souls getting a leg up from another. Jeremy had the same book on his desk, but his was closed. He rested an arm on it and stared out the window behind Brenna and chewed. Tia could show him the picture, the way she sometimes pulled a book or an object out to distract Lissie from a bout of anger. But she thought Jeremy would just find something stupid to say about the cathedral, or about the teacher who'd made caring about the class easy for Tia.

Tia would see Jeremy at Three Pools later, now that the nights were long. He had that: the elegant way he could toss his body off the cliff and into a perfectly straight missile that traveled diagonally and landed in the center of the lowest pool. Now he would say hi to her there, because of their one shared detention.

"Hey." Jeremy slid around in his seat to face her. He seemed to be trying on another persona, with a grin that stopped short of his eyes, where some pain had built a wall. "What do you think those girls did?"

Tia shook her head.

"Embezzling Girl Scout funds." A leg bounced. "Or killed someone during kickball."

Tia smiled.

Brenna looked out from behind her computer monitor. Jeremy kept looking at the side of Tia's face.

"They weren't in detention," Brenna said.

"Oh, sorry, I just—" Jeremy waved his arms as if to clear the air.

"Do you have any siblings?" she asked.

"No," he said.

Brenna said nothing after that. Tia heard Brenna thinking: Too bad.

"Oh, he has a girlfriend," her sister Jess said to Tia later. "Remember the robbery down at the trail apartments?"

These were the new buildings down at the northernmost street in town, by the dikes and the railroad and the new 20-mile trail that ran alongside it. Wood frame buildings painted pale yellow and white, dark red and dark blue, university housing mostly, with stores beneath them. They stuck out against the view, grass a shocking green and the darkly tanned mud beneath.

"That was Jeremy," Jess said. "That was Jeremy's idea of romance."

"It wasn't a robbery," Tia said. "Don't say that."

"No," Jess said. A know-it-all could be silenced by her older sister. "But it was still weird."

Tia said, "I don't know."

Trisha was a former classmate of theirs, two years older, now at university in town. She and Jeremy had been seeing each other for a couple of months. The other week, Trisha had been studying for a test and told Jeremy she needed a few days to herself. After spending the evening at the computer lab working, he'd started to walk home, and then just kept going straight instead of turning left to catch the public bus. He hung around outside the hair salon beneath her apartment, looking for a way up. Then climbed on a wine barrel filled with potted flowers, plucking a few to bring to Trisha,

reached the white ladder hanging locked at the bottom of the building's fire escape, hoisted himself upside down like he was mounting a set of uneven bars, then went up one flight of the stairs and knocked on her window.

Trisha's bed was just under the window, and Jeremy had caught her in those minutes before sleep, when you could jolt yourself awake mid-fall, or hear your ears slosh open and closed, or in this case, hear a tap at your window. They were almost an item by this point, enough that Jeremy knew which window to knock, but not enough that showing up on the fire escape didn't creep Trisha out. She pushed him back out the window as he tried to swing inside it, one leg at a time. I have class at 8:30, you fuck! He crawled backwards and stood up on the fire escape, waiting for her to feel bad.

But it took her until he was out of sight. After staring at each other for a minute, he disappeared back down the ladder. She was worried he had nowhere to go. They had only ever spent time out in the world, or at her place. She didn't know what home was for him.

Over the days the encounter shifted, in retellings, from tryst to break-in. Trisha shared the story on both sides of the open border between former alma mater and current. All you needed was one barista or one hairstylist to turn a spark of rumor into a blaze.

"Yeah, I remember you," Trisha had said, when they first met at the lookout by the town reservoir, up in the hills above the university. She'd been running. He'd been on a walk that had taken him much farther than he'd planned, past the school gate and onto a short trail he hadn't known existed until that morning. The

Vista Trail, it was called, groomed with wet wood chips and soft brown pine needles. It began at the end of a cul-de-sac a few blocks from the school, uncharted, so far, by his smoker and drug dealer classmates. The trail ended after less than a mile, at a bench with a wide view of the Minas Basin.

Skipping school was something Trisha had never done, but she didn't question that Jeremy was. In high school, she had shown up hungover enough times, grumbling at teachers who called on her. That may have been worse. When she'd gotten into Acadia, she'd loosened her grip on her studies and just relaxed. To her teachers, it'd looked like giving up.

Jeremy seemed happy to be up there that morning, to watch the sun break out from under morning fog covering the water like a tattered blanket. Happy to have discovered for himself this place she'd been running to for months—running to in order to replay the same surprise Jeremy was feeling now.

There was something intelligent she'd thought, about feeling yourself beyond school with two years still to go. In his untucked white shirt and jeans, Jeremy could have been a substitute teacher. Sweat had formed around his sideburns and made his sparse facial hair glint. But he seemed grown-up, just as much as the guys in her 100-level classes, if not more so.

She had watched those guys slide forward in their combination chair-desks as class progressed. Or else, if they were in a shadowy row in the back of the auditorium, make a pillow of their arms or jackets and fall asleep on top of their notebooks. The only interesting person in her courses so far was the quarterback of the football team, who hung on the professors' every word, even if that professor wasn't able to rouse the rest of the room. The quarterback was after perfection, which made

him easier to resent. From where Trisha sat, the front row of the room may as well have been a mile away, or on the other side of a movie screen, an unreal world, a romantic comedy whose heroine hadn't yet appeared on screen. In most classes, Trisha herself was closer to asleep than awake.

Jeremy seemed to know something they didn't, not even the quarterback, who she didn't think actually absorbed what he heard. He was too pretty, with strawberry blonde curls, green eyes, and tortoiseshell glasses. No, the quarterback's head was light and empty as a helium balloon, the better to cast the ball down the field on his springy and lithe frame. The better to see openings in the fray the way an animal might, turning down all his senses but one.

Jeremy gave Trisha books she'd never heard of, books her professors had probably never heard of. He made line drawings inspired by what he read, worlds rendered by Ursula le Guin, Philip K. Dick and Margaret Atwood fleshed out in blue ink in the pages of Trisha's notebooks. She'd find them in class, big, forlorn figures lying on mountainsides, greenery sprouting from their faces. Fallen stone emperors. Already disoriented in the lecture, in material that she thought had made sense when she'd read it the night before, the drawings only coaxed her farther away from the present moment. She told him he should try to pursue art, to sell the drawings. He shook his head. Those are for you.

If you walked to the far side of the reservoir and kept going down a dirt road closed off to cars by a yellow gate eventually you reached Three Pools. That was where Jeremy had been going the morning he met her. They could go together, he'd told her. She knew about the pools, but she hadn't been since middle school. She said she wasn't dressed for swimming.

He eyed her to corroborate that. Trisha noticed that he looked at the parts of her no one seemed to bother with: her shoulders, her feet, her ear, when she went to pat a wisp of hair behind it.

"I suppose not," he said. He smiled at her like he knew the future but had to keep the details a secret.

Scottie had spray-painted arrows all along the big plastic pipes that you had to walk across to get to Three Pools. Unlike most locals, Scottie wanted people to find the pools. The more, the merrier. Most newcomers thought the arrows were from the utility workers, something to do with the gas lines, but if you walked far enough, maybe a quarter mile, the arrows changed colors, orange to purple, and were accompanied with words: Keep walking—this way—200 feet to go!

The water in the top pool was almost black it was so deep. It spilled over smooth and white rocks into the tawny middle pool, then down a waterfall into the lowest section, which they called the Jewel. Scottie sat to the side of a saddle-shaped rock where the water poured serenely down like someone's expensive fountain. The rock here was level, with a roundish dent in its surface big enough to hold a bottle of beer, like the lips on the tray tables of airplanes, just deep enough to prevent the bottle from falling over. He'd work that indentation with the bottom of his beer as he lay on his side, cigarette in mouth, watching the scene around him, a scene he felt he'd directed.

Jeremy was the star. Jeremy invented moves, and new places to jump from, and new combinations of moves. This afternoon, Jeremy meditated on the black hole below him

for a long time with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, then dove off, doing a full forward rotation with the cigarette still in his mouth. He popped out of the water smiling like a dolphin, pleased to find his classmates laughing and hollering.

Scottie had tried that highest jump once or twice, way up by the little pine tree, which took a good two minutes to climb up to. But he didn't like the imprecision of it. He could have sworn the second time he'd jumped that he'd aimed his body straight down, but he'd somehow ended up at the far side of the pool, near the boulders he climbed up to get to his perch. Twice was enough for him to decide to just stay put up here and watch the others.

Scottie watched Jeremy and his imitators as much as he watched Tia, who sat in the shadows of the cliff above the middle pool with her sisters, and only seemed to look at him to count how many times he looked at her. But some love was built that way. Surprised, then unquestioning. While everyone else wore bikinis that cinched in the wrong places, fell crookedly over the bodies, ties loose or too tight behind the neck, always threatening to fall off when they jumped, Tia wore a black one-piece with a straight neckline, shiny like spandex. Shiny like a gymnastics uniform. Maybe it was, for all Scottie knew. Scottie clapped a little louder and whooped and cheered so that Tia's attention might move from the person (usually Jeremy) who had just plunged under the surface, up to him, stretched out like a king with an IPA for a chalice.

Scottie had clung to Tia, to the suggestion of who she was, starting soon after his brother Paul's passing. Paul's leaving him behind, as someone had put it at the wake, which had been such an upbeat afternoon that Scottie had escaped with his friends to the freezing cold porch, shuttered for the winter, snow

creeping in under the screens. Paul's leaving was all his own, Scottie had thought until he started thinking about it more.

He and Tia were in a computer class together, and it was only a week or two into that class when Scottie started to feel a sweaty desperation every morning, walking down the endless corridor to the computer lab. He was always a few minutes late because of his first cigarette of the day, more of a social commitment than a need for nicotine. He counted on seeing Tia's dark, shiny head over the top of her computer, next to a rubber plant. Their teacher Nan had placed potted plants resigned to living in darkness around the windowless room to add some life to the deep-sea wreck of gray screens donated by the university.

The anger drumming under his skin when one Friday morning Tia wasn't there. He asked Nan about it, blurting it out loud, making it the business of everyone in class. She was home sick today, Nan said, which Scottie took meant she wouldn't be at the pools later either.

