2020: Literary Perspectives

Vol. 1 | Iss. 5

“Whoever fights monsters...”
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Finis coronat opus — the end crowns the work. Yes, this issue punctuates our 2020 publishing cycle, but it also represents a continuity and a new beginning, a bridge of sorts. Nothing, no year, is ever complete; life is a work in progress that doesn’t fit neatly into calendar intervals — writers and artists know this instinctually...

From its humble origins around the beginning of 2020, th Literary Magazine has grown and hopefully evolved. We couldn’t have done it alone! Through adversity, crisis, and uncertainty, we’ve managed to produce five issues, each trying to convey a magical literary & artistic landscape. Along the way, we’ve formed wonderful friendships, featured the work of wonderful writers, artists, and photographers, and had the honour of introducing readers to bright new talent from all over the world!

And just like that, we find ourselves at the end of what has undeniably been a tumultuous year. In this issue, we bring you our usual, eclectic content in addition to pieces that reflect on some of the major events of the past year.

We’d like to extend a heartfelt thanks to all of the amazingly talented contributors who’ve made this issue possible. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of our readers, guest editors, and contributors from the past year — thank you for joining us on this journey into new and exciting literary frontiers!

Wishing you all a very Happy New Year! May 2021 bring novel adventures and opportunities to spill more ink!

Editor’s Note

Welcome to the 2020 Year-End BONUS ISSUE...

Finis coronat opus. — Ovid

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Þunor
to
Θάλασσα

James Gifford

Spring sings late, stumbling and stilting.
Listen and long for a land of islands.
Photoelectric forms falter and fumble
to salt songs of old, and silken seas.

Burnt bark of blue moss, and veinous
rivers cannot break, turn, stir
longing, like the slow strides of the parched
olive forms limping. Summer
heats slowly strike with a stillness of
noontide. Then, I feel fatigue,
stroked by Sól’s guile. This green under a
curt and cold rain calls late, wine-dark.

A patina of promises pass all possibilities,
so Spring stills, silence its song.

James Gifford is an active editor, has taught in six countries on two continents, and lives
in the Fraser Valley. His recent writing is in SAD Mag, Abridged, The Nashwaak Review, and
The Quilliad. Find him on Twitter @GiffordJames.
Kara’s boyfriend had kicked her out — put all her stuff out on the lawn of the courtyard building they lived in. It was waiting for her in a sad pile when she got home from work. Luckily, she didn’t own much, and it all fit into her car. Kara didn’t have enough money for a down payment for a decent apartment, so she took what she could get. She worked in a call center in a grey building in a grey office park, the kind of place that expected its staff to wear nice clothing but didn’t pay enough for them to afford it.

It’s just until I can get back on my feet, Kara told herself.

The place she found looked more like a motel than an apartment complex. It was right at the mouth of the freeway. A long, single-story building with doors and windows that faced the parking lot, a spot for a car in front of every door. The apartment was dark inside. A tiny amount of light came from a single window in the living room with a view of the parking lot. The only other window was in the bedroom which overlooked the busy freeway.

There was a thin, sticky layer of grime covering every surface of the apartment. No matter how hard Kara scrubbed, she couldn’t seem to get through it. She gave up. She dragged her mattress in and fell asleep the moment she hit its lumpy surface.

Over the next few weeks, Kara scoured thrift shops and garage sales for cheap furniture to fill her tiny apartment. Everything had to be small enough to fit in the back of her car. Her mattress was still on the floor, but now she had a nightstand and a few lamps in her bedroom.

The complex was very quiet. Kara thought the other apartments might be empty; however, there was light and movement behind heavy drapes that covered the front windows.
The only neighbor Kara ever saw was an old woman who lived a few doors down from her. She had many large, potted plants in front of her apartment that she was always attending to. Kara would wave and say hi, and the old woman would wave but never said anything back. Once, Kara walked over to introduce herself.

The woman looked at her nervously as Kara approached.

“Hi, my name is Kara.” She held out her hand.

The woman shook it with a quick firm grip. She made a few gargled sounds and pointed to her throat but couldn’t get out the words and threw her hands up in defeat.

Kara smiled nervously.

“Well, it was nice to meet you. I’m down in seven. Knock if you need anything.”

Kara walked away and the woman went back to tending her plants.

Until moving into the building, Kara had never had any trouble with allergies, but now it had become unbearable. Her eyes watered, her sinuses were inflamed, and her throat was scratchy and raw. She felt sluggish. People at work commented on how tired she looked.

The light, spring weather turned into a heavy summer. The vegetation on the freeway slopes grew thick and dark green. It moved closer to the apartment complex every day, growing in thickness as it went. The grass and bushes around the complex also grew dark green and became fuller.

One night a strange noise woke Kara from an already troubled sleep. There was a thrashing sound coming from the bushes just outside her front door. She turned on her outside light and went to investigate. The bush closest to the door shook violently. She heard the labored chirping of a small bird. She crouched down to find the bird tangled in the tendrils of the bush. After trying unsuccessfully to get it free with her bare hands she went back inside to get her strongest scissors. Holding the bird in one hand she cut away at the tendrils wrapped tightly around its delicate legs. The vine had grown around it. Kara was surprised by how delicate the bird felt in her hands. She gently set it down on the sidewalk, fearful she would crush it. The small bird stood dazed a moment before tearing at the plant matter still clinging to its legs. Once free, it flew off.

The next morning, Kara noticed just how much the bushes in front of her apartment were overgrown. They had begun to cover her windows. Kara never saw any maintenance crews taking care of the property. There was a shed at the far corner of the parking lot. She found it to be unlocked. Inside, it was stacked with gardening equipment — lawn-mower, hoses, rakes, shovels, weed killer, all of which were covered in dust and cobwebs. She took a pair of gardening shears and spent the entire afternoon trimming the bushes under her window. When she stepped back to view her work, she let out a heavy sigh of disbelief. The bushes looked as full as when she had started. The cut branches lay all around them on the ground and yet they were still the same size and shape as when she started. Kara tossed the shears on the ground in defeat. Hot and exhausted, she went inside and went straight to bed. She woke up the next morning shocked that she had slept all day and through the night.

Every day, the vegetation around the apartment building grew thicker. Kara had given up trying to trim it around the outside of her apartment but brought the garden shears inside. Vines and branches had started to make their way through tiny cracks she hadn’t noticed before. They had gotten so large that she had started to cut them with the garden shears. That was as effective as it had been with the bushes outside. The kitchen was now completely taken over by large, winding green branches. Kara wasn’t hungry anymore anyway. Orange buds sprouted as the branches climbed their way to the bedroom. Kara was so tired. She was missing a lot of work. When she did go in, she got very little done and missed her quotas. Her boss scolded her several times for not adhering to the office dress code.

Early one morning, the buds burst open into large flowers. Pollen rained down on Kara like orange snow. It covered her face, clogging her nose and throat. She breathed deep and the pollen buried itself into her lungs. Her eyelids grew heavy and she fell back asleep.

Kara woke a few hours later. Her throat hurt, and her body ached. A thin layer of grime covered her skin. She took a hot shower, but no matter how hard she scrubbed she couldn’t remove the grime.

Kara dressed and went to work. She filed into the 10 o’clock staff meeting with the rest of the drones and sat down at the far end of the conference
table hoping not to be noticed. All her efforts failed. Her boss asked her a question. Kara couldn’t understand her; her voice sounded like it was underwater. She tried to speak, but only a few garbled sounds escaped her mouth. Kara clutched her throat — it felt like something was growing inside it.

Everyone in the room was staring at Kara.

“Are you alright?” were the only words Kara could make out.

She felt panicked. Kara ran out of the room, grabbed her stuff from her desk, got in her car, and drove home. The growth in her throat felt like it was moving. Her hearing became more muffled.

Kara parked her car in front of her apartment and sat with her head down, stunned for a minute.

“It’s ok. You’re home now.” Kara heard someone say close to her, so close it sounded like it was coming from inside her head.

She looked up. Her neighbor, tending her plants a few doors down, waved at Kara.

“It’s ok now. You’re safe.”

It was the neighbor’s voice inside her head.

Kara tried to speak but her larynx no longer worked.

“You can’t speak that way anymore, you won’t need to… Listen!”

Kara looked out.

The vegetation on the freeway slopes, thick and dark green, whispered to her in trillions of tiny voices.

Katherine Montalto is an artist, writer, and weirdo. A long time ago she was a chef. Her non-fiction work has been featured in Detroit Metro Times, Arthopper, tango-echo, The Local Dish, and Randomville. Her poetry has appeared in Juked and her fiction in Feed Your Monster and Medusa Laughing Press. A zine she made when she was 13 is part of the Riot Grrrl Movement of the ‘90s collection at Duke University Library. Her artwork is in the permanent collection of the MONA Museum of New Art Detroit. See her work at KatherineMontalto.com.
'The hardest thing to get used to in this place was watching where you stepped,' thought Antonia as she gingerly placed her foot on the conveyor belt, and then boldly got on to get to her destination. The floors in this institute were always moving, as a not-so-subtle reminder that not even the ground you stepped on could be taken for granted. There was no place to hesitate here: you had to be decisive. Assured. Confident. Bold. Otherwise, you’d fall flat on your face, and then have to pick up your teeth from the floor by yourself.
The Institute was more than just an omniversity — it was the place where you were trained to be primal, emotional, analytical, and deific. You had to learn how to rock the world with your hands tied behind your back, and you were playing with the lives of billions, and you were playing for keeps.

This place was no ordinary one. It was eccentric, enigmatic, unpredictable, and most of all, dangerous. Nothing was handed to you on a silver platter: you had to find your classes because no one would tell you where they were. There was no preparation allowed: your assignments were given to you on the drop of a hat, and you had to do complicated and complex work right on the spot. You were always on the go, and the final exam was based on your ability to solve the real-world problem in real-time: you set off a riot or a war. You failed; the end. It was an all-or-none kind of grading scheme, and there was no running to anyone to quibble to give you a pass.

But there were also the training assignments.

Those were exhilarating, frightening, but utterly bizarre. It was a hedonistic party on one hand, but one where you had to be cunning to get through it. Eros and Thanatos will manipulate your every impulse, said the professor, and you will learn to ride their wavelengths without getting swept up in their games.

The professor in question was a peculiar, shockingly serene, but attractive woman who found the Institute. Dr. Erika Eden. She founded the secret underground Institute for Omniversal Dealers where the actual motto was There are three kinds of people: those who play people, those who get played, and the Dealer who always wins. Antonia found herself here after all the universities in the world collapsed after the great global cataclysm wiped institutions off the map. She wanted to be a psychologist, but now, she somehow leveled up in this worldwide quagmire to become a Dealer: a person who brokered behind-the-scenes deals with chastened elites who outwitted themselves, and were now scrambling for salvation.

But you couldn’t just be a Dealer — you had to be groomed for it. It was a network of secret powerbrokers who knew how to quietly rock the world back on course. You learned strategy, psychology, and survival. You had to understand healthcare, defense, economics, and how all these factors interacted with one another. The previous regimes were too myopic, and always pandering to the uninformed complainers with never took any risks, and now, the world had changed.

For some, their lives were forever ruined, but for others, their time had arrived and they could deliver. The problem was the old ways of thinking were archaic, and many people still could not accept that their old tricks no longer applied. The students here were savvy enough to feel the winds of change and were now given a chance to quietly steer the world away from the brink, but it was not an easy school to handle.

As the class settled in, a sultry and glamorous woman in her forties strutted into the class. This was the feral Dr. Erika Eden. She was a war hero to many, and an empress to many others, but only if you were in the know. She flouted rules. She was a risk-taker, always impeccably dressed when she did it. Everyone grew silent as she walked in the middle of the room and took a bow.

“Ready?” she asked as the class applauded their anticipation. “Good, let’s not waste time.”

“What’s the assignment?” asked a student.

“It is one of a wager, of course. Remember, the Dealer always wins,” she purred as she walked around the classroom. “You will do your research, and then make a wager. Your mark is all or none. Pass or fail. How you decide to wager is your choice, as always, but be aware that it is the political atheists who see the rigged nature of the board, and they see the sanctioned insanity of rules, narrative, sophistry, and above all else, atmosphere. The brain is a biological machine that can...
be swept up in gaslighting and atmosphere, and it is rigged to believe deceptions. Its only defense is to be aware of the lies and misperceptions of old habits, and then look at reality.” She paused. “Any questions?” She looked around. “No? Then here is your first assignment before the final exam. We have managed to break out the Inferno Five…”

“Those rich creeps who almost destroyed the world?” blurted a young student.

“Yes, those rich creeps,” deadpanned the professor.

“But they almost caused a nuclear armageddon!”

“Yes, but their fate is your assignment.”

Suddenly, five photographs appeared on the holographic screen as Dr. Eden continued to speak. “They come from different backgrounds, genders, and races. We have a trillionaire, the politician, the economist, the actress, and the activist. One is rich, one is powerful, one is brilliant, one is beautiful, and one is righteous. Different ages, education, and socioeconomic beginnings and political leanings. They all agreed to the terms before we wiped their memories clean away.” The photographs vanished as another appeared of a party where all five were in attendance. “That is a historical photograph of the day those five plotted to impose their schemes on billions. They unleashed a devastating propaganda campaign that was seemingly effective, but fatally flawed. Their machinations caused unprecedented suffering, and, of course, the creation of my new career.” Dr. Eden smirked and then sighed.

“In any case, remember, your grade depends upon your wager, and I find students learn nothing unless they have skin in the game. In the beginning of the year, you were all given your academic chips — you all started the year with a one hundred percent average. Those chips represent your mark so far and your progress. You can win more to make up for the ones you lost — or you can leave with a final grade of zero. Your information sheet gives you the details to make an informed wager for this final assignment. If you lose all of your chips here, you cannot make it to the final exam.”

“What are the parameters?” asked Antonia.

“Simple: they can take a suitcase with ten million dollars inside and agree to a new identity. They are given a house, car, and new job, or they can forfeit it all to spin a roulette wheel for the chance they discover their identity, knowing full well that the Dealer always wins, and that there will be a weapon there where the others will be free to dispatch of them. They will all be given the same deal. They will all be told that they are all mortal enemies of one another, and all betrayed each other with treacherous duplicity and that the safest bet is to take the suitcase to start a new life. They can play, but once they spin, they forfeit any chance of walking away.”

One young man looked miffed. “They cause the deaths of thousands of innocent people, and they get ten million bucks? They destroyed the global economy, Miss E!”

“They agreed to be your next assignment, Ahmed. They have to agree to take a suitcase in order to leave.”

“They’ll just take the money and run, Miss E.”

“We know nothing of the sort, but right now, you all have to make a wager with your chips. You have read their dossiers, and you have all the information you require to make a calculated risk. Determine how many, if any, take the suitcase, and how many survivors you expect; and, if so, which order you expect them to survive. Once you have made your wagers, we will awaken them from their holding room. Remember, none of them have any memory of their identities or why it is they are here. As of now, they are strangers to one another and have no
ideas of what is happening outside of their room. Use your instincts and temper them with humility. The bottom-line question is this: Do these five people have the ability to be teachable?"

The students all watched and read the dossiers as they consulted with one another. It was a grim game, they all agreed, and a frightening one at that. Some worried there would be some bloodshed among the Inferno Five, while others worried that one or more would walk clean away, never to be made accountable for their mendacity.