She showed up there eventually, with her two sisters in tow. Scottie wouldn't know that Tia stayed home from school that day because the morning carpooling plan had fallen through. Most days her mother worked at the airport from the middle of the night until after school let out, an hour commute each way. The bus long gone, the walk too long to get her there in time for first period, Tia had decided to bail. Not unlike her. Mercurial, someone had said in her last report card. They had suggested she take up a sport. Instead, she had taken up computer programming. When he saw her, Scottie cannonballed into the water.

Tia had walked to school to pick up her sisters, and instead of going home, they walked the

mile mostly uphill to the swimming hole, in a single-file line on the side of the shoulderless road. When they came to the blind bends, they walked through people's yards. Tia couldn't help but imagine a pickup truck coming sweeping down the hill and taking them out like bowling pins.

Tia's middle sister Jess gave her all the day's gossip from the eighth grade. About how Mr. Fallon, their English teacher and Brenna's husband, had walked into class late to find Ozzie drawing out a map of who had slept with whom on the whiteboard. Ozzie had grabbed the eraser, but then froze with it flat against the board. Fallon had stood there in silence for what felt like an hour, admiring the board like it was a painting. Then he said, Leave it, Oz. Let's talk about this. Instead, Ozzie frantically erased everything. Fallon then pointed to the door, and Ozzie bowed his head and shuffled out.

"You guys are crazy," Tia said, swinging arms with Lissie. "We were never like that, J."

Jess: "Well I know you weren't, Ti."

A short scene played across Tia's mind, then, of her sister and a guy who was too old for her in some basement, or in a thick patch of woods off the trail to the swimming hole. Tia had learned about Three Pools from Jess.

Their mother Rhea let them go to the pools without remark, spending so long there that they'd sometimes miss dinner. Tia only had to tell her mother that Ryan, her closest friend these days, would be there, to be allowed to do anything. But Ryan was almost never there. Ryan was usually working at the nicest restaurant in town, doing her AP Stats homework behind the hostess lectern. Ryan was after some provincial prize that would funnel her into a scholarship at U of T, or maybe McGill. Rhea probably didn't think too much

about whether a girl like Ryan would actually find time for cliff diving. But when Tia took her sisters somewhere, it gave her an air of responsibility. She was taking everyone off her mother's hands, and they'd be back by five—really six, this time, but her mother wouldn't worry because the sun would be up for hours.

The idea of her daughters together, black-haired and gimlet-eyed, comforted Rhea. Fast walkers with strong swimmers' shoulders, even little Lissie. When Rhea looked out the kitchen window at the mountain, waiting for the sun to disappear fully behind it, she imagined she'd see the girls walking slowly up the driveway now. But when she didn't (didn't, didn't, still didn't), she thought maybe if she walked away from the window, she'd hear them, the flip-flops whispering across the asphalt. A watched window never changes its view.

When they did come, there was first the sound of two car doors, then Tia running with her shoes off, Rhea caught off guard by a quick slap, slap, slap. She thought: Something is wrong. Then she thought: Nothing is wrong, they're chasing each other. Then she thought: They're too old to chase each other. They should be slow tonight, she thought, drained of the afternoon's energy.

At the back door now, and into the laundry room. How you told a sad story back then, before emojis, was you looked into your mother's eyes (and you were almost level with her eyes now, which was strange enough), and watched her expression change from peaceful to stricken, because you didn't totally understand what the words meant until you saw how they moved across her face, a sudden gust of wind disturbing sand. What steadied

Tia, though she felt half her weight, solid body suspended by liquid legs, was the hug Scott had given her at the parked cars, before offering to drive her and her sisters home. It was a long hug. Jess saying even in the midst of what was happening, a police SUV blocking one lane of the road, Wow, to Tia, under her breath, and, I didn't know you and Scottie even knew each other. Jess was the dog-eared Rolodex of the family.

Tia and her mother had a moment of communion, the fluent silence between mother and firstborn, before Jess and Lissie came in behind Tia, slamming the flimsy door against the fridge. Lissie's fourth-grade school picture slid down the front of the fridge behind its Marilyn Monroe magnet, both the photo and the magnet pausing, not falling, somewhere near the bottom of the fridge. In the photo, Lissie's mouth proudly bared the mess that braces might one day clean up.

Lissie was asking Jess a lot of questions when they made their way inside, not stopping to remove their shoes as they usually did. But then Lissie wanted to be the one to tell her mother what happened.

Jess burst into tears as soon as she made eye contact with her mother.

"Jeremy drowned!" Lissie said, trying to push Jess out of the way so she could stand in front of her older sister, who was nearly twice her height. Then she started crying, too.

"My baby," Rhea said, crouching down to envelop Lissie, then rising again, pressing Lissie's head into her stomach. Lissie stayed there, arms wrapped around her thin mother. "Where are your clothes?" They were each wearing only their bathing suits and half of everything else, a shirt but no shorts, or pants but no shirt.

"We left them," Tia realized.

The kitchen was a dark and glowing blue.

Rhea had not turned on any lights yet. She'd been enjoying the denial of the day ending, watching the glowing sky behind the ridge and the ridge turning as dark and thick-looking as the sea without the sun to light it. She hadn't known who Jeremy was, but that night the girls held their own memorial in the living room, teasing the good out of the few anecdotes they had on him. Of course, Jess knew the most: about Trisha and the few girls he'd dated before her, what classes he was good at, even if he didn't show it (Canadian history, environmental science), and how Jeremy had been suspended the week before and had probably been hanging out at the pools every day, edging closer to something that he might have called perfection, but which everyone else called the end.

The suspension would have been for something tame, like smoking on campus, Jess thought out loud.

"That's their solution for everything," their mother said, shaking her head. "Just send them home." Rhea wondered what home had looked like for Jeremy. Something like this. Manless.

On the brown sofa, the lights still off, Lissie curled up half on her mother's lap and half on Tia's. Jess lay on the floor, enraptured. Hard to say whether Jess feared what she had seen, or thrilled at it. She seemed to be holding the two emotions, one in each hand, letting them pull her in opposite directions.

Tia wished Lissie hadn't been there. Maybe she hadn't seen the jump itself, but she had been watching for the 30 seconds, then 40, then 60, that she and a dozen or so of Jeremy's classmates stood over the water, then leaned in, in, in, each person arriving at their fears at their own pace. Finally, a few jumped in after Jeremy, diving under messily, coming up for air, going back under.

Scottie, way up above the scene, had run down, tossed his beer bottle back in the direction of the woods and jumped in. It was so brown beneath the surface, dead, black leaves flecked across his view, just one streak of sun illuminating the pool enough that he could see Ozzie contorting himself at the bottom, trying to pull up the wreck of Jeremy, who looked like he was just sleeping on his side, on top of a dark green carpet of rocks, moss-covered and slippery as soap. Scottie already out of breath before he reached them, grabbing blindly at Jeremy's torso, then hooking a hand under Jeremy's armpit, feeling the soft tufts of underarm hair as he followed Ozzie up to the surface. What Scottie would keep replaying was how Jeremy's head bobbed as weightless and insentient as a buoy.

Scottie pumped up and down on Jeremy's chest, fed his hyperventilating breath into Jeremy's mouth. For so long they'd all just thought Jeremy been staying down on purpose, playing a trick on them.

In the car on the way home, Scottie spoke to Lissie in the rear-view mirror, saying something that sounded far away and from the future, as if the event had not just happened, but had happened months ago, and they were just all remembering it now. As if Scott knew it was going to happen. As if Scott was resigned to the mix of death that life contained.

"You OK, Lissie?"

Lissie nodded. She looked at Jess, consoled by trees passing outside the window. The whole thing had felt suspect to Lissie. The color of Jeremy's face was the color of someone halfway between this world and the next, a shade of green Lissie had never seen in anything living. She knew this was because it was wrong, and yet there was this hope long past the moment the ambulance doors had closed that he would come back. Something

refutable about it, in a way that Paul's death the year before had not been. Paul's discomfort in the world had been resolute, whereas Jeremy had just been playing in a playground he'd outgrown, outwitted, 99 times out of 100.

Kids kept diving from the same sandy ledges after that, going mostly because their parents didn't want them to, because the pools were a sanctuary for drinking and getting high. The next year, someone figured out that if you held your breath long enough, you could swim underneath a cave in the top pool down to the Jewel, and back up. Tia thought that maybe that's what Jeremy had seen that day: a light, or a bluish opening, inviting him into a place you could actually go, where he had thought there had been only rocks and rotting leaves. And that he only struggled with himself so long down there because he couldn't believe what he was seeing, and was willing to run out of breath to see it for a little longer. a tin of gum.

"Nicotine," he mouthed.

Tia's hand hovered a minute before taking a tan-colored square. In her mouth, the gum's mint veneer quickly melted away to leave a taste like bitter construction paper. But then the gum started to do something else, like coffee, which Tia had only had once or twice. Her eyes bored now into the picture of a cathedral facade in her art history textbook. She rested for a second on each figure in the facade, souls trying to climb into heaven, one of the souls getting a leg up from another. Jeremy had the same book on his desk, but his was closed. He rested an arm on it and stared out the window behind Brenna and chewed. Tia could show him the picture, the way she sometimes pulled a book or an object out to distract Lissie from a bout of anger. But she thought Jeremy would just find something stupid to say about the cathedral, or about the

teacher who'd made caring about the class easy for Tia.

Tia would see Jeremy at Three Pools later, now that the nights were long. He had that: the elegant way he could toss his body off the cliff and into a perfectly straight missile that traveled diagonally and landed in the center of the lowest pool. Now he would say hi to her there, because of their one shared detention.

"Hey." Jeremy slid around in his seat to face her. He seemed to be trying on another persona, with a grin that stopped short of his eyes, where some pain had built a wall. "What do you think those girls did?"

Tia shook her head.

"Embezzling Girl Scout funds." A leg bounced. "Or killed someone during kickball."

Tia smiled.

Brenna looked out from behind her computer monitor. Jeremy kept looking at the side of Tia's face.

"They weren't in detention," Brenna said.

"Oh, sorry, I just—" Jeremy waved his arms as if to clear the air.

"Do you have any siblings?" she asked.

"No," he said.

Brenna said nothing after that. Tia heard Brenna thinking: Too bad.

"Oh, he has a girlfriend," her sister Jess said to Tia later. "Remember the robbery down at the trail apartments?"