Once the wagers were all made, Dr. Eden pressed a button on her phone, causing the screen to show a darkened room where the Inferno Five had been slumbering. Antonia looked at the screen intensely. Becoming a Dealer was not a position of fun and games. It was life and death. She frowned. She was certain the tycoon would grab the money and get away, even though he was the impetus and the driving force of all the current global woes. She also thought the young activist would wise up and would be guided by youthful idealism and not play the game. The economist and politician were likely going to play to some degree, and the actress was likely going to try to spin the wheel and was thus most likely to be the first one killed. After that, the politician and economist would smarten up to take the money and run once they saw this was no game and the bloodshed would be very real.

Antonia watched intensely as the tycoon scoffed at the offer and ignored the repeated warnings that the game was rigged and that the Dealer always wins. He was demanding to spin the wheel first. The others were all dutifully following his lead, even the young activist. Antonia frowned as she realized she had just flunked this assignment, but would at least have enough chips to make it to the final exam. She was still in the game, and she was determined to make it to the end of the year.

But that was the enigmatic way of Dr. Erika Eden’s Institute for Omniversal Dealers: the underground school was rooted in reality, and went along for the harsh and bumpy ride. People are people, she would tell her students time and again, and don’t think one group of people are different than any kind of other people. Once you understand that you are just a person, everything else falls into place.

Antonia sighed and nodded to herself as she jotted down a little note to herself, reminding her that for the next assignment, to stop looking at the labels people thought up as a misdirection, and just look at the bottom line. There really were three kinds of people in the world: those who play other people, those who get played — and, of course, those who don’t play any games, but deal — and the dealers always won, because they knew better than to play in the first place.

Lesson learned, she thought, as she now knew without a doubt the outcome, and steeled herself for it as she wondered why people could have it all — and absolutely nothing at the same time. □

Alexandra Kitty is an artist and author of eight books, four which were released in 2020, including The Mind Under Siege: Mechanisms of War Propaganda, A New Approach to Journalism, The Art of Kintsugi, and The Dramatic Moment of Fate: The Life of Sherlock Holmes in the Theatre.
After mother re-married, she taught me to sleep in the skillet, mirror of incongruity, there is no sanctuary in fire, but no blade cuts this bread, the bones of what we sacrifice rearticulate themselves, a structure of shadow and flame, the word on my brow is not the ash on my tongue, not the discarded skin of our yesterdays, emptiness is the place when you were small, or a door locked behind you, windowless.

This is the truth of passages, smoke is a leaf of longing sprouting from tongue, carrying the flower forward. What opens in your eye feathered, fragrant; a vine once sprouted from my arm spilling so many petals, shells glistening at mouth of wave. Some doors remain shut, always.

Only a dull edge bites the flesh drags in the cut, to take up the knife after cutting is to change the orientation of scars, no longer linear, now they reach bone deep, a binding, a conjuring of closure, leakage but a shadow on the tongue an ember caught in the throat, some truths fly on dragonfly wings, others drop their leaves, spilling light from roots. What is dead named does not revive, once dissolved a form will not reconstitute, those living between leaves of palmetto or leaves of books, inscribed with dedications, receipts of Granny’s gumbo, shrimp and grits, biscuits, what we consume defines us, shadow and flame, we remain susceptible to disappearance, fading with the light, moonflower closes with day, sphinx moth folds up the darkness, the dead remain dead, shrouded in starlight.

Shell of Triton, Flowering Palm

Peach Delphine is a queer poet from Tampa, Florida. Proud Mama of a thoroughly spoiled dog, former cook, infatuated with the undeveloped Gulf coast.
A Letter to a Lost Future
Lucy Wallis

I find a photograph of your hands in *Hidden Valleys* by Justin Barton and fold the foil back around my sandwich. June sunlight streams through the summer foliage, shade shifting in the breeze, and I read. The image marks a line: ‘a gap is a place through which new worlds arrive.’ It illustrates this moment — you, appearing from an old world into this one, a world in which you are not. A tactile memory lodged within the virtual-real world of the photograph, bleeding into the world in which I am reading the book. All of the worlds existing at once; I am taking the photograph, and I am looking at the photograph, and I am remembering looking at the photograph later, all at once.

We are driving through Germany and I am 22 and you are 25. It is bitter cold, and the Fiat 595 we have rented is a red cherry spiraling up the blank curve of the autobahn, flanked on either side by grey-white snow. Everything outside the car is in motion — blurred, unfocused, separate. And there are your hands, steady as a rock on the steering wheel. Heart-achingly familiar. As is the suggestion of your face, just out of frame to the top right corner. I can picture your expression, but I haven’t captured it. We are listening to Kraftwerk, and you’re talking about the shifting dynamics of electronic music. I take a picture of your hands on the wheel and sing Depeche Mode to you.
There is a light breeze drifting into the square; out there somewhere a clock chimes three times. I took my break late again. I am halfway through a sandwich, reading in the afternoon sun, performing intellectual. I do not like my job. You always said I never liked my jobs. You said it was something in me that couldn’t ever be happy doing what I was doing. Like ivy strangling the tree that holds it to the sun. You said it was my fault about the last one. I am remembering the way your face looked when you said it. I am supposed to be thinking of new things to write about — but I don’t. I’m not. The sun is shining, and the shadow of a nameless tree shifts its great weight over me. Time inches by. I am 24 and you are 27 and I don’t sing Depeche Mode to anyone, really, not any more.

‘Not really now not anymore.’

I am taken from a Thursday afternoon lunch break to that lost moment. I am in the square and I am in the car. Two of me. Or, perhaps, two simultaneous ‘place-times’ layered onto me. Or, perhaps, I am in a hole of memory that connects the two — the present moment (which is only a past moment to a new future), and the past moment of the photograph. Awareness that this, too, is a fleeting moment strikes me. Now the photograph of your hands has become a temporary time tunnel. I have been permitted a moment of travel for a fleeting instant. When I come to rewrite this later, it will be a further spectrogenic doubling of that moment; these words becoming-photograph, becoming-memory.

This kind of layering, by which I mean a kind of superimposing of one time-moment over another, is the beginning of thinking of places as layered sheets interlinked by threads of holes, continually creating new layers and new links with each passing moment. This is the beginning of what I think is grief-space. Grief-space is just a name I made up for the space in the holes. The holes are where things are missing from your life. There is a hole where you used to be.

I tried to explain grief-space to you once, and your practical mind dismissed it. But the more I think about it, the more I think I exist in grief-space. I don’t say that to make you feel sad for me, I say it because I am constantly aware of things that are missing, even if I’m happy without them, or in spite of them. You said it would drive me mad; all the links to things that are gone. I said nothing.

If a gap is a place through which new worlds arrive, then the very fact of something not being there creates a possibility for new worlds to bleed through. Or, to bend Barton’s statement slightly, if “a gap is a place through which new worlds arrive,” then perhaps a gap allows any world to seep in. In the square on this June day, the gap creates an opportunity for worlds that might have happened to seep into the now.

I am reminded of something I’ve read before, in Red Shift. There’s a real emphasis on a compulsive repetition. Three sets of events are repetitions of each other, all happening simultaneously in the novel, superimposed upon each other, and over a hill in Crewe. Even though they’re happening at different times, there’s a sense that they’re happening simultaneously because they’re each an echo of the other, layered, doubled up, like a “Hello” bouncing back across an empty landscape. All happening in the same place, so when the echo returns, it acts as a replaying of the original act. Happening together, happening separately, happening together — an oscillatory process of returning, revisiting, reliving.

Red Shift ends, “not really now not anymore.” What does this mean? That there is no now anymore? Or, is it that because everything repeats over and over again in the same pattern of events everything has collapsed on to the now? Or, maybe that nothing is real now, and each movement reflected, and refracted, by ghostly past and future versions of ourselves? I don’t know. All I know is that I loved you once, but ‘not really now not anymore’.

I’m sorry if I’m being confusing.

I found pictures of that trip to Berlin in Red Shift, too. I must have slotted them in there when packing up our room — pictures of you smiling when we were happier.
On the page where I found the picture of your hands in Hidden Valleys, Barton talks about upward spiraling through space, ‘to make all your re-visiting into events in an intensificatory process.’ Revisiting the car in Berlin, revisiting the square in which I found the photo is an intensificatory process. Individually, those two moments meant nothing, really. I took the photo quickly on a disposable camera. You were laughing, we were easy. But together, they’re a moment of remembering in which what we might-have-been becomes real again. I never left you in that photograph, I never stopped loving you in the photograph. The world in the photograph still exists in the now. This is as opposed to revisitations becoming a deadening of a space, like a desensitisation to a moment, or a memory. Instead the moment is made more concrete by rehauling it, or, allowing it to inhabit us again. Instead of memory being a photocopy of a photocopy of a moment in your mind, memory becomes an old jacket you pull out and put on, or a bath you draw for yourself.

I think grief-space works like this. The more visitations to place, the more layers are pasted over it; each time superimposed onto the same place, like those multiple exposure photographs you took where there were a million of you in one place. Grief-space isn’t the stack though — the stack is just how places work; they stack themselves up with all the multitudes of comings and goings. No, grief-space is what’s inside the gap. Grief-space is the hole.

In writing this letter, and in looking at that photo in the square, grief-space begins to create a new platform. Grief itself begins to act as two lines of flight from two layers in the stack, converging on a new platform built into the void. A virtual-real imagining of a possible future. An impossible specter of something that might have been. Grief-space is the mode through which the line of flight travels to reach the void, jettisoning two layers (the place where you are, and the place where you are not) out into the void to exist simultaneously. That photograph of you lets me traverse the gap. Almost as though, out there, we’re enacting Schrödinger’s relationship, disconnected from my reality. Our relationship is both alive and dead out there, and I take small comfort in that. The compulsive repetition I perform, isn’t to go back to you. I don’t love you — not really now not anymore. But to revisit a moment when I did, when I didn’t need to forgive you or be forgiven.

In the photograph we don’t fight, you’re never unhappy, you never check out by getting wasted and you never hide things from me. In the photograph, I’m never mean, judgmental, or dismissive, and I only have time for you. In a way, not only is the photograph a portal for me to revisit that world, but it’s a way for that world to continue to exist in the now. It’s still there, trundling along the autobahn on a loop. It may be not really now not anymore, but it also, sort of is now, if then is always now, then there is no then. But that’s another kind of philosophy, and you would probably laugh scornfully at that. “The now is everything, but what has happened and what will happen, and therefore the now is nothing,” is what you’d say. Or you’d tell me that “it’s over, and all this writing doesn’t change anything.” Actually, if I’m honest, I don’t think you’d even say that much. You’d probably just look at me and say, “hmmm…” and go back to doing whatever it is you were doing.

The photograph is a secondary tether. I am not in that car with you on a late January afternoon hurtling along a motorway somewhere west of Berlin. I am in a park in Bethnal Green. Yet both instances have become crystallized within one another for a moment. Now I have a dual memory — first of remembering the car, and second of remembering where I remembered the car. When I come to redraft this later, there will be a third memory of writing this down, and then they’ll all stack up upon the page, each redraft, each re-read, each time a reader reads it and inhabits my memories for me... All of them distinct layers.

This is how grief-space transforms landscapes into weird dream-platforms. Suddenly, the square is not only that, it is also the inside of a Fiat 595. You’re going to argue here, because you’re quite right — it’s not a Fiat 595. But somehow, for a few minutes on a Thursday lunchtime, it is, and now the inside of the car is superimposed over the square. I can feel the leather seats under my legs, hear you speaking about synth patches, and
the sounds of the radio. The experience of loving you is tethered to the square now. The void was called in Bethnal Green at ten past three on a Thursday in June and I met it with the photo in one hand and a half-eaten sandwich in the other. Unprepared, as ever, to face the outside, and the unpredictable nature of my own intermittent spiraling in my life...

Nostalgia is a drug.

***

Perhaps when I am old, I shall accidentally find myself in this square again. Whilst I’m sure that I’ll remember the job I had and other lunches spent, I’m sure I will remember singing behind the wheel, and you laughing and talking about Minimoogs. I am dead certain I’ll remember your sure and steady hands on the steering wheel. I’ll remember the suggestion of your smile in the top left-hand corner of a 6x4 photograph. I’ll remem-ber that I forgive you, and I’ll hope that you forgave me. This is the world that will bleed through the gap I opened in Bethnal Green. You are the gap. That new world is one in which you are there and I am there. It is the old promise that we made. It is a comfort to me that at least somewhere that promise is kept.

But we aren’t there now. You are somewhere in Kensal Rise and we don’t talk anymore.

I finish my sandwich, close the book, and consign that future to the outside.

And I return to work. ☕

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Lucy Wallis (she/her) is a writer from London who can currently be found in Paris leaving croissant crumbs between the pages of books. You can find her work in The Daily Drunk, Rejection Letters, Clay Literary, and of course Near Window among others.

A Night at the E.R.

Stories from It was Her New York

C.O. Moed
The E.R. Visit: Begin the Beguine

The job is on the BMT line, express stop. So, I beat the ambulance to the ER. Because when the MTA works, it works.

Penny, the Thursday-through-Sunday Medicaid home attendant, jumps out and shrugs, “She’s fine. Cursed me all the way up.” We both knew Florence was OK, but good to do it by the book.

I do my “look in eyes, shake hands” with both ambulance drivers just in case we run into them again. They recount the various comments Florence made on the way up. Judging from their attempts at diplomacy, it is clear she’s not their usual “pick-up-the-sick-old-lady” run.

The ER is packed with a lot of old people ranging from normal old, sick stuff to normal old, dying stuff. We get parked in a corridor. Penny splits back to the apartment. Good time to catch up on the incontinence-laundry pile.

Hospital Rule Number One: With an old person who spent the last month in bed refusing to do anything except pretend to sleep while listening to the radio, do everything you can to keep their clothes on no matter what hospital personnel request. Because you know once those sweatpants come off, Florence, it will be impossible to get them back on, Florence.

So just say no.

Say, “Pull up her shirt and hook her up to the EKG that way.”

Say, “You don’t need her in a gown for the X-Ray because doesn’t it just go through the clothes?”

Say, “She is not being checked into the hospital. I’m in charge of my mother’s care and we’re going home, so I’m not putting her in a gown.”

Don’t say that last one out loud — yet. But be prepared to say it a hundred times later.

The X-ray technician asks, “Are you related?”

“Daughter.”

“That’s related.”

Because I rarely call Florence ‘Mom,’ I’m often mistaken for the home aide.

A couple of hours later, we’re moved to a better and much less drafty part of the corridor, because all the stalls are still packed.

A whole bunch of cops and firefighters wheel in a crazy old man, a nostalgic reminder of the 1980s when Reagan cut funding and the mentally ill poured onto the streets the next day to become the new homeless. The old man is handcuffed to the wheelchair. As he passes us, it sounds like he is screaming “Stupid Spirit!” which I think is a pretty imaginative curse. One of the women cops corrects me. “Stupid fill in any ethnicity you want…” We listen to him scream for the next hour the following:

“You fucking nazi!”

“You fucking spic!”

“Why am I handcuffed?”

“Get these fucking handcuffs off me!”