These were the new buildings down at the northernmost street in town, by the dikes and the railroad and the new 20-mile trail that ran alongside it. Wood frame buildings painted pale yellow and white, dark red and dark blue, university housing mostly, with stores beneath them. They stuck out against the view,

grass a shocking green and the darkly tanned mud beneath.

"That was Jeremy," Jess said. "That was Jeremy's idea of romance."

"It wasn't a robbery," Tia said. "Don't say that."

"No," Jess said. A know-it-all could be silenced by her older sister. "But it was still weird."

Tia said, "I don't know."

Trisha was a former classmate of theirs, two years older, now at university in town. She and Jeremy had been seeing each other for a couple of months. The other week, Trisha had been studying for a test and told Jeremy she needed a few days to herself. After spending the evening at the computer lab working, he'd started to walk home, and then just kept going straight instead of turning left to catch the public bus. He hung around outside the hair salon beneath her apartment, looking for a way up. Then climbed on a wine barrel filled with potted flowers, plucking a few to bring to Trisha, reached the white ladder hanging locked at the bottom of the building's fire escape, hoisted himself upside down like he was mounting a set of uneven bars, then went up one flight of the stairs and knocked on her window.

Trisha's bed was just under the window, and Jeremy had caught her in those minutes before sleep, when you could jolt yourself awake mid-fall, or hear your ears slosh open and closed, or in this case, hear a tap at your window. They were almost an item by this point, enough that Jeremy knew which window to knock, but not enough that showing up on the fire escape didn't creep Trisha out. She pushed him back out the window as he tried to swing inside it, one leg at a time. I have class at 8:30, you fuck! He crawled backwards and stood up on the fire escape, waiting for her to feel bad.

But it took her until he was out of sight. After staring at each other for a minute, he disappeared back down the ladder. She was worried he had nowhere to go. They had only ever spent time out in the world, or at her place. She didn't know what home was for him.

Over the days the encounter shifted, in retellings, from tryst to break-in. Trisha shared the story on both sides of the open border between former alma mater and current. All you needed was one barista or one hairstylist to turn a spark of rumor into a blaze.

"Yeah, I remember you," Trisha had said, when they first met at the lookout by the town reservoir, up in the hills above the university. She'd been running. He'd been on a walk that had taken him much farther than he'd planned, past the school gate and onto a short trail he hadn't known existed until that morning. The Vista Trail, it was called, groomed with wet wood chips and soft brown pine needles. It began at the end of a cul-de-sac a few blocks from the school, uncharted, so far, by his smoker and drug dealer classmates. The trail ended after less than a mile, at a bench with a wide view of the Minas Basin.

Skipping school was something Trisha had never done, but she didn't question that Jeremy was. In high school, she had shown up hungover enough times, grumbling at teachers who called on her. That may have been worse. When she'd gotten into Acadia, she'd loosened her grip on her studies and just relaxed. To her teachers, it'd looked like giving up.

Jeremy seemed happy to be up there that morning, to watch the sun break out from under morning fog covering the water like a tattered blanket. Happy to have discovered

for himself this place she'd been running to for months—running to in order to replay the same surprise Jeremy was feeling now.

There was something intelligent she'd thought, about feeling yourself beyond school with two years still to go. In his untucked white shirt and jeans, Jeremy could have been a substitute teacher. Sweat had formed around his sideburns and made his sparse facial hair glint. But he seemed grown-up, just as much as the guys in her 100-level classes, if not more so.

She had watched those guys slide forward in their combination chair-desks as class progressed. Or else, if they were in a shadowy row in the back of the auditorium, make a pillow of their arms or jackets and fall asleep on top of their notebooks. The only interesting person in her courses so far was the quarterback of the football team, who hung on the professors' every word, even if that professor wasn't able to rouse the rest of the room. The quarterback was after perfection, which made him easier to resent. From where Trisha sat, the front row of the room may as well have been a mile away, or on the other side of a movie screen, an unreal world, a romantic comedy whose heroine hadn't yet appeared on screen. In most classes, Trisha herself was closer to asleep than awake.

Jeremy seemed to know something they didn't, not even the quarterback, who she didn't think actually absorbed what he heard. He was too pretty, with strawberry blonde curls, green eyes, and tortoiseshell glasses. No, the quarterback's head was light and empty as a helium balloon, the better to cast the ball down the field on his springy and lithe frame. The better to see openings in the fray the way an animal might, turning down all his senses but one.

Jeremy gave Trisha books she'd never heard of, books her professors had proba-

bly never heard of. He made line drawings inspired by what he read, worlds rendered by Ursula le Guin, Philip K. Dick and Margaret Atwood fleshed out in blue ink in the pages of Trisha's notebooks. She'd find them in class, big, forlorn figures lying on mountainsides, greenery sprouting from their faces. Fallen stone emperors. Already disoriented in the lecture, in material that she thought had made sense when she'd read it the night before, the drawings only coaxed her farther away from the present moment. She told him he should try to pursue art, to sell the drawings. He shook his head. Those are for you.

If you walked to the far side of the reservoir and kept going down a dirt road closed off to cars by a yellow gate eventually you reached Three Pools. That was where Jeremy had been going the morning he met her. They could go together, he'd told her. She knew about the pools, but she hadn't been since middle school. She said she wasn't dressed for swimming.

He eyed her to corroborate that. Trisha noticed that he looked at the parts of her no one seemed to bother with: her shoulders, her feet, her ear, when she went to pat a wisp of hair behind it.

"I suppose not," he said. He smiled at her like he knew the future but had to keep the details a secret.

Scottie had spray-painted arrows all along the big plastic pipes that you had to walk across to get to Three Pools. Unlike most locals, Scottie wanted people to find the pools. The more, the merrier. Most newcomers thought the arrows were from the utility workers, something to do with the gas lines, but if you walked far enough, maybe a quarter mile, the arrows

changed colors, orange to purple, and were accompanied with words: Keep walking—this way—200 feet to go!

The water in the top pool was almost black it was so deep. It spilled over smooth and white rocks into the tawny middle pool, then down a waterfall into the lowest section, which they called the Jewel. Scottie sat to the side of a saddle-shaped rock where the water poured serenely down like someone's expensive fountain. The rock here was level, with a roundish dent in its surface big enough to hold a bottle of beer, like the lips on the tray tables of airplanes, just deep enough to prevent the bottle from falling over. He'd work that indentation with the bottom of his beer as he lay on his side, cigarette in mouth, watching the scene around him, a scene he felt he'd directed.

Jeremy was the star. Jeremy invented moves, and new places to jump from, and new combinations of moves. This afternoon, Jeremy meditated on the black hole below him for a long time with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, then dove off, doing a full forward rotation with the cigarette still in his mouth. He popped out of the water smiling like a dolphin, pleased to find his classmates laughing and hollering.

Scottie had tried that highest jump once or twice, way up by the little pine tree, which took a good two minutes to climb up to. But he didn't like the imprecision of it. He could have sworn the second time he'd jumped that he'd aimed his body straight down, but he'd somehow ended up at the far side of the pool, near the boulders he climbed up to get to his perch. Twice was enough for him to decide to just stay put up here and watch the others.

Scottie watched Jeremy and his imitators as much as he watched Tia, who sat in the shadows of the cliff above the middle pool with

her sisters, and only seemed to look at him to count how many times he looked at her. But some love was built that way. Surprised, then unquestioning. While everyone else wore bikinis that cinched in the wrong places, fell crookedly over the bodies, ties loose or too tight behind the neck, always threatening to fall off when they jumped, Tia wore a black one-piece with a straight neckline, shiny like spandex. Shiny like a gymnastics uniform. Maybe it was, for all Scottie knew. Scottie clapped a little louder and whooped and cheered so that Tia's attention might move from the person (usually Jeremy) who had just plunged under the surface, up to him, stretched out like a king with an IPA for a chalice.

Scottie had clung to Tia, to the suggestion of who she was, starting soon after his brother Paul's passing. Paul's leaving him behind, as someone had put it at the wake, which had been such an upbeat afternoon that Scottie had escaped with his friends to the freezing cold porch, shuttered for the winter, snow creeping in under the screens. Paul's leaving was all his own, Scottie had thought until he started thinking about it more.

He and Tia were in a computer class together, and it was only a week or two into that class when Scottie started to feel a sweaty desperation every morning, walking down the endless corridor to the computer lab. He was always a few minutes late because of his first cigarette of the day, more of a social commitment than a need for nicotine. He counted on seeing Tia's dark, shiny head over the top of her computer, next to a rubber plant. Their teacher Nan had placed potted plants resigned to living in darkness around the windowless room to add some life to the deep-sea wreck of gray screens donated by the university.

The anger drumming under his skin when one Friday morning Tia wasn't there. He asked

Nan about it, blurting it out loud, making it the business of everyone in class. She was home sick today, Nan said, which Scottie took meant she wouldn't be at the pools later either.

She showed up there eventually, with her two sisters in tow. Scottie wouldn't know that Tia stayed home from school that day because the morning carpooling plan had fallen through. Most days her mother worked at the airport from the middle of the night until after school let out, an hour commute each way. The bus long gone, the walk too long to get her there in time for first period, Tia had decided to bail. Not unlike her. Mercurial, someone had said in her last report card. They had suggested she take up a sport. Instead, she had taken up computer programming. When he saw her, Scottie cannonballed into the water.

Tia had walked to school to pick up her sisters, and instead of going home, they walked the mile mostly uphill to the swimming hole, in a single-file line on the side of the shoulderless road. When they came to the blind bends, they walked through people's yards. Tia couldn't help but imagine a pickup truck coming sweeping down the hill and taking them out like bowling pins.

Tia's middle sister Jess gave her all the day's gossip from the eighth grade. About how Mr. Fallon, their English teacher and Brenna's husband, had walked into class late to find Ozzie drawing out a map of who had slept with whom on the whiteboard. Ozzie had grabbed the eraser, but then froze with it flat against the board. Fallon had stood there in silence for what felt like an hour, admiring the board like it was a painting. Then he said, Leave it, Oz. Let's talk about this. Instead, Ozzie frantically erased everything. Fallon then

pointed to the door, and Ozzie bowed his head and shuffled out.

"You guys are crazy," Tia said, swinging arms with Lissie. "We were never like that, J."

Jess: "Well I know you weren't, Ti."

A short scene played across Tia's mind, then, of her sister and a guy who was too old for her in some basement, or in a thick patch of woods off the trail to the swimming hole. Tia had learned about Three Pools from Jess.