“Nazi, Nazi, Nazi, Nazi Hospital! I didn’t want to come here.”

In between the screaming, Mr. Nurse Cee tries to draw Florence’s blood. But people keep going back and forth with stretchers, so he has to step out of the way a lot. He doesn’t get much. I sing numbers from Sondheim musicals to Florence as he takes another stab at it.

“Door Chimes! Phone Rings! In Comes Companeeeee!”

“NO! THAT’S WRONG!” Florence yells. “IT’S PHONE RINGS! DOOR CHIMES… OWWW!” Mr. Nurse Cee’s finally got a good vein.

The screaming old man quiets down — either he got moved or he got sedated. The firefighters and the cops head out. The really cute firefighter says to the other really cute firefighter, “What do I know? I’m just a stupid Spic.” The woman cop complains to her partner, “I don’t wanna leave my handcuffs here.”

Dr. Hot-to-Trot suddenly appears at our gurney with all of Florence’s paperwork. He is young, in charge and moves like a jockey — that small, butch-in-command mojo swagger. You can tell he’s going to be a great doctor.

He asks Florence, “Are you home?”

Florence says, “Well, I’ll call it home…”

I have been holding her hand through it all. My nose itches. I scratch it and smell her urine. I find a hand-sanitizer dispenser and clean both of our hands.

“What have you ever taken care of anyone like this before?” Florence asks me.
Dr. Hot-to-Trot then wonders if maybe she has a urinary tract infection. “Can you get her to pee? If not, we can easily catheterize her.” He seems very excited about that.

Questions that separate the men from the boys:

• How many times have you seen your mother’s vagina and urethra and asshole?
• How intimate are you with the smells of those places you now wipe clean on a regular basis?
• How often do you make decisions about those places?

“No catheters. It will be too upsetting. Let’s try the bedpan.”


You gotta draw the line somewhere.

For a frail old lady, Florence is dense heavy bones to move. It takes the new night nurse, Ms. Nurse Dee, and me ten minutes to pull off the sweatpants and slip the metal bedpan under her. An hour later, a hopeful check only finds the empty pan suctioned tight to Florence’s bottom. In between her shouting “Ow, Ow! That hurts!” Ms. Nurse Dee and I pry the bedpan off her shrunken butt and a small plastic one is quickly slipped under her instead.

Then we shove as many little apple juice boxes as we can into her hands and she slurps away happily. Soon she is sleeping.

Dr. Hot-to-Trot pops his head into the stall. “Anything?!” Man, this guy is so excited about the possibility of pee.

“Don’t worry! It will happen!” His shift ends in a few minutes and what he really wants is to find out if his hunch was right.

Suddenly things get quiet and empty. As if New York decided to take a break from car accidents and deranged homeless people and sidewalk falls and life-threatening illness.

Even when the supervisor of Dr. Hot-to-Trot warns me that they can’t be responsible if I refuse to do what they say I should do, which really means if something goes wrong with your mother we’re going to make sure you go to jail.

I’ve heard it all before. I also know if she stays in the hospital, things will go more downhill than they already have, and right now things are so downhill we’re digging a tunnel.

All the tests come back fine — her heart, her lungs, her pressure, her blood. I do not say “told you!” I just pretend to look relieved.
“I want you to feel better,” she states. “I had to change in later years. Working.”

I sit up. “Working? Like teaching piano working?”

“No,” she says. “Working on myself. Becoming equal to what I had wanted to do.” And then she looks at me… she looks at me and…

A few hours ago she didn’t know my name or that I was her daughter. I was just the person she knew would take care of her, rub her back, sing her songs, help her feel better — love her like a mommy loves her little girl.

But suddenly in this quiet and empty ER, after fifty years of knocking on closed doors, waiting patiently under the grand piano and walking silently next to her as she stomped through the city battling her demons, someone else is looking at me.

And although I only met her a couple of times in my life, I’d recognize her anywhere.

For, here, in a stall with plastic curtains drawn around us like a shawl, from the midst of her disintegrating into wisps of childlike desperate need, I suddenly see my mother again.

“I’m going to give you a drink!” she declares.

“Of what? Scotch?” It was what we drank together at an old bar in the East Village, never mind that I was still underage.

“No!” We are now both grinning at each other.

Out of nowhere a herd of doctors stomp into the next stall and wake up the addict there.

“We’re going to give you Narcon.”

“No! No! I don’t want Narcon.”

“Well did you take anything?”

“NO! NO! I just fell asleep on the bench.”

“Then why won’t you take Narcon?”

“No! No!”

Florence and I look at each other like WOW. What was that?

We rest. I can’t take my eyes off of her, and she keeps looking at me.

She finally says, “Is there anything I can give you?”

“For, here, in a stall with plastic curtains drawn around us like a shawl, from the midst of her disintegrating into wisps of childlike desperate need, I suddenly see my mother again.”
“Yeah.”

My childhood as her pupil, spent learning notes and keys and rhythms.
And time signatures. The beats between two bars. The measure of each note. The pulse within the walls of a home.

My cousin once told me it wasn’t the trumpets that brought down the walls of Jericho. It was the tears of the women.

I weep. Out loud. And I weep out loud, not from a broken heart, but from a heart that has broken open.

“You look awful,” Florence says.

The addict, furious at the treatment he was offered but refused to take because it didn’t include the pain killers he wanted, screams at the doctor who has told him to leave the ER, “I HOPE YOUR CHILDREN ARE ALL FAGGOTS AND THEY DIE OF AIDS!”

“I’m listening!”

I say, “I think this was one of our best visits ever.”

But she dismisses me. “Oh, I like the other one where you put all the…

“Music?”

“Yeah.”

And I hear myself speak like the daughter I never got to be. “I’m just sad.”

“When you say the word SAD, I can feel it. You always say you’re O.K. Makes me think it’s…”

Another word gone…

“A facade?”

“Yeah.”

“I am O.K. But I’m sad.”

“Why don’t you go to a shrink? Get a minor…”

“What? Key?”

Shakes head.

“Start changing. Start changing the change of the different changes of the…”

I lean in, hoping my body acts like magnet for her words but she is fading…

“… and then start out with what you have with starting with a different…”


“No. What I can think of it… that way is better…”

And then she starts to count.

“1,2,3… 4,5,6… 1,2,3… 4,5,6…”

We look at each other.

“A different time signature?” I ask.

“Yeah.”
The Eleventh Hour

It is now eleven hours since we've arrived at the ER. Ms. Nurse Dee comes in and we find that all the apple juice we plied on Florence was happily peed out—not into the little plastic tub, but all over the sheets, the pads, the blanket, the bed. There is nothing left to do but catheterize her.

I hold Florence's hand and sing her numbers from Sondheim musicals.

"Door Chimes! Phone Rings! In Comes Companyee!

"PHONE RINGS! DOOR CHIMES… OWWW!!"

Somehow there's still some pee left inside her and the filled plastic bag is whisked away, and we all find out she has a urinary tract infection which is one reason she couldn't get out of bed for the last couple of months.

A prescription is called in to the 24-hour pharmacy, a private ambulance is summoned to take us home, and two Amazons, with no effort whatsoever, move Florence from bed to stretcher and whoosh her into the ambulance.

I quickly kill the roach running around the back but Florence somehow sees it.

"Was that a roach??"

At 10:50 p.m. we finally roll into her home lobby. Now, all we have to do is get Florence from the stretcher to the wheelchair.

One of the Amazons scoops Florence into her arms. Florence, utterly befuddled, stares up at the Amazon in childlike wonder. Without thinking I blurt out, "Florence! It's your dream come true! You're in the arms of a beautiful woman."

And with that she is gently plopped into the wheelchair.

We can't all fit in the tiny elevator. "They are going to take you up in the elevator and I'm going to take the stairs and meet you up on the 5th floor."

Florence's face crumbles. "But I want to go with you …"

Both Amazons go, "AAAAWWWWWWW…"

I run up five flights of stairs and all four of us, the two Amazons, and Penny, who has waited up for us, manage to get Florence out of sheets and wheelchair and confusion to face her bed.

When Florence sees it for the first time, her face lights up like a child opening a present. "OH!!"

The other Amazon scoops up Florence in her arms like a prince to a princess or a lover to a lover. Or a really strong woman to a frail old lady, and she gently places Florence in bed. Penny and I cover her up.

Florence is finally home.

I head out to the 24-hour pharmacy.

I haven't seen my mother since.

Raised on New York’s Lower East Side when it was still a tough neighborhood, C.O. Moed is an alum of the WOW Café and a recipient of the Elizabeth George Grant for Fiction. Her work has appeared in various presses, anthologies and online 'zines, including: Lilith Magazine, Shades of Blue: Writers on Depression, Suicide and Feeling Blue (Seal Press), and AWAKE!: Reader for the Sleepless (Soft Skull). She began a blog in 2008 because she didn't recognize the New York she knew in anything she was reading. She needed to tell the stories of her streets and her people. She was also damned if she was going to let Florence's life disappear. This collection, culled from 10 years and 1400 of those New York stories, is like family letting it rip over Thanksgiving dinner.
Selections from *Drunk as a Skunk*

Matthew Paris

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*The Neanderthal Diet*

Some say your tastes in cuisine are quirky
When you chew on the gizzard of an extinct turkey.
You can cook it or buy it
It’s the Neanderthal diet.

You pick up the guts of an old dead cat
Boil its innards in a leaky vat.
Everyone gets quiet.
It’s the Neanderthal diet.

You don’t eat dragon meat, bloody, raw.
You don’t push a mammoth down your craw;
It might start a riot.
It’s the Neanderthal diet.

Eating’s not a thing of the past
Neither is love in a cave.
You just gobble down everything fast
That’s how Neanderthals behave.

You chomp down splitting a long dead bone
Lard it with ooze from a bumble bee drone.
You can free, broil or fry it
It’s the Neanderthal diet.

You’ve read all about it in recipe books
You like its perfume; you love its looks.
You can pickle or dry it.
It’s the Neanderthal diet.
I’m Just Balling with Boris

Some like hound dogs, Alsatian poodles
When they’ve making love or slugging down noodles;
I’ve got a robot that beats them all.
I picked him up in a shopping mall
You can have your Latin studs
Budding Billys or Billy Budds
I’ll say alone or apart of a chorus
I’m just balling with Boris.

Wherever I go on a camel or donkey
If you’re ruled by the moon or a mischievous monkey
Whenever some planet’s in retrograde.
You might get whatever when want when you’ve prayed
It’s one more night in a different sack.
Nothing you’d hungered for ever comes back.
Whether you’re Pisces or Ares or Taurus.
I’m just balling with Boris.

I love astrology, look at the stars
Wonder what fortune they’ll bring,
Maybe a guy with a taste for the bars
Who’ll drop me a bundle or ring.

Lots of loose women swear by machines
A Lesbian Isle or a kid in their teens.
They like a little incest if they have a son
Keep on a butler for even more fun.
After a week they’ll throw out the creep
Watch some t-v, go off to sleep
To the news where the experts guess who is for us.
I’m just balling with Boris.
Hotel Decadence

1

You might be smart though lacking the art
To adorn our attractive events.
You’d be wise to drop your ties
At the Hotel Decadence

You might be bored of being ignored
Though perils of fame are immense.
Why not stop, take a suite at the top
Of the Hotel Decadence?

It’s very very democratic.
You can melt in a melting pot.
Nothing in life is static.
Hope leads to odorous rot.

The world is home to a honeycomb.
Creation is dark and dense.
You might enjoy the slaves we employ
At the Hotel Decadence

2

Where even your dog has gone insane
Where nothing makes any sense
Where even the therapists complain
It’s the Hotel Decadence.

Where you think of the past till you sleep at last
Behind a lawn and fence
Where your mangy brood eats frozen food
It’s the Hotel Decadence

Where you can’t elect or even respect
Either the many or few
Where you’ve got to say in a zealous way
Truths that aren’t true

Where politics is just brainless tics
The pleasure is never intense
Where one’s either a joke or hopeless and broke
It’s the Hotel Decadence

Steamy Mimi’s Song

Steamy Mimi was a suave chanteuse
Who warbled a lot of light blue blues
But after the secrets of sex were known
Mimi would wail in a musical moan
“As the half naked natives would say to the Dutch
Sometimes, baby, enough is too much

“When whatever we bury, whatever we hide
We should have the sense to keep inside
After three months they’ve seen your stuff
Sometimes, baby, too much is enough.”

“Every success is fashioned to fail
Whatever seems novel turns lethally stale
When things come too quick with a flick or a touch
Sometimes, baby, enough is too much.

“We all know the gods who’ve quit and have left town.
We grin at the queens who once wore a crown.
Whether in mink or in bed in the buff
Sometimes, baby, too much is enough”
**Pandemic Moan**

I told Burton
He told Merton
We were certain
It’s on his curtain
You can’t be a dunce
Not even once
Mama.

I told Iris
There’s a virus
On her papyrus.
On the hounds of Osiris.
You can’t be vague
About a plague
Mama.

As it rages
Merton gauges
It might be in your pasta
It’s on your pages
On the sacred sages
Of the Mashool
Bugagurastra.

A harlequin
With an elfish grin
It does you in
In a loony bin
A baseball dome
A nursing home
Mama.

When it rages
It’s contagious
Hiding under your rug
It’s squatting, sitting
In your knitting
It’s a helluva bug.

It’s a viral disgrace
Let’s soar into space
Find a better place
For a new human race
With methane breath
While we wait for death
Mama.

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**Quarantine Blues**

One might say with a stammer
It’s not quite a slammer
Most lock ups are never Death Row
In stir for a felony
That’s how I met Melanie
How Rita met Zita and Moe.

Maybe it’s best
Under some house arrest
To know who your cell mates are
If you sometimes feel stale
If it’s never quite jail
They’ve closed down the brothel and bar.

In a limited space
Which gets smaller and smaller
It’s a mall for the mauler
The brawler and bawler
A creeper or crawler.
It’s hardly a place
For a gentleman caller.

In the murk of the cell
Like a consummate hell
There are few whom one might cherish.
Where the limits are vague
One might get the plague.
Only a fool wants to perish.

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Matthew Paris is the author of The Rabbit Club Mystery and The Holy City. His prose has been praised by Isaac Singer, Irwin Shaw and Virgil Thomson. He lives in New York. Until the pandemic he was house pianist for the Irish Arts Salon.
Shemos
The Names – The Names That Matter
David N. Zimmer

I chant the names
of those that died
and tubeiform worms
climb out of my mouth.

They are singing,
SHEMOS,
(The names.)

Muhammad Ali said,
“What’s my name?”
and Ernie Terrell
chanted the name
of the one
that planted him
face first
on the canvas

and Muhammad Ali said,
“I ain’t got no quarrel with
them Viet Cong.”

And we marched.
And we chanted.
SHEMOS,
(The names.)

Albert Ayler,
On his debut album,
My Name Is Albert Ayler,
Started the album with this chant,
“One day everything will be as it should be.”
And I chant his name and I scream his name.

And we marched.
And we chanted.
SHEMOS,
(The names.)
And Special Interest

from their song,
Young, Gifted, Black, in Leather, sing,
“The law is on my back/Every night,
The law is on my back/That’s why we fight.”
And we sing.
SHEMOS,
(The names.)