Their mother Rhea let them go to the pools without remark, spending so long there that they'd sometimes miss dinner. Tia only had to tell her mother that Ryan, her closest friend these days, would be there, to be allowed to do anything. But Ryan was almost never there. Ryan was usually working at the nicest restaurant in town, doing her AP Stats homework behind the hostess lectern. Ryan was after some provincial prize that would funnel her into a scholarship at U of T, or maybe McGill. Rhea probably didn't think too much about whether a girl like Ryan would actually find time for cliff diving. But when Tia took her sisters somewhere, it gave her an air of responsibility. She was taking everyone off her mother's hands, and they'd be back by five—really six, this time, but her mother wouldn't worry because the sun would be up for hours.

The idea of her daughters together, black-haired and gimlet-eyed, comforted Rhea. Fast walkers with strong swimmers' shoulders, even little Lissie. When Rhea looked out the kitchen window at the mountain, waiting for the sun to disappear fully behind it, she imagined she'd see the girls walking slowly up the driveway now. But when she didn't (didn't, didn't, still didn't), she thought maybe

if she walked away from the window, she'd hear them, the flip-flops whispering across the asphalt. A watched window never changes its view.

When they did come, there was first the sound of two car doors, then Tia running with her shoes off, Rhea caught off guard by a quick slap, slap, slap. She thought: Something is wrong. Then she thought: Nothing is wrong, they're chasing each other. Then she thought: They're too old to chase each other. They should be slow tonight, she thought, drained of the afternoon's energy.

At the back door now, and into the laundry room. How you told a sad story back then, before emojis, was you looked into your mother's eyes (and you were almost level with her eyes now, which was strange enough), and watched her expression change from peaceful to stricken, because you didn't totally understand what the words meant until you saw how they moved across her face, a sudden gust of wind disturbing sand. What steadied Tia, though she felt half her weight, solid body suspended by liquid legs, was the hug Scott had given her at the parked cars, before offering to drive her and her sisters home. It was a long hug. Jess saying even in the midst of what was happening, a police SUV blocking one lane of the road, Wow, to Tia, under her breath, and, I didn't know you and Scottie even knew each other. Jess was the dog-eared Rolodex of the family.

Tia and her mother had a moment of communion, the fluent silence between mother and firstborn, before Jess and Lissie came in behind Tia, slamming the flimsy door against the fridge. Lissie's fourth-grade school picture slid down the front of the fridge behind its Marilyn Monroe magnet, both the photo and the magnet pausing, not falling, somewhere near the bottom of the fridge. In the

photo, Lissie's mouth proudly bared the mess that braces might one day clean up.

Lissie was asking Jess a lot of questions when they made their way inside, not stopping to remove their shoes as they usually did. But then Lissie wanted to be the one to tell her mother what happened.

Jess burst into tears as soon as she made eye contact with her mother.

"Jeremy drowned!" Lissie said, trying to push Jess out of the way so she could stand in front of her older sister, who was nearly twice her height. Then she started crying, too.

"My baby," Rhea said, crouching down to envelop Lissie, then rising again, pressing Lissie's head into her stomach. Lissie stayed there, arms wrapped around her thin mother. "Where are your clothes?" They were each wearing only their bathing suits and half of everything else, a shirt but no shorts, or pants but no shirt.

"We left them," Tia realized.

The kitchen was a dark and glowing blue. Rhea had not turned on any lights yet. She'd been enjoying the denial of the day ending, watching the glowing sky behind the ridge and the ridge turning as dark and thick-looking as the sea without the sun to light it. She hadn't known who Jeremy was, but that night the girls held their own memorial in the living room, teasing the good out of the few anecdotes they had on him. Of course, Jess knew the most: about Trisha and the few girls he'd dated before her, what classes he was good at, even if he didn't show it (Canadian history, environmental science), and how Jeremy had been suspended the week before and had probably been hanging out at the pools every day, edging closer to something that he might have called perfection, but which everyone else called the end.

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something tame, like smoking on campus, Jess thought out loud.

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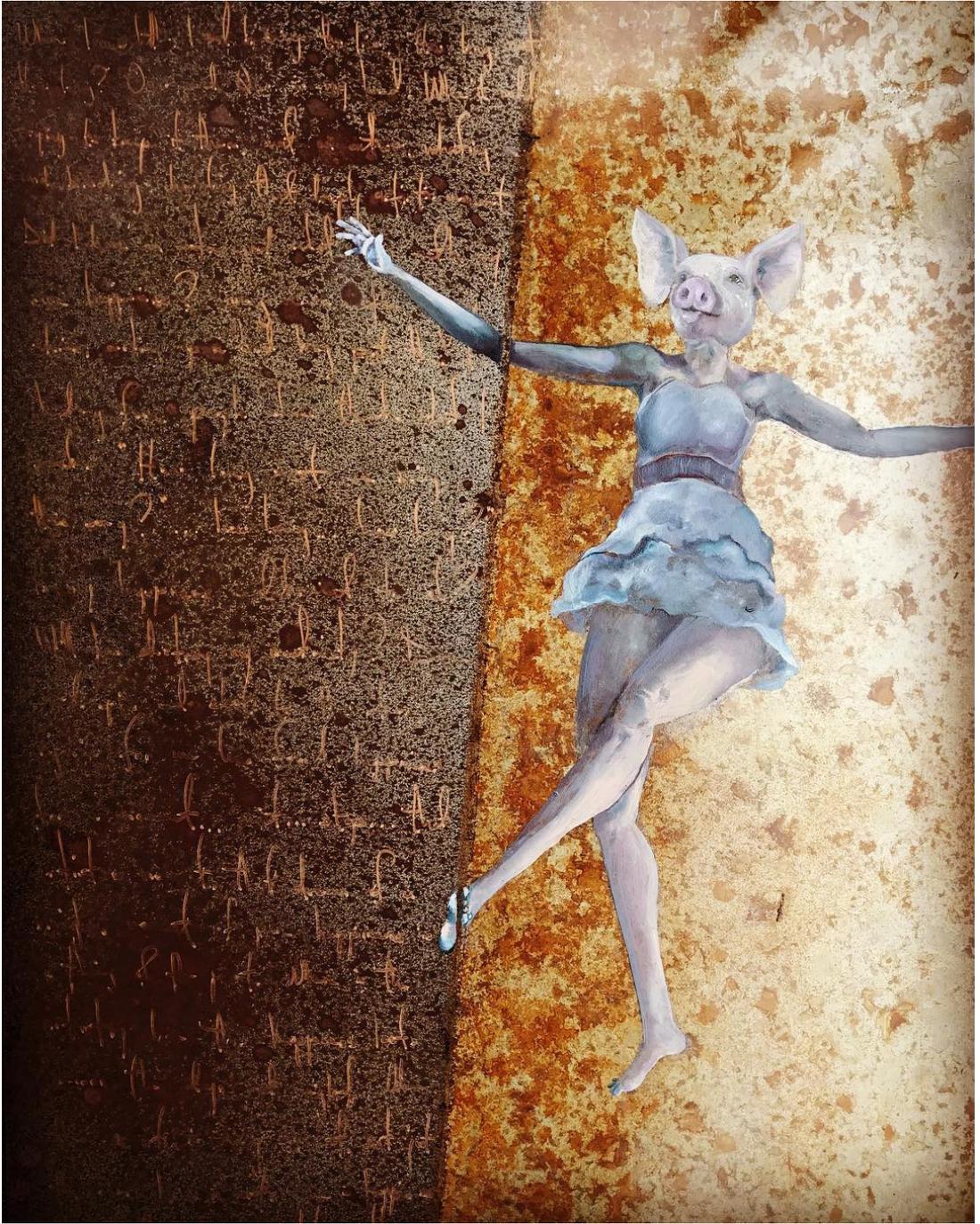
"You OK, Lissie?"

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Liz Colville is a writer and creative director based in Nova Scotia. Her fiction, poetry and prose have appeared in *The Southampton Review*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, NPR, *Pitchfork*, *The Awl* and elsewhere. She was born in Virginia and raised in England, Cyprus, Nova Scotia and New Jersey.



Oink #2

Matthew Stokes & Sophia Tittorton

The Coffee Table of Our Duplex

Pitambar Naik

You do possess a lot of IQ on beauty but that's essential
why shouldn't you embellish the shadows around your eyes—
you say that's a camaraderie of hibiscus and your family ethos
the frame of transfiguration you wear is no atom of a dilemma
the intuition of physics creates a space of therapy.

The freshest spring descends surreptitiously as you yawn
over a cup of coffee at the time while soothing a scar of the millennia
we walked hand in hand to bury all conspiracies of metallic sorrow
our bodily paranoia was a season of respite with caffeine!

We thought to sweeten the conjugational longitude on the balcony
with the vapour concocted with nicotine and bougainvillea's orgasm
almost half of our surrogacy and its intimacy underneath was a locket
yours was sugar less and mine was little creamy and stirred up.

We clung to our ripe innocence to play with feverishness
and wished to be the mendicants of seductive hallucination
the coffee table of our duplex—a calling bell of connotation
often I take refuge peacefully in your lazy exertion!

Sharing a Lane

Seth Geltman

I WAS JUST BREAKING THE SURFACE as he broke my reverie, the only one I ever have, gliding along the water in the very early morning. His snorkel and flippers and expensive swim gloves and yellowish bulk flew over me and pushed off. He had a wide, proud stroke, an open yearning for all that was and ever will be.

Tipping my head up to scan for his little smile scattered my rhythm so much I gulped pool water, panicked a bit, and almost called out for Steve, the lifeguard. But I didn't want to jeopardize our jokey poolside rapport — it'd be ruined if he actually had to save me. Barely recovering, I hoisted myself out of the pool and toweled off.

"So soon?" Steve asked. He had a black crewcut, rangy limbs, and a perpetually canny gaze. I nodded toward the whitish thing thumping through the water.

"Oh — Josh," he snickered. I walked to the locker room.

Atop the great skyscraper of life are Profiles in Courage and Badges of Honor; and, 239 or 671 stories down from there, the whiffs of chlorine I snatch up from my forearms at odd

moments of the day. Each is a teeny olfactory pep-talk, a hit of integrity, getting me from one nondescript task to the next. Today, I'd whiff a weaker brew.