“They are dead and Gone, all gone.
And with them
All of their possibilities.

And the tubeiform worms chant,
“You don’t need to be executed to be killed,
You don’t need to be executed to be killed.”

These are the names I sing
And it lifts my feet
As I march.

And the tubeiform worms smile
and march
and chant,
SHEMOS.
SHEMOS.

David N. Zimmer, musician, artist, photographer, poet, and writer grew up
in a housing project in Brooklyn. He first joined the Tenant Patrol Blues Band,
then the N.DooDe band. He has also worked with the Biko Sisters. David is the
president & co-founder of the tax-exempt arts corporation, Monster in the
Closet, Inc. promoting music, poetry, art, and dance in NYC.
January 25th 2020, Philadelphia, PA.

Sarah heard a knock at the door as she sat on the living room couch watching Oprah. Sarah had worked her usual morning shift at the hospital in housekeeping. She was the proud single mother of a bright, sweet, loving boy she had named after her grandfather, Noah.

When Sarah turns down the TV, she hears sirens and people screaming downstairs. Sarah’s first thought is, where is Noah?

She runs to the door, unlocks the deadbolt, turns the door handle, and opens her door just a crack and asks, “Who is it?”

Sarah hears her neighbor’s voice yelling — “Sarah, come downstairs, quick! The Police shot Noah!”

In a panic, Sarah closes the door, takes off the chain, then pulls her door open, leaving it open as she flies down the stairs.

Once she exits her apartment building, she’s blinded by sirens and flashing lights.

She runs through a crowd with her neighbor leading the way until they reach a line of police blocking off the scene. Sarah begins crying and screaming Noah’s name when she sees his sneakers covered in blood and his body lying on the road. Three officers stand over her son as he lies there bleeding to death. Sarah’s mind fills with rage — she pushes her way past the cop in front of her as she announces, “This is my child, what have you done to my baby?”

Remember the Kings

Snakefist Panda
One of the officers standing over Noah walks over to a paramedic unit standing nearby and allows him to attempt to save him. Then he walks over to Sarah who is crying and yelling, “God... no, please, God, not my baby!”

The officer puts his hands on her arms and tells her, “Ma’am, we stopped your son to question him because he fit the description of a young black male who stole some bubble gum from the convenience store up the street.” The officer clears his throat and continues, “Your son began running when we pulled up on him, and as the officers chased him, one of the officers saw him with a gun and told him to drop it before firing and hitting him twice in the back.”

Sarah looks up with her eyes full of tears and replies, “Noah hated guns because his father was killed by a cop when he was only 5 years old. That’s probably why he was afraid and ran when you approached my innocent child.”

Sarah continues, “You shot my Noah in the back as he ran for his life, afraid he was going to be killed.” “Then you left him without medical attention to die like a dog in the street.”

Sarah drops her head as the officer apologizes just as she grabs the officer’s gun and puts the barrel under his chin. Before he and other officers realize what’s happening, Sarah pulls the trigger, blowing the cop’s hat clean off as he suddenly goes limp and slumps to the ground.

The other officers pull their guns on Sarah and begin yelling, “Put the gun down ma’am!” Sarah points the gun at one of the officers and pulls the trigger, shooting him in the face. The remaining officers start shooting at Sarah.

Sarah was shot 17 times before the hail of bullets had ceased.

It has been two weeks since this horrible incident took place and the community has burned down the local police station and city hall and looted and burned down local businesses. Protestors are calling for the police to be defunded to end police brutality as this is the 24th unarmed black male who has been shot and killed by police in the United States this year. Government officials are calling the National Guard to curb the looting and violence that has erupted since 15-year-old Noah Johnson was gunned down by two white police officers in front of his apartment complex in Southwest Philadelphia while walking home from a local gym in his neighborhood. This is Roger Robinson reporting with WPSP channel 5 news...

The spirit of the snake: When the snake appears in your life, it likely means that healing opportunities, change, important transitions, and increased energy are manifesting. The spirit of the Panda: The panda is a powerful spirit animal inspiring tranquil strength and determination—I am the Snakefist Panda wishing you all peace, balance, and harmony.
Planets

i wonder what the other planets are like:
the ones not destroyed by humans
are they clean and quiet? and full of moons and rivers?
can you walk right through the ground, to its angelic longitudes?
look what we’ve done
the Earth is trembling and burning
hanging in the atmosphere
surrounded by planets that have never been broken

The Mask-less

do you remember our severed world before this one?
where death lurks invisibly in the air
and the Unmasked sign the gravestones of every innocent?

Cydni Chéry is a 28 year old Midwestern/New York guitarist, sing-songwriter, and poet, who has been a mother for a little over a year. A lover, a hippie, and a thriver are just three words that describe Cydni, a woman who never thought she’d make it past 23, or find happiness again. Her work is about finding and exploring the slivers of hope, frustrations, and joy that makes each of us all too human.
This right...

The Poetry of Aimée Keeble
This right

“If you are against abortions, don’t have one.”
-Scott Andrews

Unbidden — compelled as a cart-horse
in the month when most deciduous
I am unspooling
fraught because my stuffing is being snapped over
by white teeth
and so jaunty in the hips
grail bearing mutineer stripped shrill
slopping body-water singing:
the performance of our gift/curse not for you not for you not for you
when in the early dawn was it decided?
a boundary set leg to leg— a law on what comes in and out
these- my featherless wings, hunched deep abdominis
and I feral colored in the den, one raw eye on Venus
digging a little, half-sovereign blood shine and free

American woman

And how now do I mean:
blooming at the improper time in a buzzard country
Scooping apricot-colored water by the fistfuls balletic on the nose of a crook-coming
thing anything to scream me into an American guarantee and this pie is made of lies
this pie is made of lies
watch me go then into a liquor sunset as illegal as a ranchero’s dream
hallow’d be my 401 nothing and long live my freedom to die unaided
don’t speak to me neighbor lest I shake loose your peace and drown your Sundays
tailgate my reassured backside twangs of South sizzling that tailbone and onward yo-
this newer and newer world to the night dogs and mutants, leave your heart on the shore
we’ll come for it when the fires are out

a feminine celebration

sometimes when i am doe-hipped, afraid of cars and running men
i remember flesh spoils as bad ideas do
and we all one day
groin free and ghost-happy god blobs bumping each other
without peril without want
so i prey move my lovely body higher and let the night shine
on my honey shanks, retch fear along the roadside in indigo globulets
and give thanks to my teets soft buzz of my inner
the makings of a maker, sugar eyed sword breaker

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ed by Ayla Zuraw-Friedland at the David Black Agency. Aimée lives in North Carolina with her dog
Cowboy and is working on her first novel. She is the grand-niece of Beat writer and poet Alexander
Trocchi. Her previously published work can be found at: https://neutralspaces.co/aimeekeeble/
In here, we watch sunsets, we watch sunrises and let time pass.

We have free time, like normal people and spend it on the beach, at the end of the day, when our work is done, this private beach nobody from the outside world can visit, and he says we’re safe here, our little village is a happy place, a safe place, when he comes for the rent.

High tide, low tide, go with the tide, not against the flow.
In here, we’re caged, we’re prisoned but not poisoned.

We pay the rent, like normal people, but we don’t go out, out awaits evil, danger, disease, but the disease can’t reach us, and he says we’re safe here, our little village is heaven, free of harm, as long as we stay quiet, and calm and positive, we’re safe here, he says, when he comes to check if the work is done.

The plague comes, the plague goes, the plague can’t reach us, he guards the door.

***

In here, we serve, but we are not slaves.

We work and we get paid, like normal people, but we never worry, for he takes care of everything, misfortunes can’t reach us, and he says we’re safe here, in this fenced village, his private property, we’re safe here, as long as we are useful. He’s like a king, only he isn’t, he’s just the owner, he owns the place, like it’s a hotel, only it isn’t, it’s our little village, our hometown, the place we call home.

We sit and watch him, like normal people, we watch his adventures, but from a safe distance, he owns everything, our homes, our streets, the water, the air, the soil we step on, we are conditioned to adore him, like the faithful admire their god, like the crowds adore their heroes, we wish we were like him, we dream that someday we will be him, and he says we’re safe here, like we own this paradise, only we don’t, but he’s gentle enough to let us stay, as long as we work hard and pay the rent.

We say no to crowns, blissfully this we sing, for all kings died, long live the king.

***

In here we rise, but we do not shine.

We rise high, high enough to see the stars, observe the sky, but not over the fence, the sky can’t reach us, and he says we’re safe here, we’re lucky to have him, we’re blessed he protects us, we pray for him, for we know, if he’s happy, some happiness will slide from his sleeves right onto us, to feed our hunger, to soothe our soul, while others are startled, he can’t own the streets, they say, then they pay to travel through their streets, they pay to those who built them, like we pay the price to be safe, and they try to teach us, they try to free us, while we insist that we are fine, we are not trapped, confined, defined by fear, we are free enough, for it’s perspective that defines us, we choose not to be negative, we choose optimism, positive thinking, we choose fairy tales and happy endings, we choose to be comforted by lies, as long as they are beautiful and shiny, like the sky is beautiful and shiny and open on sunny summer days.

We love the sky, like normal people, but we know, we know well, that no matter how high we rise, we’ll never rise high enough to breathe (we’re safe here), with or without him, we’ll never reach the stars, like he does, but he’s our king and that is fine.

Mileva Anastasiadou is a neurologist, from Athens, Greece. A Pushcart, Best of the Net and Best Small Fictions nominated writer, her work can be found in many journals, such as Litro, Jellyfish Review, Queen Mob’s Tea House, Moon Park Review, Okay Donkey, Kanstellation, Open Pen and others.
Just to the Right of the Stove

Conversations with Sylvia Plath

Elisabeth Horan
Many people connect with Sylvia Plath because her words are so fearless and tragic. She knew things deep down and was not afraid to say them. She made her poems ugly and beautiful, and she made suicide ugly and beautiful. Those are two key facets of her work. I have always respected her for this. I try to emulate this by sharing the darkness inside of me with you all. I believe that Sylvia’s monster was the Bipolar and the PMDD, it screamed and howled at her every month with her cycle. The rage would bubble up along with genius, and she would write. She would be fire, wrath, and phoenix who would then crash from the guilt of mothering. She would crash from the shame of loss and the anger at men and the world.

Sylvia came to me, and we had a talk. Even though I don’t pretend to get it fully, I can empathise and draw from my own experience of my own crushing postpartum depression. I can draw from my own PMDD cycles which cause a flurry of genius poems and fire, followed by that same crash. The crash comes with feelings of shame, guilt, self-hatred, immense rage, and anger at myself and the world.

Can one be a brilliant poet and a decent mum? Can one forgive themselves for doing such harm and survive? I hope you can see this duality in my work here — this duality — can one be a brilliant poet and a decent mum…? Can one forgive oneself for doing such harm and survive?

I hold on, but it is bleak at times. I will never forgive myself for the words I said to my children in my darkest hours. My only slight consolation is that I did not die, and they get to see their mother’s face in the morning, even if the terrible monster still exists inside – Mommy is here, little ones, and she is still alive. Much love to you all and thank you always for opening your hearts to me and my humble, broken-glass words. <3

This work stems from my experience with severe postpartum depression and the poems I wrote while trying to fight through it. I was in so much pain that I thought I would not survive the long, five years it lasted. I often thought of Sylvia Plath and how her suicide could have been a result of severe postpartum depression, like mine. I considered how things got so bad for her that she succumbed to the idea that her children would be better off without her. I often thought the same in my darkest days, but I also knew, no matter how awful I was to be around while depressed, my two young sons would probably rather have a sad, edgy, and unpredictable mother than no mother at all.

I write this work as a tribute to a kindred mother and poet who did not survive. I feel as though I got lucky. I survived because I had a ton of support, but I also refused to give in. I tried twenty different medications; I stumbled through therapy with three different therapists, every single Wednesday for five years. I lie in bed and think about how Sylvia might have survived if she had had access to medication and therapy if she had had a support system. Maybe her mind was too brilliant, too ‘over-the-top’ creative with genius to ever experience relief from the voices and words. They fell out of her mouth into poems. These poems selected from my forthcoming book, *Just to the Right of the Stove*, are an imagining of what she and I might say to each other, and how I wish I could have pulled her back from the brink in that moment of her deepest darkness, as a friend, mother, and poet.

Love,

Eli

---

**Trigger Warning** These works discuss suicide & suicidal ideation and mention sexual abuse.

Elisabeth Horan’s upcoming collection is scheduled for release in Feb 2021 by Renée Firer at Twist In Time Press...
Godammit! Just Hurl That Sink Already

Who am I? lashing out –
my tongue a leather whip
leaving verbal welts
on the back of someone so small –

I shrink with him against the wall
as I grow bigger
with regretful triggers;
my shadow looms like
Godzilla climbing up
this flimsy dollhouse I built

It looks like defeat will have us again
a tantrum, doled out by these placid hands –

A free-range, grass-fed, child-locavore lurking
amid the unseemly acres of my mind.
How shall I resist the ineptitude in wiring –?

So many pills,
so many times on the couch
for naught, overwrought;
endless wringing of the hands;
(I should have rung my own neck),

Or Nurse Ratched's...
or, my mom on the phone
or a bell or a gong -
this isn't funny at all.

> I'd eat my own self if I could <
belly all swoll'd up like a capybara in a python.
Choke on my own infectious diseases;
gag myself with that sticky finger howling:

You did it! Ayoowah!
Then vomit my own meat,
just like it was water.
A confused coyote;
I don't recognize this poison.

But what of the little boy?
Cowering, looking to me for shelter –

Saying I'm sorry is not enough.
[Kids are very resilient = bullshit = holds no more water than a sieve].

I will do my own lobotomy.
I will hurl that sink through the window.
I will fly over the cuckoo's nest
come one more savage, salient dawn.

Rust Mother

Razor draws the crust from ears so clotted, so packed, drops, the
drops do nothing to remove the metal impaction; a baby's cry sends
millions running yet I stay determined — clawed cat, trust mother,
you can call me that, but I am defective, their hurt becomes my body
so I wear it akin to dull badge - look at me! everyone, how I ruffle up
& rage, I make dinner, let the flies in the screen & argue with green
backs & slaughter your rooster

Clang the bell and dwarf the toddler, he doesn't eat much anyway,
stays up till 11 whilst my eyes bleed an alloy, edging scarlet ruined
ocular once lined with black now vermilion crazed penny for a blink.
Look how tired. Look how I achieved him to take the amoxicillin
yesterday & tomorrow & the next...

Fail mother cat cuts her pads on the fence. Sharpens her tines on
organic slices — stirs the Similac to warm — once & twice &
3am. The fence lies somewhere between miser birth & regret. It's
so brown raggedy drips softly like a prison tear; the others will be
whispering — her name is elisabeth horan — today & forever &
at birth's calling in her ear
Do you want to know what I managed to do last night?
I crept so carefully, so stealthily, so doggedly
I was able to erase all the bars in the paper
I crept like a wise pussy cat prowls –
all fingertips and toes.

I'm sure they'll think me stable now
as I've stripped the horrid bedclothes,
made gone the pulsing paranoia
the hinges incessant — the creaking like stairs
such terrible bars lay about this lair!