Other satisfactions would suffer, too. I typically follow laps with a drive to Evelyn's Donuts. Nothing surpasses her French crullers. Beneath the ridged, delicate layer of glaze on top are tender, tiny chambers of dough below. If you arrive at exactly 6:39 AM, Evelyn brings them to you hot. Today's timing was botched.

The locker-room at this pool supplies neither towels nor walls for a shower. I was two minutes into mine when Josh strode in. Naked, he was exponentially more opalescent and repellent than ever. He tipped his head slightly in greeting; I turned away and headed to my locker.

Quickly I yanked on underwear, socks, shirt, pants and —

"Excuse me." Josh, right next door. "Guess I'm here," he said gently. I hustled out of the room, shirt untucked.

As I got in my car in the lot, he sauntered towards his, whistling, with the same eerie semi-smile that blurred over me during that fateful jump in the pool. He entered a nice purple Lexus. And though my Cavalier is nei-

ther nice nor purple, for a decade and a half it's done what it's needed to do. I turned the key. The engine coughed, then there was nothing. Slowly, Josh's waxen smile turned my way. He tossed his leather gym-bag in back and drove his car over to face mine. He got out, withdrew jumper cables from his trunk, and walked to my window. I opened it halfway.

Awkwardly he extended his hand through. "I'm Josh."

"Terry," I answered. The handshake was warm, fleshy, weak.

"Pop it?" he asked, winking at the hood.

When he finished things off, this motor of mine growled and purred like never before. I was in a muscle car disguised as a 2003 Cavalier. But it didn't hurl its sound around like a teenager's. No, it mumbled through you in the most knowing, soothing, intriguing ways. Josh got his cables, shut the hood, winked again, and took off in his Lexus.

A few minutes later, I sat at a red light. I was next to a Volvo helmed by an old woman who held forth to her twentyish daughter in the passenger seat. Clearly, this was some oft-repeated, tried-and-untrue exchange that flawlessly led both back to where they'd started, strapped to previously staked-out positions in even bunchier, bristlier belts. The daughter had chestnut hair and a lovely gaze that was starting to sour. She cracked open a window. And beautifully it tumbled in, the dangerous but reassuring tonic of my engine: things could be different; possibilities extended infinitely beyond being yammered at by a yammersome woman at a red light that lasted three days.

My Cavalier's was a siren song, the man's version of it, not the mannish one; no, the real stuff, the slow-cooked, crackling-fire kind, a heady, urbane mischief mingling with animal

power. And maybe Josh's jumper-cables threw some magic on my eyebrows as well; they struck a pose so worldly and amused that the girl couldn't resist. The light stayed red. She got out of her mother's car and headed toward mine.

"Molly!" her mother called. "Come back here!" But with a slight, knowing smile, beautiful Molly tapped on my passenger side window. I let her in. The light turned green. We took off with ridiculous certainty and violence, chuckling along together before we'd said a word.

My conversations with the fair sex are often hobbled by what seems to be an earpiece lodged in my head. It rings with the voices of fifteen newscast producers with fifteen competing commandments on what to say next. By the time I sort anything out, the woman I'm talking to glazes over and moves on. So it was a thrill to feel words cascade along easily and wittily once the chuckling with Molly subsided. Her chestnut hair grew wilder and wilder, and, coaxed along by the toasty narcotic rumbling beneath our bottoms, our banter hurtled toward a shared carnal knowledge neither of us knew we ever had.

Even the block itself fell sway to the jumper cables. It arranged its buildings to be at my convenience, instead of the other way around. So it was only natural, when Molly and I reached a certain delightfully lascivious point in conversation, that the Skyway Motel rose up from the curb. We checked into an unlit room. Somebody'd made an attempt to decorate it with a Leroy Neiman poster and sickly poinsettia. We got to business on a crotchety bed. If you inhaled deeply enough, it was redolent of others who'd jostled in its sheets. But who cared?

Can the sweetest tangerines be dipped in the milkiest caramel fondue? Can toothpicks break

out in flower and song? Can the tone of a clarinet wrap vines around the Moon?

No idea — but no cockamamie bundle of wonders could compare to what Molly and I did, over and again, together in our room at the Skyway.

When we were done, and just resting, my cell-phone rang. It was Evelyn. She'd missed me at the morning shift, so they whipped up a brand new batch of French crullers. As Molly and I drove there, we easily settled back into rhythmic rapport, during which I hatched a plan: Over hot French crullers and hot black coffee, I'd propose to her on the spot.

Naturally, this entailed consideration of all the requirements of a wedding befitting Molly. Cakes and gowns and music could be gathered easily enough. But I'd need a best man, and this was problematic. There had been no best; better; good; good enough; okay; kind of okay; not really okay; pretty bad; bad; or just plain wretched men in my life, ever. But the jumper-cabled world worked its magic once again, and Steve appeared on the corner, only too happy to accept my invitation for a ride to Evelyn's.

This was heaven. Cracking wise with Steve to the appreciative giggles of Molly, I felt supremely confident that we were all of the Earth, not just on it, and that a new home of harmony was just opening.

Then there he was on the side of the road.

Josh.

For all the world, he looked like a college student on his year abroad, heaped up, not with a large backpack and camping supplies, but with two sets of everything: flippers, snorkels, expensive swim gloves. Alongside

him, somehow managing the same infuriating hangdog grin, was his purple Lexus, hood open, curious orange rivulets pouring out of it. A red light lit up, and I was forced to stop next to him. Comically he raised his thumb.

"Give a guy a lift?" he asked, grinning comfortably. I didn't respond, and his shoulders sagged briefly, but the smile kept on gamely enough. "Hey, come on, Terry. It's me. Josh."

I offered a professional nod through the glass. The light turned green, and I peeled out. Molly, Steve, and I laughed laughter we'd never known before, and the Cavalier barreled sweetly down the block.

"Hold it," Steve said. "Was that Josh?"

"Yes," I said. The car seemed to lose a bit of power, probably a gear change.

"You knew that guy?" asked Molly.

"No," I said. Another downshift.

"And you just...?" Steve said.

The downshifting continued until a clank or two rang out. Molly's chestnut hair grew lank, and Steve's happy squint grayed over. We approached another stoplight. The car gurgled and died.

"I'm gonna go," said Steve. He got out.

"Me too," said Molly. She left.

Cars honked behind me. I floored the gas pedal. Nothing. I floored it again. Nothing. Honks kept swarming until my Cavalier suddenly roared up on its own, ferocious enough to shut them all up. I knew that Molly would hear this and chuckle; and that Steve's wry smile would crinkle its way back into place. Again the transcendent power of this motor would carry us away, and again we'd be one small but ludicrously happy family.

Then the engine bellowed lustrous black billowing smoke, snakelike and blanketing at once, filling in every corner of every thought, every second of every day. The car juddered

and clanked and lurched. The steering wheel broke off in my hand. I blacked out.

I awakened to blackness and silence, naked, wet, standing all alone in the pool. The water was black and silky. But things were normal enough for me to finish the laps cut short that morning.

I like to get 37 in. It's a meaty enough prime for me to feel it's an accomplishment. I'd completed 23 earlier before Josh barged in. So I did 14 more. As I started that last one, a barely perceptible 'pop' sounded somewhere, and the pool became steadily shallower. By the time I got to the wall, I was doing one of those silly crawls, literally, that kids do in a wading-pool,

when they pretend to swim. At the moment I touched the wall all the water was gone.

Something soft, like a pillow, flew and bumped softly against my back. It was a neatly bundled, pre-warmed terry-cloth robe, apparently tossed at me by Josh, who, at the moment, was on the pool floor, carefully stoking a campfire he'd built there. He stared into the fire, intent on it, his right arm poking the logs with a poker, his left beckoning me over. He sat on a red-checkered picnic blanket, with a couple thermoses of hot coffee and a picnic basket full with French crullers. The aromas of black coffee and chlorine mingled pleasantly. I put on the robe and joined him. He claimed he made the crullers himself. They were pretty good, but not Evelyn's good.

Seth Geltman grew up in Boulder, Colorado, and graduated from NYU with a degree in Film. He's a teacher of Gifted/Talented children in the Denver area. His crossword puzzles, constructed with partner Jeff Chen, have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. His stories have appeared... well, nowhere — until now.

An Unwelcome Guest

Paul Brucker

Thou fearful guest,
dainty in plumage and hue.

The twilight gathers
with windless air, whispering low.

It marches over the hillside,
smooths the Sicilian grass,

And passes the field of honor
crowned with ragged rocks.

Death, unwelcome guest, rides by with its summons —
to cease to understand, to cease to know.

So sleep fair and undefiled
Little Lottie Daugherty.

Our day is done and the Hyblean bees
will continue to feed on the flowers of willows.

Paul Brucker lives in Mount Prospect, IL, “Where friendliness is a way of life.” Active in the Washington, DC, poetry scene in the early 1980s, he put a lid on poetry writing to go to Northwestern University’s graduate advertising program in a questionable move to earn a decent income. Nevertheless, he has succumbed to writing poetry again. Recent publications include: *The Beautiful Space*, *Prachya Review*, *Coffin Bell*, *Ray’s Road Review*, *The Bangalore Review* and the anthology, *The Pagan’s Muse: Words of Ritual, Invocation and Inspiration*.

The Career of Lucifer Messenger

Sarah Bolmarcich

HE WAS A NATTIER DRESSER than I expected him to be. In fact, he was more of a dresser than I expected him to be. His suit was charcoal-colored and tailored to fit him, because of the tail.

However well he dressed, and however much aftershave he slapped on, it couldn't mask the scents of smoke and despair and fear that followed him about. And on hot and humid days, or when it rained, you could see the reddish tint of his skin under his makeup.

He didn't even knock. He just popped through the door to my office and said, "Good evening!"

I was ready to send him away with his ears burning for interrupting me when I hesitated. "Aren't you—?"

"Yes! I am Lucifer, Lucifer Messenger. You should have my name on"—he crooked his finger towards my left elbow—"that piece of paper, there."

I didn't immediately look down. I was mesmerized by his fingernails. They were stained a deep, dark red and very nicely filed. He caught my stare and tucked his hand under his lapel.

"Ah..." I looked down for the piece of paper. Yes, there it was, the list of candidates who would be interviewed for the HR intern-

ship tomorrow morning. As assistant director of human resources, I got stuck with doing the interviews and supervising the intern once hired. I was planning to pick the person who looked least likely to create any problems.