Supplanted them with my more efficient scars:
'Tis easier to pull a scab than to remove such stubborn, tacky paper...
The pattern remains but I've a plan for that too!
I'll scrape it clean with my fingernails
one row after obstinate row;
The pattern in my mind
I'll describe it to you –
Babies pills babies pills, creep creep creep.
Babies pills babies pills, scratch scratch scratch.

I pray they'll let me out this day –
let me hold the tender babe.

My nipples have since dried, as
a well gives up her water
but my heart is still wet
with a red pumping -
with an endless flow
For that blue-eyed boy
I've missed since birth –
I'll not hurt him
I'll be so calm, believe me!
I know I can do this
for I am his mummy.

I'm dressing now.
I'm preparing for the moment.
When John and the good Doctor shall arrive
and finally realize...

There are no more pills to take
I've made quite sure of that;
collected them up as the days went by –
swallowed them all in one big chunk!

I'm wearing my best frock as well
with the longest sleeves despite this bestial heat –
look how the pattern even matches
the ruby tracks upon my arms
where I scratched myself free:

Babies pills babies pills, creep creep creep.
Babies pills babies pills, scratch scratch scratch.

I've also donned my garden gloves –
my goodness, it took some doing
to pull them over my finger tips
where alas, my nails've all gone missing.

Once I'm free to commence the creep
I'll take to that brutal track,
I'll spend the night hunting them down –
prowling, all fingertips and toes.

Like a wise pussy cat out for catching
mice — as fingernails; as snacks.

Babies pills babies pills, creep creep creep.
Babies pills babies pills, scratch scratch scratch.
So Lush --- The Dystopian Eden

I cannot mother them
I can mother them
I cannot keep alive
I must keep alive

This joker face
Plastered white
With cherry bombs
Sickening sweet

Taste it the hive invites
You in --- the rotten eyes
Swell like briefs; looking

At you reminds me of my father
He would say --- act right daughter
And you say --- act right wife/mother
Yet you act like a sphincter

Tightening relaxing at all the
Wrong moments --- like when
I spilled my vodka on your
Sister's dress then screamed:

Oh go fuck yourselves,
You smiled calmly and said
Relax... it's just that time
Of the month again

But when I held the children
As you fucked the night away
You came home a hitler

And blasted the youth despite
Their bluest eyeballs
And my pubic hair has as much blond
Potential as hers

Prodigal Daughter

It is the horse hoof which kills me --- head opened up & poetry inside & purple worms give way to ochre hides tanned polluted skin factory mercury; these words like chemical mixtures: lime green and magenta, underground sockets; the peck-eyed crows call you sister, mother, friendly-old-woman not the youth --- youth is the tightly pored plan of Jesus' altruistic dinner & it blinds me --- if the crown had not yet prior to this --- this is the knell I cower I cackle I burn I'm something you know about which kills the little people it's a man yes, it's him --- yet look at how I've become his kin. What other reason would the children not know --- what other outcome than to not give them to you --- spirit them safely away in a bedroom all the while with the creeping about, and I, a fucking cat creeping about --- I planned less and less and never arrived then the suicide girl --- through the wall and though hated her I still missed you very much --- so here I am. Dear Father.

Arsenic Hour

Here comes a bad one. Pearled teeth, gnarled hands, knife fingers, bomb breasts, snake limbs, tortoise pelvis, wolf anus, pronghorn genitals. Here comes the malfeasance. Ivory ban, fingernail grind, tusked cheeks, flat bill palette, five toes times five legs, monstrously amphibious, heat seeking whore platypus. Squat and jealous. Here comes the lady in red. Competitive. Hormone pinch hitter, estrogen wane, progesterone filler, wants things of testosterone nearby her; a dildo toy killer. Hypothyroid gets her best, statin spies through this fat girl's dress. Here comes young queen bee, she's queen till tomorrow's sorrows. Hippocampus dehydrated, frontal lobe sliced mango, cortex, correct me, umm, sliding unstable, emotions hostage, child for ransom. Speaking of gloves, here's the kid, here's the mother. More immature this ovary banter, this Questcomm demean- or; Elvira thong, Judge Judy pants, this earth-bitch wishes for a pod like Mrs. Jetson's. Dishes, cuticle crack, thumb condom, moustache wax. Pyjamas, pantiliner, low slung breasts, boring penis, always Mr. Right: flaccid. Middle age mayhem: anaemic theatre. Of war and love, no date is cheaper than this female, dullard woman; dial up trauma-hype and penitence; frugal.
"the fever is relentless a manly fire it is arsenic hour I am drowning in the gas I smell small people meowing for relief --- a subsequent sneeze like the German salvo Churchill's theater ridiculous claims of faking it from the frogs across the pond - the torpedoes par-snouted kill sharks eels reef fish not the Nazis they are healthy — they are emoluments for you and them to be taking; they work kitchens and clinics experiment stations; take twins and give them different medications --- whilst Russia waits with the grippe in the frozen trenches --- a warrior mother bellows

"don't take my child, my husband my father"
in the freight cars bodies like bugs cluster flies succumbing to the heat of the mind let me out of this window, Jesus Christ!!! shrieks and fingernails one bottle for liquid spills, and God flees, gilded In His quilt, --- one more vomit, one more kid on the coals of my deity; (s)he is a swarthy bitch, bold as Herr Fausto; stout as Bavaria; forget-me-not-eyes seem to coax her to marry, don't do it, Ms. Braun, there is always Assia.
In war there are only Herr Feminists & the Likely Isolationists some bombs need more ghosts than others... my trench is Lord Byron's flat and flu is 1918 or 1963 or 2020 --- don't you feel the prickle --- of my syringe/stun/atomic glee?"
To Be Polite – I Sip the Oversteeped Tea

I only meant that
I am really good at
Feeling sorry for myself.
Not that I had a corner on the market.
You have the corner,
I promise; I recant.
I have not such brass tits as thee,
O mighty slayer
Of men: a gallant tertiary,
Otto, Ted, Nicholas, that’s three –
Not counting
Any daughter or mother, or you –
Feminism does not
Hold that we mourn our wombs nor our gelatinous skin –
Yet Cixous says we are different, from that –

If I was in England all alone in a flat,
Towing a fish line,
Fed up pushing the pram,
Wiping green shit, blue puke
Red wounds, brown germs –
If I was a young mum,
So, isolated, armed and riddled
With your brain –
Perhaps, just perhaps,
I would have done the same.

The Teapot Should Be Whistling Soon

Adroitly, eh,
You think you’ve got something on me?

I am the queen of adroitness,
Of lunacy, of the prickled switch
And paddle; I reverse La Pietà;
Jesus holds his Virgin Mother –
Ubiquitous cross and thorns;
I adorn nothing; absorb His scorn
God will mount me; pink hued, for
Naked lunch below the Yew –
I nibble, unasked of this messy to-do
Note this, unstable prodigy:
Your poems or your children
One cannot bask in glory of both –

So I declare that I shall have the neither & the nor;
Don’t you remember Sexton and Woolf?
If I shan’t have a room of my own,
Then I will become
The room and the walls all around
And they will feel my sour breath
Slit mouth harangues it’s metallic chant;
Rows of carp teeth

Upon their hairy necks — I clamp down
As I deliver a stake to their
Rescident breasts

1,2,3 poof! I deliver my airs,
I’m a bomb PhD, gale force
Dioxin; lethally toxic,
I dare them to breathe me in.
Vapor. Gas.
Vice. Women.
Children. Crying.
Nights. Poems.
Ocean. Death.
Marriage. Rows.
Endings. Chambers.
Rot & Cached.
I’m gone.
Keeping Tabs

Here I go again
Down the goddamn rabbit hole
Chasing the oily smell
Of my past as only I can do –

It's so dirty
It's such a waste of time
This hating myself –

But I go back anyway
I can't stay away
Like a lover who promised me forever.

Here I go again –
Berating my brain
When I mess up
Instead of making amends
I go deep, I go dark.

I use the pain of what I've done –
To burn the eyes of those peering into
The destruction zone –
I had cordoned off.

My children have learned not to listen when I yell
When I say:
Forgive me babies
Mommy didn't mean it –

They look at me with a hint
Of pity
Which belies their youthful ages
That seems to say
We know she's nuts
Let's move on and play quietly over here –
As to not disturb the dragon again.

They think of me like a feral cat
That can't be trusted
Too unpredictable with her claws –
Like a mutt who eats the garbage again and again
Despite the punishments

Despite the slap to her head — which
Reverberates across her guilty tongue.

Here I go again
Such a pussy –
Hiding in this isolation
Which so adroitly keeps
Tabs on my chance of being a good person.

Scrubbing Dishes

Haha child — This is all you've got?
My nights are filled with sunken ships
Filled with fetuses born of this witch
Little spines, crooked — broken

Fingers, toes, only count to seven, and curled
Hideous; veins outside of transparent skin

A heart beats black; the lungs puff –
Sooted. My daddy takes me from behind

Sings Edelweiss and Baby Mine - lines
A gun up between my eyes — Doktor Mengele

Fingers the trigger.
But I don't die. Not even close ---

Rather I sing to showers
Full of ghosts

Women with rashes and public lice; men
Swinging low, ashamed, pissing scars of sacred

Ness; trains of cows, full of meat to market
Whoosh by in a clickity-clack, the waving faces
Of Weisel & Niemöller & Milosz –
Inside, Carcasses. Dear
God - racks over racks of
Children — my mind inside out

Ted ted Ted ted. Dead.
Gone. Ripped front to back; dick
to head. Me. Blue nighty.
Rooftop flier.

God says
Go for it Sylvia; go ahead and be
A martyr.

Dabbing the Corners of Our Mouths Like Ladies

I secretly think I am better than you.
I say that with the utmost
Respect which is due.
I didn’t succumb, I held on
For my children,
But please understand,
I know what could have happened to me –
I know what women are capable of –

I once did an MRI
Of my brain
For the sake of science;
Allowed them to study my horrible misfiring
Grad students lined up alongside the Radiology Chair
Persistent Severe Major Depressive Disorder
(Which Does Not Respond to Therapy or Medication)

Biome mapping; looking for lighted patterns;
Denigrated synapses, I lent them my mind
In hopes it might someday help someone else –

For two hours I laid there with a button under my thumb
Magnets clanging in and around my skull
For a measly $100 bucks.

Why do I do anything I do?
But, remember this — I’m still alive —

Did they study your brain?
I mean, afterwards?
Would you have wanted them to?
My dark is not as saturated nor brilliantly stained as yours.

One difference I know –
I took the pills they were feeding me;
Buckets of meds and annoying weekly therapy:
Again and again, discussed the divorce, and the rape.

A tape so old, it’s yellowed; beetle-scraped,
Like the bile in my liver, itching to spill,
On the faces of those who abandoned me –

Did I die, like Sylvia — or did I survive,
Like Elisabeth.

Elisabeth Horan is an imperfect creature from Vermont advocating
for animals, children and those suffering alone and in pain - especially
those ostracized by disability and mental illness. She is Editor in Chief
at Animal Heart Press, and Co-Editor at Ice Floe Press. She has several
chaps and collections out at Bone & Ink Press, Fly on the Wall Press,
Cephalo Press, and Animal Heart Press. Her newest collection, Just to
the Right of the Stove, is forthcoming at TwistIt Press, Feb. 2020. Follow
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I’m hiding in the bathroom. I’m sitting on the edge of the bath, looking through the crack by the doorjamb at the incoming men — there are three of them, dapper, wearing suits. They are putting sets of clothing on my bed in the bedroom of this large house in which I supposedly live alone… It’s all a lie.
My clothing is chosen by my father, and my stylist and makeup artist have a strict specification of “dos” and “don’ts” in actual list format written by my father. I don’t see my father, he doesn’t visit, and I do not want him here. My “boyfriend” will call later, and we will go for a drive in full view of the cameras. Thirty paparazzi have been tipped off and know where to wait to get good shots while I pretend to be unaware. I’m on first-name terms with them despite everything. Of course, my male caller is a paid handler and not my boyfriend, or even my friend for that matter. In fact, he is quite rude to me — by the way, have I mentioned how much I hate this shitshow?

I want and need help. I wish someone would come and stick band-aids all over me. I would love a true friend, or any friend — someone who is not being paid to publicly party with me. I wish I could have experienced real-life things like other people have… My first kiss was prearranged, my first step choreographed, all directed, and all for show. I never really came of age as I’m an eternal woman-child, sexualised since I was pre-pubescent (but told to say I was and would remain a virgin when I was getting down and dirty on the scene and everyone in the industry knew it). I’m a rich, famous ingenue who has to play dumb, feign innocence at the gross comments and disgusting innuendo of interviewers. I’m a grown woman in the eternal form of a genitalless doll made to speak and sing in my fake baby-voice. My real voice is not fit for public consumption.

The glitz on the surface hides the dark parts of my past and the shady vistas of my present. I’m told to wear waterproof mascara, get lashes that are permanent so that when I cry my tears can be quickly hidden. My torso is sculpted, and my anus is professionally bleached in case the lights catch it through my highly revealing Vegas costumes which my father vets and selects. To get out of it — all of it, any of it — I would need a legal team, but part of the deal made for me and about me is that I cannot hire my own lawyer, ever! They will claim I’m not mentally stable and so can’t access my own money to pay the legal fees to get myself out of this bind. A

child could see the catch. I think back on how I used to be, a five-year-old-diva and an oblivious lamb among wolves. Bright, sparkly lights and pink sequined outfits seemed the wish at the end of a shooting star in the cosmology of a child. None of this was my ambition or desire, but I was groomed for it in more ways than one into this burdensome sweet perfection. When I reached the pinnacle of owning my estate, grossing multimillions, I was already in decline, fading fast in my soul.

When I got up on the pedestal, it was so small and restrictive — one wrong move and down I fall, and what’s below is hard and harsh and unforgiving. By the time I’d amassed my own fleet consisting of a Mercedes-Benz SL65 Roadster, Porsche 356A, CLK350 Convertible, mini Cooper Convertible and more, I was not allowed to drive unaccompanied. Now I am not allowed in a car at all. That day with the paparazzi chasing, I had my baby in my arm and they were closing in, and I was afraid they would crush my baby and me. I tried to speed away, him on my lap, just to get clear of them, just to save us both. I am now not allowed to see my children. I am not allowed visitation, supervised or unsupervised, in case the paparazzi stink gets onto them from me, from my flesh, from my stupid doll clothes — in case an areola touches them.

During my (involuntary) confinement in the psychiatric facility, I was force-fed drugs and given electroshock “treatment,” and now they’re saying I have dementia and that that’s the reason for my house arrest. I wish I did! To escape the memories would be wonderful, but they come quick and flood in fast. Memories and dreams start to merge, constant noise, shouting, laughing with photographers always pushing past me, trying to get in front of me and blocking my exit. They are pushing against me — sleazy men with cameras putting their hands on my ass, and I can’t move away. People are continually touching my hair; they won’t stop caressing my bra-strings and pulling at my blonde extensions. I just want for them to stop touching me! My dreams are of persistent and endless touching, people feeling my ass, my hair, my
father’s face — people trying to touch my breasts, a shadowy man in my girlhood room, a man’s watch I recognise, and his hand touching my favourite teddy-bear when I don’t want him there, and I don’t want him to touch the teddy-bear or to touch me. I don’t see him clearly as he’s in the shadows, but I do not want him here. I dream of people trying to photograph my areola, visions of invasion of my privacy and violation of my private parts. Sometimes I wake from these fever dreams with my hands crossed protectively across my chest. Sometimes, upon waking, I throw up.

I’m on the outside looking in at normal and on the inside looking out at freedom. Business managers, executives, agents all talk of the power I wield, and there’s irony in the fact that I can’t — in fact am not allowed — to get a takeaway coffee from Starbucks by myself. I am forbidden from purchasing a fucking donut. I am sick to my teeth of signing autographs, and I have considered writing “Help Me!” when it’s an adult asking, but I always chicken out.

A static star that can’t explore the sky, that’s me, a sad motionless comet, or a sick sun that’s made to keep shining though it imploded long ago. I would love to just go out, on my own. If I wasn’t barred from it, I’d go to a casino or a store, or go anywhere to do anything! If it were possible, I’d drive really fast down the Pacific Coast Highway! I’d run barefoot along the beach. I’d go incognito and watch a movie — any movie — just for the thrill and the experience. It would feel so liberating for me to do anything at all outdoors, beyond this house and grounds. It’s madness being here, sitting here, on my own. It’s madness to be surrounded surreptitiously by bodyguards, security detail, watchers to make sure I don’t break free. They are under orders not to engage, not to talk to me, not to give me the time of day. Alone but not solitary, lonely among an entourage.

My life, my prison, 24/7 monitoring and surveillance, inside and out. My thoughts loop back to the fact that those in actual prison know their release date… Death row inmates have it the best of all — they know the exact date and time their suffering will end!

People who don’t know me are apparently experts on my lived experiences. Glamorous, yes, but you can’t see, or feel, or smell, the sweat-stress and anguish from outside. On YouTube, there are home vids of kids gazing at posters of me with my glittery eye makeup, wanting and trying to be sexy like me, yet too small to even know what “sexy” means. Their parents longingly view my mansion and exclaim, “she’s so lucky!” At concerts, they strain to see me, they stare, point, and say, “she’s a star!”

We were on the roof of my apartment when my psychiatrist suggested we go out drinking. She was pretty and fun and had gone to Princeton, and I always liked to think we could have been friends. When I forgot to refill my prescriptions, she saw me in her office late at night, and when she forgot her car keys, we decided to go to my apartment. Her husband worked downtown near my building in Beacon Hill, and it would be easier for him to meet us there. She always wore the chicest tops, so chic that sometimes I had to copy them, I couldn’t help it. She always complimented me with sorority-esque excitement, not a tinge of pity or fear in her generously lashed eyes.

We gathered our things and clattered down the three flights of stairs to the cobblestone streets, where we cherry-picked our heeled way to one of the bars on Charles Street. Even though she had to be pushing forty, she had that “It Girl” quality that infused confidence into any social situation, where you never questioned you were in the right spot. If it wasn’t happening, she would make it happen, and you felt lucky to be in the vicinity of her radiating glow. We situated ourselves at the corner of a wooden bar, and she was all smiles and a margarita and a worriless brow atop her crisp, white shirt. Her shirt, never having known a wrinkle or stain, was fitted enough to show off her enormous breasts that somehow, through some unknown magic, made her look even classier or more intelligent to the rest of society. She transgressed all biases, stereotypes — she was white and privileged but never a Karen. She was woke, cool, and Ivy League, and also a hot girl next door you’d still want to introduce to your boyfriend.

The boy behind the bar started flirting with my psychiatrist, whose prominent diamond emanated clearly atop her bony ring finger. Perched casually atop the bar, her hands were slender and artfully decorated in fine jewelry that was delicate and trendy, pulling off the coveted catwalk between luxury and total effortlessness.
This was the first time I recalled hearing a sound that night. The boy had the goofy grin of a frat boy with the composure of a CEO. “Me?” he chortled, his grin growing somehow wider. “Of course not,” he said, his eyes suddenly locked onto mine. “Have you?” “Have I what?” I said, feeling as if I had unmuted a television show in which I was suddenly part of a live audience. “Cheated?” Without hesitation, I replied: “Yes,” matching his magnetic eye contact. It was true: I had. Until I started undergoing serious psychiatric treatment in the fall before last, I had cheated on every romantic partner without an ounce of guilt. I was a body without a soul, accelerating through life with the recklessness of a poorly programmed driverless car. In fact, it truly wasn’t clear that anyone had programmed the car I was in, or if anyone controlled the vehicle at all. It wasn’t the “me” I felt today, that’s for certain. I retroactively applied my understanding of personal integrity onto my past mistakes, for which I now felt genuine shame. I was a hollow house back then, and yet occupants had flocked to my doorstep. I acquired boyfriends and girlfriends and feared no consequences. I danced with recklessness and drove without a morning memory. I discarded friends without a single afterthought, and then picked up new ones to fill my empty rooms. I did not know who this person was now, except that I knew I should apply to the label “me” to its past enigmatic continuity. I was aware of my fragile transparency now; I was an agarose gel, I wiggled, I was nearly see-through. And yet I treasured my fragility. I was the embryo of a monster that had evolved through the amphetamined acceleration of Frankenstein’s hand. I now saw myself as a baby: Sweet, to be protected. I was the monster with a soul, looking down from heaven on my newfound birth. How lucky I was, to experience this freshness, this newness, this sweet self. I knew what they saw, but I did not cover myself up.

I started receiving ketamine infusions in the spring. This worked well for me. I had always loved going to hospitals because of my veins.

I always set an alert in my calendar to 56 days, and would visit the hospital to give blood like clockwork. The nurses would squeal in excitement at my prominent vascular anatomy. “Look at this one!” they’d say, gesticulating wildly for the others to come over. Their faces transformed in response to a visceral pleasure, and I replayed the slow evolution of their softening, childlike expressions of excitement in my mind. I was O negative, the universal donor, and I always told the nursing staff that I felt a “moral allegiance” to donate. I’d beam up at them with the innocence of a freshly born baby, and reply with a soft “No” with the purity of a child to the sex and drug-related screening questions. I felt my agarose wiggle, and I hoped it shimmered in the light. I beamed up at the nurses. ‘Protect me,’ I thought. ‘I am special now.’ ‘I am the one worth saving, and yet look at me, vulnerable, prone, a person for others. A martyr, even.’ Soon, I was filled up with enough memories to last me a few weeks, at least. I couldn’t wait to go home, where, lying prone, I’d close my eyes and imagine the nurse gently bending over me, a needle ready to capture the flowing, universal life that I emitted, “One, two...three,” the pinch, the nurse’s efficient movements, the most direct transaction of the draining of the self for others, ecstasy. That night, I’d replay the scenes of them rushing over to look at my veins with the enthusiasm of school children until I fell asleep.

There were many actions that I enacted with the ritualistic precision of a surgeon, or perhaps a highly skilled serial killer, depending upon how you liked to frame things. I always corrected cashiers, even when they gave me a penny extra in change. I’d always point out when I was undercharged, even if it meant waiting in line again, while the ice cream I’d purchased melted and slowly dripped its sweetness onto the cold, tiled linoleum floor.

I soon became convinced that sometimes, I was failing to have my intended objective in this strange new redemptive reality. I couldn’t prove my actions had consequences. I couldn’t prove...
to myself that, that very morning, I hadn’t walked out onto the property down the dirt road and killed an entire family. Perhaps the empty house was still inside me. Lonely in it’s desolation, it creaked in annoyance, whined with neglect. Perhaps, it could lash out. Without me, it could pursue finding occupants for its many rooms. This is when I met the doctor.

She helped me, saved me really. Walking into her office provided me with the tranquility of a veiled confession room. Soon, I was on the maximum dosage of Ketamine and so many other medications that I had to have two daily pill containers to hold them all. With my newfound molasses-like movements, I reasoned my ability to murder entire families was quite low. Walking into her office, I’d say: “Absolve me” with my desperate eyes. She’d increase the dosage until I felt like a sedated farm animal, but this wasn’t a disqualification for blood donations, so I didn’t mind. I was like a beautiful thoroughbred horse, retired from my racing days. My trainer kept me, let me rest in a beautiful pasture to live out my days. The doctor visited me, sedated me to prevent my agitations upon remembering my race days. Then, I’d lie with my silky mahogany mane in her lap, and she’d stroke my long, velvety ears until I fell asleep.

Julia Knox is a researcher at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, a masters candidate in narrative medicine in the school’s Department of Medical Humanities and Ethics, and a fellow at the Precision Medicine Ethics, Politics, Culture Project at Columbia’s Center for Social Difference. She is interested in the methods by which data takes narrative form in our society. The focus of her research includes exposure to environmental mixtures, maternal/paternal-child health, and transgenerational epigenetics. An AmeriCorps alumna who earned her masters of public health in 2016, she is dedicated to mentorship and sustainable community investments. She is passionate about making space in academic science for people with disadvantaged backgrounds and hopes that will reflect in a more comprehensive set of research interests in genomics, and eventually, in a better world.
when the mind is trapped
the body follows
from underneath this heavy blanket
the world seems muffled
thoughts thud tirelessly
against the wall
when the body is trapped
the mind follows

thoughts of demise
tear me apart from the inside out
memories of emptiness
ooze through me
broken bone by broken bone
scar tissue by scar tissue
only after every last inch is covered
and I sink into my clammy sheets
I feel relief

with you I never know
is this the last kiss?
the last time your fingers
run up and down my spine?
will you ever push my hair
behind my ears like that again?
the uncertainty of it all
destroys everything

in the cold
in the dark
there is nothing at all
we can do to stop this notion
the feeling of loss
no control
no renunciation
we know that the day will come
where we will watch the end of the sun
a glorious mess
there will be nothing left

we all are masters of our own fate
pretty much like drunken sailors
on a wrecked ship
our heads are badly injured
but filled with dreams
and great expectations
because pain is a side effect of hope

Helmer is a poet in her mid-twenties who works and lives in Leipzig, Germany. Through writing, Helmer processes a life-long struggle with mental health including severe depressive episodes, anxiety and an eating disorder. "The Stages" was created in April 2020 when Helmer’s depression reached its lowest point in years: the self-isolation due to the Coronavirus pandemic resulted in months of complete loneliness, whilst the end of a very unhappy and toxic relationship demanded a lot of strength. On top of that, the news of a friend’s suicide made it feel like there was nothing left worth living for. Turning terrible events and feelings into art helps Helmer to accept the stories of depression, anxiety, hope, love, loss and everything in between that life entails.
Still

Amy Lovell

(For Michaela and Darcy: Doesn’t it feel like this was yesterday? Thanks for never making me feel strange.)

High school graduation is one week away. Off in the distance, while all the normal high school seniors sleep, I stand still by myself under the streetlamp, outside the suburban high school which I may or may not graduate from next week. My graduation isn’t certain. Nothing is. School became the last priority under my circumstances.
A tan canvas bag containing a physics textbook, makeup, clothes, a laptop, and two bottles of alcohol remains my only loyal companion. I set my bag down beside me. It slumped forward. My right shoulder also slumped forward in pain from lugging the bag around for far too many hours. Neither my shoulder nor the handles of my bag were designed to lug around the weight of the world for this long.

I pried through every frenzied moment over the past few months in paranoia of what the next might unveil. My days demand I remain on my feet in constant motion traveling from one destination to kill my time then to the next. Tonight, my luck ran out. I failed to locate my next destination. I need to remain still. My parents hate me so I can’t call either of them. The man I had planned to fuck fucked me over. I hung out with Michaela all day but now she’s out doing something fun, so I don’t want to inconvenience her. No destination leaves me to sleep outside. It’s fine.

Last fall, things appeared smooth on the surface. Existent problems within my life lurked beneath the surface. My abusive home, spiraling drug addiction, and horrific mental health all surfaced this year in their cruelest forms. What kid gets into all 10 schools they applied for only to then fail senior year? Me. Can’t say that’s a hard pill to swallow, though — if they were, I might not be in this position. I’m not who I thought I was. Last fall, when I started my senior year, I held this naive idea that things would be calm. If only I had known.

Earlier, I moved over Jersey state lines into Pennsylvania, where I could blow my last few dollars on cigarettes legally (legal age is 21 in my town). I pulled my Marlboro 27’s pack out from the pocket on my flannel shirt and lit one. Cigarettes were an essential tool in my survival kit. The grey smoke created with each drag looks like a low budget SOS smoke signal as I stand stranded. Unfortunately, if anyone notices and pulls up in a car with an offer to save me, I’ll end up saved for sure, just probably in their freezer. I’m cold enough already. Goosebumps formed on my legs; summer air feels like fall at a certain hour. The only pair of shorts I have to wear are the kind of denim high waisted ones that raise eyebrows on school officials. Dirt laced the cuticles of my toenails. I couldn’t anticipate wearing my flimsy, brown, open-toed sandals for such a long journey. At this hour, when the sky above looks dark as my future, I’m not supposed to be here. My physical presence sticks out as “out of place” amongst the other unmoving objects in their belonging places. Tomorrow morning, I still won’t belong, even upon the arrival of other high schoolers belonging in this scenery. It’s so obvious: I was never normal like them. I finished my first cigarette. There’s only one reasonable thing a person can do under my circumstances; light another cigarette.

I gazed around to try to deduce which stone indentation on my high school’s architecture makes for the warmest sleeping spot. The window of my junior year AP English classroom caught my eye. One day I walked into class only to discover a jolting warning written on the chalkboard: “Don’t stay in the same place for too long or you’ll get stuck there”. I need to keep moving. Leaving. I can’t stay still.

I pose a question to the void, the ultimate pity party ice breaker, why me? Personally, I don’t know the answer. There are many things I don’t know, including anything about physics. Only a few hours remain until I’m supposed to wake up to take my physics final. I’m bound to fail unless the final exam contains only one question; “What’s the rate at which Amy’s life is accelerating into the ground, past rock bottom, and deep into the inner core of the Earth?” with the answer being “C — Very Fast,” this final exam stands as much a lost cause as I am. I couldn’t learn much in school because I needed to learn how to survive. That’s probably not a very relevant excuse to argue to my high school.

Pent up adrenaline deflated out of me. Seductive exhaustion replaces the adrenaline. My eyelids pressure me to close them. Soon I need to accept my fate and
pick a discreet corner around my high school to sleep. I don’t want to venture from the streetlight. It’s the only reliable light source in my scenery. If I can’t see what’s coming in the next moment metaphorically, I at least want to see it physically. Yet there’s no other option. I need a concealed hiding spot to sleep. I want to go home now. Tired, hungry, cold, broke, dirty, sad, and lonely, I’m so ready to go home wherever that is, whatever that means. Somewhere safe to sleep off this entire lifetime. Like it’s just been a bad fucking dream. Home. A place where I can flick a light switch on to get out of the dark. It sounds innocent. It’s nice — it’s nice to imagine a place where I’m grabbed by the arm as I’m leaving; I can stay there, still.