Ten candidates had been selected for interviews. But there was only one name on the list: Messenger, Lucifer.

"What happened to the others?" I rifled through the papers under the list, which should have been the CVs and cover letters for all the candidates. Instead, there was only a CV and a letter from Lucifer Messenger. The return address was Circle 9, Lake Cocytus. No ZIP code.

"Well"—Lucifer Messenger gave a little giggle—"let us say they are vacationing in the tropics."

Really, this had gone far enough. I folded my hands before me on the desk and said, "Mr. Messenger, I gather you want to interview for our summer human resources internship?"

"That's right!" He nodded.

I indicated one of the chairs before my desk. I would ask him a few questions and send him on his way. "Have a seat."

The seating of Lucifer Messenger was an involved process. He approached the

chair, circled it a few times, and then chose to semi-recline on it on his left side. He crossed his right leg over his straightened left leg, wincing a bit. I later realized all this was because the tube for his tail had been sewn into his right pants leg.

At last he seemed set. “So, Mr. Messenger, tell me why you’re interested in our internship.”

“Oh, well!” Another little giggle. “I’m trying to prove to Daddio”—he pointed towards the ceiling—“that I’m not the total wastrel he thinks I am. Every family dinner, it’s all ‘when are you going to get a real job, Lucifer?’ as though I don’t work hard enough already. Like I don’t have responsibilities! And I constantly hear about how well Joshua and Michael and Gabriel and Raphael are doing! What the Big Kahuna”—another upwards gesture—“doesn’t understand is that if he gave me even a tenth of the support he gives them, I would be ten times better!” For a moment his eyes, so dark brown as to almost be black, had little flames instead of irises. The temperature in the room rose perceptibly.

“I see. Thank you for answering that honestly.” I paused to give both of us a moment to calm ourselves. “Now, what interests you about working in human resources?”

“Wait wait wait.” He wagged his finger at me. “Shouldn’t you be taking notes?”

“Of course, how stupid of me.” I yanked out a legal pad.

“I wouldn’t want to lose my dream job because you didn’t take notes.”

“I understand, Mr. Messenger. Now—human resources?”

“Oh...it seems so fun! Benefits, salary, hiring, firing, making people happy, making people miserable, making people fill out twenty forms in triplicate and then realize

they were given the wrong forms and have to fill out twenty other forms...Mwah!” He kissed his fingertips at me. “The perfect job for me! I have extensive experience in making people happy and miserable. Happy first, miserable later.”

“I was just about to ask you about experience.” I picked up his CV. “I see you are currently CEO and COO of Gehenna, LLC?” No place like Hell for limited liability.

“That’s right! I run the whole show! Nothing happens there without my approval.”

“Won’t you be missed there while you’re interning here?”

“Oh, no!” He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “I’m owed a lot of vacation time, you know! Several hundred years at least. Beelzebub can handle things in my absence.”

“Mr. Messenger—” I folded my hands and leaned forward. He started to lean forward, too, but almost fell off his chair. I caught a glimpse of something red and forked at the end emerging from his right pants leg. “—forgive me for saying so, but you seem much too experienced for this position. You have your own company. You’re older than our typical candidates. You’re really overqualified, you know.”

He had leapt up in indignation when I mentioned his age. “Older?! Does this company practice ageism, Ms. Wilcox? I know my rights! You can’t refuse to hire me on the basis of age alone. And believe me, I know a lot of lawyers.”

“No no no.” I tried to calm him down. The air conditioner was no longer effectively cooling the room. “I’m just not sure you would be a good fit.”

“Fit?! Fit?!” He threw himself into his chair and immediately jumped up with a howl of pain. Rubbing his right butt cheek, he paced in circles in front of my desk. “Fit? I’ll tell you

about fit, Ms. Wilcox! Fit is what I don't have with my family! Always disappointed in me, Daddio always shaking his head and Michael, that twit, always smirking at me while Joshua and Raphael do things like tie my tail to my bed when I'm asleep! Well, I plan to rise from intern to CEO of this company! That will show them Lucifer can cut it."

He pirouetted and was suddenly leaning across my desk, his nose inches from mine. His breath smelled like rotten eggs. I was powerfully reminded of Great-granny Wilcox. "Fit? What better place for me than a mortgage brokerage?"

"Mr. Messenger, I can't justify hiring you to my boss."

"Can't?" He calmed down and rearranged himself in his chair, smirking. "Oh, I think you can and will, Ms. Wilcox."

"How so, Mr. Messenger?"

"Behold!" With a much too dramatic gesture he unfurled a piece of paper from his inner breast pocket. "You will, if you want your soul back."

My soul? As far as I knew it was somewhere inside me. I read from the paper, "I, Cathy Wilcox, sell Mr. Luc my soul in return for five dollars to buy Mr. Freezee pops for me and my friends."

It was written in crayon on construction paper. But it was in my six-year-old hand.

I closed my eyes. I did have a vague memory of the Mr. Freezee truck jingling by and my friends and I wishing we had money to buy pops. The gardener for one of the nearby houses overheard and called me over. If I would just write what he told me on a piece of paper, he would give me enough money for my friends and me to have two pops each.

"Oh, come on," I said to Lucifer Messenger. "A six-year-old doesn't understand contract law."

"Nevertheless"—the finger wagged again—"I have your soul, Ms. Wilcox. Why do you think you picked human resources as a career? You don't have a soul! Why do you think you don't visit your parents enough, even though they're just over the border in Connecticut? Can't find a good man? Dump your friends when they get clingy? You don't have a soul!"

"Imagine—" he breathed at me, leaning closer again, "having a soul! Giving a damn! Working in editing, not human resources! Getting along with your parents, having friends get your back, finding the man of your dreams!"

It did sound good. I hesitated. "So if I give you this job, I will have my soul back at the end of the summer?"

"Not the summer, no. When I am the CEO of the whole company, yes. Then I will give you your contract and your soul back. But not before."

"So why not start on the banking side? Why human resources?"

"Ah, ah, ah"—the finger again—"trying to get rid of me, already? Anyone can pick up numbers, but I know humans. You'll get your soul when I am CEO."

That was a long time to wait. If having a soul was so great, I wanted it back soonest. I hadn't had one for thirty years. It sounded like I'd been missing a lot.

I had to get my hands on that piece of paper.

And at least he didn't want my job. I planned to be Director of Human Resources someday. "All right, Mr. Messenger. You're hired." Why not? I saw all kinds in my line of work.

"Excellent!" He sprang to his feet and clicked his heels.

"Let me have you sign our standard

contract, so you can start now.” With a few clicks I had the document ready and printed. I signed, then looked up at him.

“In the special notes section, I’d like to add the note that I will get my soul back when you become CEO.”

“Of course, of course!” He waved his hand as though he were extending a boon. “I shall like being CEO, you know!”

“Mmmm-hmmm.” I added to the contract, with the understanding that Mr. Lucifer Messenger will return to Ms. Cathy Wilcox the contract for her soul upon his becoming CEO, or the termination of his employment, and pushed the amended document across the desk. “Sign here, and here, and initial the bottom of each page.”

I watched him. He licked his finger as he turned each page. “Mmm...mmm...mmm... you don’t pay very much, do you?” He stopped at the last line and prepared to sign. I held my breath. I could fire him tomorrow and get my soul back. “Oh, no, Ms. Wilcox, I’m afraid we can’t have this!” He scored through or the termination of his employment. Damn.

And then he signed with an extravagant flourish. “Congratulations, Mr. Messenger. I’ll see you at eight tomorrow morning for orientation.”

Back home, I read through the alarmingly high number of stories about deals with the devil.

Faust, of course.

“That Hell-Bound Train.”

The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant.

“The Devil and Daniel Webster.”

The Picture of Dorian Gray.

None of them were especially helpful to someone who had sold their soul at six.

But the devil could be deceived. Souls

could be taken back. If I could just get that contract, he would have no choice but to return it. I would just have to be more cunning.

Lucifer Messenger was the ideal intern. His coffee was always just the right temperature. He could unclog any paper jam in a printer or Xerox machine. He could shred for hours on end. His ability to find “misplaced” files was extraordinary. When one case manager thought she had permanently deleted a list of employee social security numbers, he retrieved the data from the bowels of the server.

Except for his insistence on standing during even the longest meetings, and his annoying titter, he fit right in. He joined the lunch-time yoga classes. He discussed the hockey playoffs and the baseball season by the water cooler. He opened doors for female employees with a flourish and a little bow.

“I have to say, Cathy,” remarked my director, Mr. Hughes, “I was dubious when I saw he was older, but he’s a prize find.”

“We should think about hiring him permanently,” chimed in Ms. Casey, my associate director.

Lucifer Messenger was offered a position as a case manager the very next week. He excelled at all the requirements of the position: he confused new hires thoroughly at the benefits orientation, so that they did not sign up for the plans that would cost the company too much money; he created several more forms for applicants and new hires to fill out; and he negotiated lower salaries with aplomb by stressing the value of our benefits package, which he would explain further at benefits orientation.

A few months after this, Ms. Casey went on leave for cancer treatment. I was appointed acting associate director. Lucifer Messenger was under my direct authority.

I mentored him. I kept tabs on him. I wanted my contract back.

No one knew where he went at night or on the weekends. No one knew where he came from in the mornings. He was there later than everyone else and there before everyone else, but he checked in and out with security as required. However late I stayed, however early I arrived, he was always in his office, and there was no chance to go through his files looking for my contract.

He appeared to wear the same sharply-pressed suit every day, changing only for the lunchtime yoga sessions. I slipped into the men's locker area once but could not find his suit. Another day I entered his office and locked the door, glancing out the window to the courtyard first. There he was deep in a Kali pose, tongue protruding. The teacher was using him as a model for proper form to the other students.

I looked through his files undisturbed. Nothing.

In desperation, I arranged for us to go on a business trip together. And for the hotel to "lose" our reservation for a second room so we would be forced to share.

I planned to wait until he was asleep and search his briefcase and suit. But he didn't change. He didn't shower. He didn't even use the facilities. He stayed awake all night. There was no opportunity to get my contract back.

The final night I tried something different.

"Phew," I said as we came in after a day of meetings and meals. "I need a drink."

I kicked off my heels, unbuttoned a few more buttons on my blouse, and extracted two mini bottles of whiskey from the hotel bar. Then I walked over to Lucifer Messenger, who had sat down on the sofa and was powering up his laptop.

I gave him a bottle. He looked puzzled and put it on the end table.

I sat right next to him and tucked my legs up under me so I was almost touching him. He ignored me and logged onto his computer.

I leaned my forearm on top of his shoulder and let my hand hang down so it would brush his chest. He looked at it like it was the first boil of an incipient case of the bubonic plague.

"Sooo..." I leaned my head close to his so I could see his screen. "Whatcha doing?" My hand slipped inside his suit jacket.

"Work. And you, Ms. Wilcox, are distracting me."

"Work?! Come on, Lucifer, have some fun!" I reached out and shut his laptop.

"Gadzooks, Ms. Wilcox! I hadn't saved!" Frantically he opened his laptop and tapped away at the keyboard. "I know what you think you're doing, but I'm not interested, and you're distracting me."

"Come on." I tried again. "Kick back. Have some fun. You know, like the people in the Second Circle." I snaked my hand beneath the laptop and settled it firmly on his crotch.

I couldn't feel anything. I pressed harder, ran my hand around looking for something to grab. There was nothing there.

Was he some kind of Ken doll underneath the charcoal suit?

He had ignored my rummaging around. I wasn't even sure he could feel my hand. "The Second Circle? Those perverts? Eeeewwwww!"

I retreated. I didn't need a sexual harassment charge against me from Satan. Plus, there was serious repression going on here. Probably Daddio's doing. What else would you expect with a father who thought procreation was thinking other beings into existence?

We were a mortgage brokerage. If Lucifer Messenger wanted to be CEO, he would have to make a lateral move over to the banking side someday. Soon, before I lost more quality time with my soul.

I started dropping hints about that during our weekly staff meetings and anytime I ran into him in the hall. Finally, at his six-month performance review—glowing, of course—I asked him what he knew about finance.

Nothing, it turned out. He knew greed, but he didn't know credit.

I encouraged him to go to training sessions and take classes, where he found a lot to like. The idea of refinancing enchanted him. “We give people more money so that they can sink further and longer into debt, even at a lower interest rate? How nefarious! How wonderful!”

I'd recommended him for a transfer to Mortgages. I'd done some coursework towards an MBA years ago and I helped him study. Although strong on the broader concepts of banking, he was weak on the details.

“No, no, no.” I said after he'd botched yet another question on mortgage contracts and was scowling in frustration. “You need to pay closer attention.”

“What do you think I'm doing, Ms. Wilcox?” The temperature rose.

I raised a placating hand. “Look, let's do a sample contract so you can see. We'll keep it simple.”

“All right, but does it have to be houses? I

don't understand houses. I make contracts for souls.”

“Souls it is, then.” I started block printing on a piece of paper. “I'll be the buyer, you can be the lender.” I turned the paper so he could see what I was writing.

“I, Cathy Wilcox, do agree to mortgage my soul to Lucifer Messenger. Soul to be redeemed by Cathy Wilcox after thirty years upon repayment of \$10 to Lucifer Messenger. Upon repayment all previous agreements become null and void.’ See?”

He frowned. “Thirty years?”

“It's the typical term for a fixed-rate mortgage.”

“Oh.” He twitched in irritation. “Got it.”

“Here,” I said, drawing some lines on the bottom of the paper. “Now we both sign it, print our names, and date it.” I signed with a flourish, and Lucifer Messenger followed suit. I pushed the paper aside. “Now let's talk about NINJA loans and mortgages.”

He sighed, but we sat there for another two hours until he seemed to have a handle on mortgage types and agreements.

“I've got to go.” I gathered up my old textbooks and notes, slipping our contract into the pile.

Lucifer Messenger nodded, already turning towards his computer. He wasn't big on thank yous.

“Oh, by the way...” I turned back. “Here's your \$10.”

He looked at the bill, puzzled. “I don't understand.”

“I'm paying off my mortgage. I'd like my soul back now, please.”

Recognition began to creep into his eyes. The room temperature rose. He patted the breast pocket of his suit and pulled out the old contract for my soul.

“No! This document still holds force! And I

gave you \$5, not \$10.”

“\$5 thirty years ago would be worth \$10 today. Inflation, you know.” Another concept he was not strong on.

“But this is the real contract! And we agreed that you would have your soul back when I became CEO. We were just practicing with the other one.”

“We both signed it, it’s binding. And see here,” I pointed to the last sentence. “‘Upon repayment all previous agreements become null and void.’”

“AAAAAAHHHH!” Lucifer Messenger threw back his head and screamed. Daddio probably heard him far above. “Another one! Another trickster! And I fell for it! Again! Raphael is right, I’m too trusting for my own good!”

“My soul, please.”

“Soul? You want your soul?” The room was boiling hot. He reached inside his suit again and threw what looked like a handful of dust at me. I sneezed. “There you go! There is your soul! Much good it may do you!” The room had begun to reek of brimstone. Lucifer Messenger was growing, and his head now reached the ceiling. The charcoal suit expanded with him. “Now go! Leave my presence, mortal! We shall meet again, on the Last Day!”

I ran.

It has been twenty years since I last saw Lucifer Messenger. He transferred to the banking side of the company a few days after that. I heard no more of him until I sat next to his supervisor at a corporate lunch a few months later.

“Cathy Wilcox? How do I know that name?” she asked. “Oh! You recommended Lucifer Messenger for a transfer to the mortgage department.”

“Yes, that’s me. How is Lucifer doing?”

She just shook her head. The woman across from her leaned forward and said, “Terrible! He’s Ellen’s worst nightmare.”

I looked at her, confused. “He was our best case manager in Human Resources. Really polite. Hardworking. Ingenious.”

Were they thinking of sending him back to HR? I couldn’t have that.

“Not our Lucifer,” Ellen said. “He scowls at everyone. He’s monosyllabic. He leaves early and comes in late. Yesterday I heard him screaming at a client who asked him why mortgages were usually thirty years. She was just making small talk, and he was shrieking in her face. Spittle was flying everywhere.”

“Oh, dear. How odd. He used to open doors for women over in HR.”

“Not anymore. I’m afraid I’m going to have to give him a negative performance review. He won’t take that well.”

The next I heard, one day Lucifer Messenger did not come to work. He just vanished.

I have heard stories of a man who sounds like him here in Manhattan, a handsome fellow in a bespoke charcoal suit who always smells like smoke. Sometimes he is a psychotherapist, sometimes he is a yoga instructor, once he was a docent at MoMA. Perhaps he could no longer tolerate the thought of family dinners and stayed in New York. But I never ran into him, if it was he.

And as for me? As soon as I had my soul back, I threw myself into a social life. I dated, I chattered, I brunchted, I nodded wisely over exhibitions at the Met. I even got engaged twice. Both men wanted me to spend more time with them, they urged me to have kids while I still could, but I was now Director of

Human Resources and there was no time.

I tried to make friends. After I was a few minutes late a few times because of a holdup at work, they would drift away.

A few years ago both my parents died. I

did not visit them as they were dying and only grudgingly made time to attend their funerals.

There were deadlines to meet at work, a new payroll system to implement.

Lucifer Messenger lied to me.

Sarah Bolmarcich was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After attending college in Massachusetts, graduate school in Virginia, teaching in Maryland, Michigan, Texas, and Minnesota, as well as living in Greece for a couple of years, she now lives near Phoenix, Arizona, and teaches Latin and ancient Greek at Arizona State University. Although she's done a lot of academic writing, she started seriously writing fiction in summer 2017 and writes mainly short stories with the occasional poem.



Dreams

Matthew Stokes & Sophia Tittorton

Agreement over a Cuppa of Cappuccino

Pitambar Naik

While patting your disturbed innocence you missed the last train
your anxiousness down the spine was hatching a conspiracy
did it smell a war disproportionately while revoking your hostility?
The evening wears a see-through, deep-black and low-neck couture.

For the whole fortnight, we're exiled on an island
the moonlight was silver love wrap in that café coffee of loss.

This is again a leap year; this is further a chilled winter
whereas ours is an agreement over a cuppa of cappuccino
I knew how your presence was the Dionysian warmth
that resembled the inside's righteousness of a penumbra.

Your body tilts towards exertion and recurring ache
I aggressively smell the workloads of your innocence
breaking the barbed giddiness insanely we sip rather intrigued peace
serving some slices of music, sandwiches with spoonfuls of aroma
you ask, how the bosom of laziness smells
how we get wilder around the hypothesis of ceramic saucers!

A tiresome middle-aged hypertension maybe hovers
a perennial ecstasy is the eulogy of your dry and pale skin
our first night's disheveled breathing was a memorial song
look, something beyond the mimicry
we come together for a facelift of our heartbeats
and just have the chilled condensation with creamy milk!

Pitambar Naik is a poet and writer from Western Odisha in India. He's the winner of Write, Publish and Publicise Contest-Bengaluru Poetry Festival, 2019. He's longlisted for the Rhythm Divine Poetry Chapbook Contest 2018. He has a book of poetry—*The Anatomy of Solitude* (Hawakal Publishers, Kolkata-2019) and working on 2 more manuscripts. His work is forthcoming in *Queer Poetry of South Asia: HarperCollins India*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Magazine*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Stag Hill Literary Journal* and has appeared in *Voice and Verse Poetry magazine*, *The Punch Magazine*, *Vayavya*, *Literary Orphans*, *Mad Swirl*, *Occulum*, *Ethos Literary Journal*, *Joao-Roque Literary Journal*, *The Mark Literary Review*, *Mojave Heart Review*, *The Literary Nest*, *Formercactus*, *Best Indian Poetry* and elsewhere.

Vanessa Wanita Dicat

Michael Paul Hogan

THE RESTAURANT she got a job at was somewhere between Covent Garden and Leicester Square—you know, one of those typical London streets immediately off popular thoroughfares that always seem to have been hosed down with a sort of grayish-brown effluent that pools between the cracks. They gave her a red-and-white-striped blouse and a black apron with a pocket for waitress-pad and pen and a laminated menu with which to familiarize herself before she started. She smiled at that. She had to stop herself looking the manager in the eye and saying, How long does it take to learn nasi goreng? but instead she glanced at the (rather dirty) linoleum floor of the restaurant and said, Thank you very much, and then walked home. The blouse had a button missing off one of the sleeves and the apron had a sort of a whitish-grayish bloom that made it look not very clean. The afternoon before her first shift she sat in the bath with the blouse and the apron hanging over the shower rail. A breeze blew in through the open window. The curtain billowed inwards with the breeze. The light through the curtain made ripples on the ceiling. Like an aquarium. She leaned forward and rested her face on her knees.