I did that thing everyone does at the end of a movie when there’s nowhere left for the plot to go - stare at the moon. Despite its motionless appearance, the moon is always moving somewhere. It only appears still by illusion. The pull of the moon grew mighty enough this year to cause the tides to rise, pull me under, and strand me washed ashore in this moment. As the moon disappeared into hiding, giving the sun its turn. Arising daily with the sun were my countless problems that I wished were just bad dreams. I skipped my physics final. I probably wouldn’t be graduating the following week anyway. I set up my canvas bag as a pillow at the back of my high school library. Not a single thought of guilt, shame, or regret crossed my mind while I slept through my physics final between the shelves of books and in eyesight of normal kids studying for their exams.

A week later I graduated high school. A few months later I moved to Philadelphia to start college. That fall, when I started my freshman year, I held this naive idea that things would be calm. If only I had known. I’m not sure how to get to the moon, but you’ll find me sitting pretty on the moon before you’ll find me still again. In the weeks leading up to that moment, under the streetlamp, outside my high school, only when I sat down did I notice how badly my feet hurt from being on them so much.

At age eleven, a nightmare of an afternoon waited to greet me every day after school. As I sat on my school bus, moments before I arrived at my house, I’d close my eyes as tightly as possible for a moment. I’d use that moment to whisper to myself ‘It’s going to be okay, I promise.’ Now at age eighteen, while standing still under the streetlamp, outside my high school, smoking one cigarette after another, I close my eyes as tightly as I can. After a deep breath and a pause, I use one moment to whisper to myself, ‘It’s going to be okay, I promise.’ A text notification rang from my practically dead iPhone. Darcy texted me. She said she’d be happy for me to sleep over at her house a few towns over. And so I began moving again. From that text message onward, I haven’t stopped moving.

The moon disappeared into hiding, giving the sun its turn. Arising daily with the sun were my countless problems that I wished were just bad dreams. I skipped my physics final. I probably wouldn’t be graduating the following week anyway. I set up my canvas bag as a pillow at the back of my high school library. Not a single thought of guilt, shame, or regret crossed my mind while I slept through my physics final between the shelves of books and in eyesight of normal kids studying for their exams.

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Amy Lovell is a Philadelphia based writer who gains most of her joy from writing fiction and nonfiction.
The Photography of Zarnab Tufail

These photographs are part of a project that gifted, 19-year old writer and photographer Zarnab Tufail completed in 2019. She took a series of photographs in and around her hometown of Lahore, Pakistan, with her camera and phone over the month of October. Out of those photos, she has chosen several of her favorites to be featured here. We hope you will find them as breathtaking as we have.
"Hazed"
"Warm Air"
Zarnab Tufail is a 19-year-old WoC from Lahore, Pakistan. She is the co-founder of The Walled City Journal and an author at Women’s Republic. Her work, including photography and poetry, is published or forthcoming in winnow magazine, Vagabond City Lit, Remington Review, blood orange tarot, and elsewhere. Besides finishing up various sitcoms on Netflix, she enjoys taking landscape photos, reading historical fiction and contemporary poetry.
to be inside
Laura Owens

I wonder which I prefer
to be inside
when rain pours
a monsoon
rejoicing at the tears
and the pain as its strike
until they eventually yell
through brimming throats;
until the rumbling bellow
does the same
as I emerge
hair dripping
because of the shower
or to be inside when
winds are howling
in their frames
trapped on the other side
of their shackles but
nuzzling a hot
blanket and I
brush through my mane
to entangle
me further
or even to be inside
when snow tumbles in
a celestial being
its frosted feathers
down at six
windows to witness
when everything is covered
and impartial
and the snow as I imagine
bleaching their hair
still onto our world
when it’s scorching hot and
on my drip-stained windows
these cotton sheets that seek
my discomfort; even
this drink melts in
an arrogant magic trick
to growing my nails specially just
from my body and discard it all
eagerly awaiting the
rain gushes
outside
but I sure as hell don’t like
when snow tumbles in
its celestial being
its frosted feathers
down at six
windows to witness
when everything is covered
and impartial
and the snow as I imagine
bleaching their hair
still onto our world
or even to be inside
slow motion
My word! I look
in the morning from my top floor
the untampered immaculacy
so equal
I laugh at
some unfortunate angel
just to cover up dandruff flakes
descending

Laura Owens is a 3D animator and budding poet currently residing in Oxfordshire, UK. Her words and visual art have appeared in various print and online publications. She does occasionally go outside. Say hi on Twitter/Instagram @laurabethowens
There are three different ways lightning can strike, more or less — within a cloud, like a bad atmospheric stomachache; between two clouds, like a row with swearing and plates being thrown; or from a cloud down to the ground, like a hammer blow.

I learnt this from Jez, who knew lightning from the outside in. He had rolled around in lightning balls and warmed his toes on heat lightning. He could tell you which way the next bolt would zig and how many degrees it would zag. He had very short white hair that stuck straight up all over his head, as if he had been freshly shocked, and he never wore shoes so that he could stay close to the ground.

It was Jez who told me about the upward streamers.

An upward streamer is an invisible channel of positively charged ions, reaching up as high as it can, stretching towards the clouds. You can imagine it glowing an electric blue, or like the shimmering space above a candle, although neither of those images is really correct.
Cathedrals and skyscrapers and pine trees have tall upward streamers. This is why you must never hide under a tall tree in a thunderstorm. In built-up areas, we have lightning rods which have an especially high flare so that they can catch the deadly bolts of electricity and wrestle them safely to the ground — earthed.

But then there are some people who have opened their own ionic channel, or are born with it.

"Don't know," shrugged Jez, when I asked him how it had started. "It was just there one day. Like an atmosphere around me, or a feeling like someone was standing right behind me, breathing down my neck. Then — bam."

The lightning struck him dead on while he was waiting for a bus at the side of the road. He still had the scars down the left side of his body to prove it. A year later, lightning had struck twice — different spot, same man. He had a delicate pattern on both feet, geometric or maybe even floral, etched into his skin where the lightning had unfurled its roots and dug deep within him.

After the third time he got hit, his wiring was fried pretty badly and he ended up in occupational therapy, learning how to apply fine motor skills and emotional expression to third-hand crayons. With me.

"This," he said with grim relish, flourishing a page that was covered in wide angry red and purple lines, "is what happened to me." He glanced around the table at the rest of us. "What's that meant to be, then? A ball of knitting?"

He grabbed a piece of paper from the girl sitting next to me.

"It's a ball of string with a black hole in the middle," she said softly.

"That's rubbish," said Jez, crushingly.

"It's how I feel," she said softly.

"It's how I feel," she said.

"Well I'm not drawing how I feel," said Jez. "I'm not here because of how I feel. I'm here because the planet's got it out for me. I've got stories."

He was growing more and more animated, warming to his theme, an orator who could see his audience was gripped.

"I've been struck by lightning nine times," he said proudly. (He always claimed it was nine, even though the occupational therapy group leader told me they had only documented three events, and no one had ever survived more than seven strikes, as far as scientists knew). "Nine times and the bugger keeps coming back for me. I've got something special."

I knew he was a joker, but he had a way of telling stories which invariably drew people in. After a couple of weeks, he had convinced a few of the more nervous outpatients to stop wearing shoes until the group leader stepped in. During a papier-mâché session, he taught one lady how to make a 'lightning proof' hat. I found him in the corridor afterwards, doubled over with laughter as she walked out with a new spring in her step.

"That was mean," I said.

"Yeah," said Jez, "but it's no harm done. She hasn't got an upward streamer anyway. She'll be fine. Lightning won't bother with the likes of her."

"You talk about lightning like it's a person."

"Well it's not. It's a —" He shut his mouth firmly, then opened it again. "It's like a — force, or... Like it's a person, but a big person. Bigger than a city. Bigger than a mountain. A really, really big person. Not fat. Just big. And strong."

"Can you talk to it?" I asked, curiously.

"No! No. But sometimes — it doesn't talk to me. But sometimes I think it might be, well, talking. Inside. It takes decisions. It picks and chooses when to come after me."

"Is it angry with you?"

"No," he said again, and a dreamy look came into his eyes. He stared away out of the window. "Not angry. Just inevitable."

Next week when I arrived for the OT session, we were told that Jez was in hospital. He'd been struck again; doctors were astonished that he had survived. He was having trouble talking, they said, and would be in for a while. But he was alive.

I went to see him, of course. I picked up a bouquet that had some bursting white star-shaped flowers which made me think of lightning. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to upset him or make him feel at home. Either way, he only grunted when he saw them, and gestured for me to leave the bouquet, still wrapped, on the table beside his bed.

Then he waved a hand to indicate that I should come closer. I leaned over him in the bed. He smelled, a little bit, of sweat and something acrid, like burning plastic.
"It happened again," he said hoarsely.

"I heard so," I said.

"Do you want to know how to do it?" he said.

I nodded.

He reached out his hand again, and took mine in a firm clasp. Looked deep into my eyes. I felt a sparking shock in the palm of my hand, vivid at first, then dull as my fingers went numb and the muscles spasmed. I cried out, and tore away from his grip. Jumped back from the bed.

Just like I had seen him in the corridor weeks before, he was howling with laughter, bent over, clutching at his stomach.

"Your face!" he croaked. "Your face!"

Then he held up his hand, and showed me the little trick buzzer he had hidden between his index and middle finger.

As I walked away from the hospital, I told myself that I was angry with him for pulling such a petty trick. But in reality I felt obscurely disappointed. For a second I thought there had been something genuine in his eyes; something that he had recognized in me, as if we reflected one another, two stormclouds with a charge running between them.

He had known that the lady with the papier mâché hat didn’t have an upward streamer. Had he seen something in me? Had he seen a ionic channel of charged particles, beaming and buzzing around my head? Was it like detecting someone’s aura, or being able to smell when they had Parkinson’s?

I would never dare to ask him, now that he had disappointed me so badly. I didn’t even want to return to the OT group, in case someone else visited him and he regaled them with the story of the prank. That would be just like him.

In fact I didn’t think the OT group had been doing much for me anyway. The storm that had struck Jez down had passed, and we had had a week of long hot afternoons and incandescent sunsets. Staying home was more tempting than going out to draw pictures and maybe get made fun of in a big stuffy hall. I decided to skip it all.

I went straight to the kitchen when I got home from visiting Jez, and made myself a drink in the tallest glass I could find. Then I made some more drinks in a big glass jug, so that the drink in the tall glass wouldn’t get lonely.

I took a blanket off the sofa and carried the whole thing out to the garden, just a patch of grass between concrete paving stones really, but wide enough to lay down on my back and watch the sky with a drink at my elbow. Enough space to earth myself.

It was quiet. No squabbling over art supplies. No practical jokes. I rested my head on my folded arms and tried to picture my own upward streamer. What does a charged particle look like? How far does it travel?

I raked the sky with my imaginary searchlight, looking for enemy clouds. Come and get me, I thought. Come on, let’s start something. I’ve got something special.

The silence around me thickened and grew, stretching out to fill the whole garden, the empty jug, the empty sky, the atmosphere that lay in wait above the earth. The kind of palpable silence that fills a room before someone speaks; the silence in which decisions are made.

I felt something, almost like a breath on the back of my neck.

I waited for the hammer blow to fall. ☬

Corinna Keefe is a freelance writer currently based in the UK. She has lived and worked in 10 different countries. She has not (yet) been struck by lightning.
Three Poems by Richard LeDue

Autumn Always Arrives

Over scratched mosquito bites remind me how dead skin under fingernails part of growing up, while watching leaves cling to branches, knowing autumn always arrives (trees naked as my grey lipped grandmother in the morgue), only to purchase spring time lilacs during September because they thrive in a greenhouse, one stone throw away from death, but no worse than the rest of us, and although the first snowflakes in an early winter have no mouthparts, they can bite just the same.

Not All Endings Are In Sight

Some days are so restless with the waiting for dreams, circling in the back of brains like a colour blind shark. Can't decide if it's worth the effort to wake up, forget every thing your subconscious told you through the night, as if eyes only open in the morning.

On the drive to work, designer sunglasses protect your vision from the light they keep saying is killing us (UV warning flashes red on the weather channel, but you cancelled your cable last spring for a cheaper movie streaming service), only to arrive on time, and park within the lines.

Richard LeDue was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba with his wife and son. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2019, and more work is forthcoming throughout 2020, including a chapbook from Kelsey Books.
As Iris Murdoch says, consciousness and its development is connected and intertwined with the use of metaphor. Metaphors are intrinsic to an awareness of our condition as humans. And so to explain some things we come to use metaphor. It is an explanation of the imagination I would like to add. It seems that when we think of metaphor it is usually to grasp the ungraspable, or at least what language makes difficult to articulate. Few things in my life have been as difficult to articulate as melancholia. And maybe now that it is not gripping me with its decaying claws I can think of ways to explain it to myself, not just to others. My thoughts are that since melancholia will always come back to me, maybe this time I’ll have language to understand it, that I will be able to grasp the relationship between melancholia, life and myself. So to grasp the ungraspable I come to a metaphor. And my metaphor is like all metaphors, a story. It is also not just a story but a memory. A memory that happened to me when I was a child so for a while I thought it was a dream. But I asked my mother if it was true and she said it was and so now my memory feels real enough to use.
When I was five, I rode horses. I remember driving out to the outskirts of the city in my riding gear with my mother. The anticipation of coming close to the horses always filled me with excitement. I was never scared around these gentle animals though I did get stepped on once. They seemed like creatures that I could talk to. What I remember most was that disarming feeling of moving with an animal way stronger and greater than you. And the specialness that comes from you listening to the horse and the horse listening to you. I had always loved stories of fairies and adventurers and I felt like a mystical maiden every time I rode one of the horses. All I needed were flowers and ribbons in my hair. I look back at those days when I was young with heavy nostalgia. I wish I could go back to the feeling of a carrot being nibbled from my hand.

So on, I began jumping and learning all the tricks. One day, I walked through a trick without realizing it. This is what tricks do, they sneak up on you. A yellow piece of plastic string had been strung between two poles, so faint it was easy to miss. I walked through those poles on a horse and got strangled by the string. The plastic string cut at my neck so I couldn’t breathe. I let go of the reins to try to pull this string away from my neck but couldn’t do it. It was tied to the poles too tightly. As I was groping, my horse kept walking forward, and finally, I was flung backwards off the horse. Everyone had watched in horror and came rushing to me lying on the ground with a mark around my neck. I burst into tears.

And so here is my metaphor: Five-year-old me is myself to this day. I may not ride horses anymore, but I have found other things that give me that disarming feeling. A horse may not be a book on philosophy, but somehow both allow me to feel otherworldly; both fill me with excitement. The plastic string is melancholia; for melancholia, when it first comes into a life, is easy to miss. It lies waiting for its prey as the ultimate trick, an obstacle that arrives unseen and unexpected. One walks into it without realizing what is happening till it begins to strangle you. Melancholia strangles every part of your life — your ability for purpose, your ability for love, your ability for living... Melancholia chokes your reason for existing.

To fight back against melancholia sometimes feels futile. That chord is tied so tightly to what supports it that as much as you claw at it, it continues to strangle. There is a hopelessness in trying to free yourself. But still, you claw, scratching yourself in the process. The last part to this metaphor is the horse. The horse that keeps moving forward represents life. Life keeps moving forward regardless of being strangled by melancholia so that you are flung backwards. Life seems to be completely
oblivious to what is happening as it marches into the future. You cannot guide it anymore, for to rescue yourself, you have to let go of life’s reins. Those who have experienced melancholia know of the pain of not being able to move forward but instead are pushed backwards — into the past, into limbo, into stasis, whatever it is to you experiencing it. You are flung into the opposite direction of life, either in the air or in pain on the ground. With melancholia those who love you watch in horror at what has happened to you. But unlike the real plastic string, melancholia doesn’t leave a visible mark.