The aeroplane banked sharply over the South China Sea and a sudden ray of sunshine flooded the cabin with the immediacy of an atomic

flash. Vanessa Wanita Dicat inclined her head against the window and, with the side of her face pressed against the lozenge of toughened glass, looked down at the gorgeous expanse of purest blue. Then came in sight the first of the Thousand Islands, and between them many small boats, each possessing the absolute clarity of diamonds sprinkled over a jeweler's baize.

She smiled. She said,

"Saya tidak tidur dengan orang asing," and touched with the tip of her finger the bubbles on the surface of her beer.

They lived in a one-room flat on the third floor of a converted town house on Manchester Street, with a stove and a washbasin in one corner and a toilet and a bathroom half-way down the stairs. She said,

"Hello, good morning!" to the elderly Polish gentleman on the second floor and the very elderly French lady on the floor below that. She wore a pair of sunglasses and a purple blouse and an olive-green skirt. She felt her skirt swish around her knees as she skipped across the hallway and out onto the street.

Her boyfriend was a painter. His name was Robert. His canvases were six feet high and

four feet wide. He painted with his back to the window and the canvas facing the windows on the opposite side of the street. His style was abstract portraiture, or else completely abstract. If his inspiration was for portraiture he positioned Vanessa on a small stool in the middle of the room and recreated her in sweeps and panels of red and green and blue. She focused on the wing-nuts on the framework of the easel and tried not to move. Robert wiped his brushes on the hems of his T-shirts and moved his head side to side. Like a bird, thought Vanessa, when his head appeared from around the side of the painting, Like a parrot or a parakeet or some tropical forest bird. She tried not to smile. Robert was only twenty-three but very serious. After they made love he looked at the ceiling and frowned while he smoked a joint. Marijuana always made Vanessa giggle. It was a balancing act.

She visited Bloomsbury and Knightsbridge and Camden Town. She ran the tips of her fingers along the railings in Notting Hill. Along Kensington Park Road and Colville Terrace she looked through the railings and into people's drawing rooms. She imagined living in a whole house and not just a single room. She imagined how the sofas and arm-chairs would feel against her bare legs. In one drawing room an old man was watching a movie on the TV. She couldn't hear the sound but could clearly see the characters on the screen. She stood there for five or six minutes, her face between two railings, her hands around two other railings either side.

"I'd like to buy you a drink."

"Why?"

"Because you're beautiful."

They'd met at an ex-pat bar called Erla's Mexican Cafe in Bandung. She said "Thank you." Then: "Are you a painter? You have paint under your fingernails."

He said,

"Are you a model? You have paint on the tops of yours!"

Cepat seperti kilat, she thought. Quick as a flash. Terlalu cepat. Too quick. She smiled. She said,

"Saya tidak tidur dengan orang asing."

He raised his glass and his eyebrows simultaneously. She clinked her glass against his. She said,

"It means, Thank you very much for the beer."

She felt her skirt swish around her knees as she skipped across the hallway and out onto the street.

"it's not my fault if you can't paint. It's not my fault. It's not my fault if nobody likes you. It's not my fault nobody likes you. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not—aiiee..."

The sound of his slap rattled the paint brushes in the jam-jars on the windowsill. Down on the street a car-door slammed. Then a double silence. Then the noise of a fly landing on the glass.

"Would you like another beer?"

"No, thank you."

"If you lived with me in London, we could drink wine. We could drink wine every day. All you have in Indonesia is beer and arak. And arak's just disgusting."

She thought: Now you will say that you want to paint me. Inevitable. Like the next line

of a bad song. She said,

“Sekarang anda akan mengatakan bahwa anda ingin melukis saya. Tak terelakkan. Seperti baris berikutnya sebuah lagu yang buruk.”

He smiled uncertainly. She smiled back. Despite herself she knew that she liked him. He said,

“Maybe while I paint you, you could teach me Indonesian.”

She thought, You are young and quite handsome. But mostly you are very young. She said,

“Mungkin.” His face was a combination of disappointment and confusion. She smiled. Then she laughed. The laugh surprised herself because it was genuine. She said,
“It means Maybe.”

She lay on the bed in the half-light of a summer’s evening, turning the pages of last month’s Vogue.

Robert was sleeping. She maneuvered herself out of the bed and put on his shirt, the shirt that was lying on the floor, and went to the washstand for a glass of water. It was the middle of the morning and it was raining. The rain made the window like the window in the bathroom. She watched two raindrops run down the pane and then join up just before they met the sill. She drank the water and turned to face the painting that Robert had finished / abandoned during the night. Suddenly it was as though the canvas were a mirror and she saw herself looking out through the great swathes of burnt sienna, viridian and cobalt blue. She put out her hand and touched the surface of the paint. It was nearly dry but still slightly tacky against her fingertips. Behind the paint she could see herself, an exotic

creature trapped in the artificial jungle of some mad parody of Regent’s Park Zoo. The girl in the mirror of the painting looked imploringly at the girl in the window of No. 28 Manchester Street. She said,

“Aku ingin pulang.”

She said,

“I want to go home.”

They were in Erla’s Mexican Café in Bandung. She said,

“Saya tidak tidur dengan orang asing.”

He said,

“Do you mind if I kiss you?”

“Tolong, tidak ada di sini! Please, not here! Not in front of everybody. Tidak di depan semua orang.”

“Later, then.”

She was suddenly conscious of every mark, every stain on the surface of the wooden table. She looked down into her handbag, slung over the arm of her chair, for a cigarette. Not facing him made the answer easier. She said,

“Alright.”

She fed the ducks in Hyde Park and then walked home past Selfridge’s, swinging her jacket over her shoulder and stopping in front of each window, imagining herself as her reflection, living in an enchanted world of Dior and Givenchy and diamonds and rubies. Of telephone kiosks and evening gowns and phosphorous moons and stars. Of everything wonderful. Of genuine love and genuine friendship. Of tinsel and tulle.

He had taken to locking her out, to making her stand in the street until some other tenant

left or entered the building. And then having to sit at the top of the stairs until he decided to come home. He usually smelled of cigarette smoke and alcohol and some brand of women's perfume that she didn't know the name of, let alone wear. The Polish gentleman looked up at her when he came out of the bathroom. She could see him through the stair rails. He said,

"Is you okay, Miss?"

She managed a smile. She said,

"I'm a silly girl. I forgot my key."

"Maybe your boyfriend come soon to home, yes?"

"Mungkin. Maybe."

The Polish gentleman nodded. He carried a towel in one hand and a sponge bag in the other. He raised the hand that held the sponge bag. She managed another smile. She watched him from underneath the banister go back to his room.

She ran her fingers along the paint brushes in the jam jars on the windowsill. She touched with her fingertips the bruise under her left eye.

One day, feeling particularly lonely, she went back to Notting Hill and walked along Kensington Park Road, looking for the window of the elderly gentleman watching TV. She remembered it had been on the left-hand side as she walked towards the tube station, and so on her right-hand side now. The distances seemed different, the road itself shorter, and the house fronts were not the same. She came to where she thought it was and looked through the railings. The ground floor curtains were drawn, even though it was the middle of the day. Next door an unfamiliar dog was peering out of the window, waiting for its

owners to come home. Vanessa gripped the railings very hard and rested her cheek against the cold metal and thought that it was not possible to feel more desperately alone.

They'd borrowed a motorbike and ridden up to the volcano above Bandung. The last part was too steep for the engine, so one walked while the other rode. They held hands and looked down at the boiling lake of the volcano. Their clothes and hair were damp from the steam and went painfully cold on them before they were even half-way back to the city.

"You're not even proper Indonesian. You're bloody Chinese."

She watched two raindrops run down the pane and then join up just before they met the sill. She said,

"Tidak ada di sini. Tidak di depan semua orang." She said,

"I'm a silly girl. I forgot my key."

She looked down at the wonderful freedom of the mid-morning street.

She ran cold water into a paint-stained glass.

"Not even Indo. Bloody—"

"Aieeee..."

The boy's name was Budi. He was fourteen years old. He had been a professional fisherman with his father since he was nine years old and had inherited the boat when his father was diambil oleh hiu. Taken by a shark. He loved his boat the way other boys his age might love a girl and barely spent any daylight hours in the beachfront shack he shared

with his mother and grandmother and three unmarried sisters. One day, while reeling in a barracuda that later he would sell to a Jakarta restaurant, he glanced up and saw an aeroplane that had taken off from Soekarno-Hatta Airport. The aeroplane was in the middle of its ascent and banking sharply. Its wing dipped and caught the sun, sending out an atomic flash. Budi winced and instinctively shielded his eyes. The barracuda felt the line slacken. The aeroplane slid through the sky as a fish might slide through the water. The after-image of the sun-flash on its wing shimmered and shimmied in the boy's eye. A sort of mirage.

The restaurant was on one of those typical London streets immediately off popular thor-

oughfares that always seem to have been hosed down with a sort of grayish-brown effluent that pools between the cracks. The afternoon before her first shift she sat in the bath with the blouse and the apron hanging over the shower rail. A breeze blew in through the open window. The curtain billowed inwards with the breeze. The light through the curtain made ripples on the ceiling. Like an aquarium. Like the aquarium in Jakarta she'd been taken to when she was a small girl. She looked up and watched the shapes weaving and undulating on the white plaster of the ceiling and the upper wall. Beads of water ran down the strands of her hair and dripped onto her shoulders. She leaned forward and rested her face on her knees.

Born in London, Michael Paul Hogan is a poet, journalist, fiction writer and literary essayist whose work has appeared extensively in the USA, UK, India and China. A former staff writer and columnist for *Island Life* in Key West, Florida, he has been a theater critic, travel writer, book reviewer and, most recently, Features Editor for the monthly magazine *Dalian Today* in NE China. He has also published six collections of poetry, the most recent of which, *Chinese Bolero*, with illustrations by Li Bin, was published in 2015. His short stories can be found in, amongst others, *Big Bridge*, *Peacock Journal*, *Culture Cult*, *No Extra Words*, *Random Sample Review* and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*.