The question that I have is what if I had seen the string? What if I had been able to bow my head and lean close to the mane of my horse and miss getting strangled? It is hard to do ‘what-ifs’ for memories because one cannot change the past, that much is obvious. But I want to dwell on that ‘what if’ to see what it can do for my metaphor. What if I could see melancholia? What if I could cling closer to life and miss melancholia altogether? These are difficult questions (and here, maybe, I might find that I undo my metaphor). For, in many ways, I can see melancholia, but it still catches me unawares. I know that it is coming because it doesn’t leave me alone for long. So I can sense that the string is there but yet when I walk into it I am surprised again. As if post-melancholia, I am in this amnesiac cloud and I cannot remember the position of the string or even that it is between those two poles. So it is a strange paradox — knowing it is there while forgetting it is there at the same time. Fighting an invisible enemy will always present challenges. Because it seems like life is leading me through those two poles, not I leading the way. There is always that wonder of horse riding — how much are you really controlling the horse? Is it not the illusion of control because if the horse decides to not follow your orders, there is nothing much you can do? Life itself gives us these illusions as well. I had to wonder if it is life that will always lead me between those two poles, always leading me to be strangled by melancholia. Or is it just the nature of my mind that I lead life and myself there? Maybe my mind both ties the string and ensures that I don’t see it? Is there a difference between the string strangling me and myself? And so I see there is always a risk with metaphors in that they can bring more questions than explanations. If anything, it shows how complicated the experience of melancholia is — both known and unknown at the same time, an experience that is both concrete and elusive. Even a string, a horse, and a five-year-old girl doesn’t seem like it can do it justice. Especially when the three parts to the memory start to blur when placed within the bounds of a metaphor. I wonder if
a memory will ever be solid enough for a metaphor. But maybe explanations of the ungraspable will always be fluid, changing, and up for interrogation by many — a question, a thought, a wish.

Yet I come back to the metaphor; I come back to the memory. I still have the hope that it has explained some element of the human condition. For even in its ambiguity, it still explains something to me as it would seem that this year I have missed the string. I walked in through those two poles and the string of melancholia was not there. It was a welcome surprise and a relief after many years of strangulation. And so within the bounds of its complications, I can write this metaphor. I can write because I am free from the motion of being flung backwards into stasis. I can write this because I can go forwards with life. But that forward motion has made me look backwards to understand what came before. Forwards sometimes means recollection. For there is always a fear in me that sometime in the future, the string will be set up by mind again, ready for me to walk into it. So I am looking as carefully as possible and clinging to life as much as I can. I am like my five-year-old self, trusting something that is far greater and stronger than myself.

There is an ending to my metaphor. When I was five, after getting strangulated by a piece of plastic string, I got picked up by my mother and taken home to be cared for by my parents. I was loved and put into bed where the incident could become part of my memory and eventually fade away, so I believed it was a dream. And so even if I walk into the string of melancholia again, even if life moves forward and I’m flung backwards, I will be taken care of by those who love me and put to bed. Maybe that is why I don’t remember melancholia once it is over; it becomes a faded memory that I can almost, one day, believe is a dream.

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I walk through the bristling trees, verdant and sprayed with a smattering of flaxen yellow. All is quiet except for a distant violin playing sombrely.

Intrigued, I quicken my pace and find my way through the maze that is the park to find a man with a rubescent hood playing his instrument at an outdoor chess table. This man was without an opponent.
I am mistaken in thinking that he has not noticed my presence, because his outstretched hand gestures towards the opponent’s side. His hand is cracked and dry, it almost looks like the hand of a labourer. Each time he picks up a chess piece, a thick wall of charred dust surrounds us like a bad omen.

Just as I am about to pick up a piece, I feel an iron grip on my wrist.

“Don’t! Touch!” he growls.

Understandably perturbed, I snatch my hand back, not knowing what to do now. The silence is awkward and disconcerting, but I’d rather have silence than have him growl at me again. Anything but the growling.

Why am I still sitting here?

I don’t know the answer to my own question and that terrifies me. A human being should know themselves inside and out before they leave their scent to drift through the ethos.

To my surprise, there are seven pieces instead of the usual sixteen. He spreads them out in a triangular shape and my eyes are magnetically pulled towards this creation.

“The seven deadly sins,” he tells me, gesturing towards the chess pieces.

Lust
Gluttony
Sloth
Greed
Wrath
Envy
Pride

They are not ordinary chess pieces; their shapes are foreign and peculiar. The piece representing sloth is indeed that same creature, and pride is represented by a lion.

I suddenly feel myself burning up, the sweat above my brows has transformed to a pool of brackish juice. It is now that I notice we are atop a bed of flames. The flames crackling and singing the threads of my pants.

“Son, we are amidst the seven deadly sins. We are laying in the bed of devils and fallen angels. This is a place you do not want to be.”

My eyes are stinging from the forceful heat, and the figure sitting in front of me has been engulfed by the flames. However, my nature remains calm; I’m perplexed as to why.

“The art of faux living is something that society is comfortable with, but you, you
are better than that. Do you want to live, my friend?”

“Yes! I want to live! More than anything!” I scream.

The hooded figure removes his hood, and I am face to face with the devil himself! His horns look like fossils unearthed from a desert.

“You must understand that hell is other people,” he states.

There is that feeling of a magnetic pull again. My surroundings are being vacu-umed inside my soul. I am full.

Dangling from the edge of a cliff, I realise something.

Hell is other people.

And, I want to live.

Courtenay S. Gray Courtenay S. Gray is a twenty-three year old writer and poet from the North of England. She writes poetry and short/flash fiction. She creates digital collages too. Courtenay has a penchant for the melancholic and macabre side of literature. She has been featured in publications such as Vamp Cat Mag and Trick Zine, just to name a few. Courtenay is also a pushcart nominee of 2020. You can reach her on Twitter @courtenaywrites and on Instagram @cherrygraphics.
The box opened easily, inside was a lake. It made rushing noises and smelled of a spring morning in a cool country, one where the mountain snows had just begun to thaw.

“Lock it up again, before Da finds out we stole his key,” Erin, my sister said, her hands shaking on the wooden lid.

“He said it had been in the family for generations, from the old country, but…” I sighed as loudly as the winds that chewed storms out of the August skies.
“Oma’s stories sounded wonderful — the ballroom where she danced until the stars melted into the dawn. The lakes where she hunted swans with arrows tipped with rubies. Her bedroom in the tower top where she leaned out and whispered her secrets into the clouds.”

“You don’t believe that rubbish that they were royalty, do you, Maggie?” She scoffed and slammed the lid shut.

But I did believe it. And I went back to the box and I watched the lake and I saw minnows, shining and fast as spilled mercury. And they carried bright pieces like shattered jewels. And I remembered Oma, her smell like marble and icing sugar, her voice as grand as an echo in a palace. So, one night, I carried the box into our garden, and there beneath the oak, I poured out the lake. The minnows were a swirl of light and colour, dazzling back the moon shine. They worked faster and faster until all I could see was a spinning the colour of lovesick fireworks. All I could feel was their tails tickling my ankles. They put the pieces together like a towering puzzle and when the sun rose, the palace gleamed back the dawn. I opened the door and went inside.

**The Winds**

The winds had teeth. I’d seen them snapping at my bedroom window through the gap in the curtains that never closed — white and sharp like knifes dipped in chalk dust.

“When the winds come, don’t look out,” Ma said. And then afterwards, when the world was as quiet as the moment before you fall asleep, we’d walk beneath the oak trees and collect new sticks for firewood. I ran my fingers on the bitten edges of the sticks. Ma held hers in her faded apron. And she built a fire in our stove and as it burned and crackled and the warmth turned my face red and cast our home in amber, I thought about the teeth biting the trees.

“Why can’t I watch the winds?” I asked as she pulled me into a hug that smelled of flour and moss.

“You never knew your aunt, my sister, Ethel was her name. Laugh like a witch up to mischief on All Hallows Eve, hair a big orange tangle. Always looking out into the winds — they’re all teeth and eyes, she told me, and they smell of wet dogs. And one evening, when Ma and Da were napping by the fire and even our old grey hound were snoring loud as church bells, she went out into the winds. She never came back.”

But I wanted to know where she’d gone. And I watched the clear skies and I waited for the winds. And when Ma closed the curtains and sent me to my room to huddle under blankets, I opened my window. The winds were full of wolves. They snapped at the trees, at the chimneys puffing in the village, at the church spire. Their eyes were fierce lights and they fixed on me. And then they were nudging me with dripping snouts and tugging my sleeves with their fangs.
The Balla Bons

Did you feed the balla bons? Remember when we pretended they lurked in your wardrobe but only at ten to five on a Friday afternoon? And we picked the lavender that your Gran had grown in the flower beds that was supposed to be left for her to collect and dry and sew into those pouches meant to go in undie drawers and make them smell better. (Better, of course, meaning like an 85 year old with a blue rinse hauling a shopping trolley to the post office). You said they lived on lavender like bees, seeing as they were only the size of bumblebees and blur-winged like them, too. I told you I could hear their tiny hooves against the closed door of your wardrobe. But I only said it so you’d go and put your ear to the door and listen and wouldn’t notice me stealing the fizzy fish from your midnight feast. You always made yours last longer than I did. I thought you ate it extra slowly just to tease me.

Then, in the morning, when your Dad was weeding the flower beds, we pretended to help, but we shoved the lavender in our pockets instead. And your Gran would sit at the garden table, drinking her bitter coffee and glowering at us over her copy of the Daily Mail, because she’d have seen all the moustaches you’d drawn in biro on the Queen. Then she’d say — no respect, your generation. And we’d giggle into the too-big gardening gloves. And I’d get soil on my face and you wouldn’t tell me, you’d just let me go around like that for a whole hour, until your mum told you off. And we made double buttercream for the Victoria sponge your mum had just got out of the oven, and we scoffed more than ended up on the cake.

I think I can hear the balla bons now. Even here on the edge of the sky, something beats softly against the metal hull, ten thousand tiny hooves, leaving prints denting the walls.

Rebecca Harrison sneezes like Donald Duck and her best friend is a dog who can count.
Morpheus, My Messiah

The passenger whispers
Of the afterlife as an odyssey,
One through memory and dreaming.
Eternity spent
Traversing the multiverses
Poured into us
By arts
By dreams
By life
To come home
In the end
To the sweet sound of
Shapeless sensibility.

Electric Blue

Pregnant of power,
Profoundly stretching
Beyond our sight.
Alluding to the
Solitude found only
In the darkest seas.
Pure in form and shape,
Tangible tokens
Of Seraph Skin,
Celestial figments
Made visible.

Premise One

Imagine
If all of us
Woke five years
In the past
With the minds and memories
Of the present,
Now five years in the future?
What sins of a future
Now a figment
Would not be forgiven,
What would be fulfilled again,
And what new future
Would be forged
Out of the springs of foresight
If any?

Tuur Verheyde is a twenty-three year old Belgian poet and student, currently completing a master's degree in English Literature and Linguistics at the University of Ghent. Although Dutch is his first language, Tuur writes poetry exclusively in English. His poems often discuss current events, progressive politics, spirituality, and highbrow and popular culture as well as personal experiences and stories.
Consistency wasn’t my forte. I watched my parents play chess every day with a tad of skepticism, thinking if they really enjoyed playing the same game. My mother could win hands down. My father lost every time. It upset him. He was a bad loser. Just watching them was monotonous. The same arguments over those moves on the chess board.
In those days, I wore Naagras. They were royal shoes with a narrow pointy front bow. I went to some really dark places in them. Both boredom and romance took me into forbidden forays, as I sought newness. I really didn’t know what to expect. A nuanced romance that would explode a life of taste and colour. The more I tried, the more disappointment my adventures brought me, flat prairies of no exciting relationships.

One summer’s afternoon, however, I sat reading Tagore’s The Last Poem. His definition of love and marriage eluded me. The essence of true love fascinating and dangerous, he compared true love with an ocean where the mellow heart must be allowed to immerse occasionally. Marriage, on the other hand, was washed away with sullied water, fetched every day and used every day.

Then I heard footsteps. Our neighbour’s son, Sunny, ambled along the garden. I looked up. He smiled and sat down next to me. We started talking about romance and marriage.

“Are you reading Tagore’s The Last Poem?”

He asked looking at the turned pages.

“Yes,” I answered.

“How are you liking it?”

“I like his views on love and marriage,” I said.

“Hmm, Interesting take, say, do you think Madame Bovary could change?” he asked.

“Seriously? No, I don’t think so. Her boredom was too deep.”

He noted my terse answer. However, I continued unabashed.

I had roped myself in defence of the Madame Bovarys of the world. Suddenly, Sunny looked at me strangely. He pulled me towards him. His lips were pressing hard and hot on mine. I had the strangest vision in his arms. I felt a connection. Something actually clicked.

“I have been there. Done it, many, many times.”

I cried and unlocked myself from his arms.

“With the same person?” he asked.

“No.”

“Aha,” he chuckled.

I started to walk away from him. He followed me. We entered the house together. Our parents chatted on the far side of the verandah. Sunny joined them for a drink. I went to my bedroom and stood by the window. The pomegranate tree was in full bloom. True love didn’t exist, I reminded myself, but I felt something there with Sunny which I had not felt with any others. Maybe Sunny checkmated me. Maybe, I was in love. One kiss, could this transform me? I braced myself for a fall.

The next day when I woke up, I thought of Sunny’s kiss. The first thought of the day was that I was eager to see him today. I texted him asking for a date. He responded promptly. It was in the afternoon again in our garden shed. Time appeared to have moved slowly this morning. But the moment arrived. I went up to the garden shed. I saw him from a distance, waiting for me under a tree shade. He grinned at me. I grinned back. I pulled up a branch of a mango tree as I walked under its foliage.

I had walked a few steps towards him, and he walked towards me. We met halfway. He kissed me again and refreshed my memory of his last kiss. A desire swelled in my heart. He carried me and he walked towards the shed. As we entered it, I realised that he had come prepared with soft linen and pillows to make it all comfortable.

After about a quarter of an hour, I saw through the tiny shed window a crow flying in and sitting on the edge of the corrugated iron roof. It dropped a patch of lathery feces before it flew away with a caw. Sunny and I spent nearly two hours here. That was just the beginning of a romance. He recited sweet poems that he had written. He poured them into my ears so my cold, cold heart of short-lived romance would melt to submission. I began to feel it, the passion, the romance, and a rash desire for Sunny. Sunny was the one, the only love of my life.

Some moments passed in silence. I thought of love, then I thought of the crow too, flying here from nowhere for a release.

Sunny looked at me and asked,

“What’s up! What’re you thinking?”
“Of you.”

“Really? Do you want to marry me?” he asked in earnest.

“Yes, I do.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm? I asked.

“Not sure, if you’re committed enough.”

He lit a cigarette and made a smokey ring as he puffed it out through his pouty lips. The penny dropped for me. Sunny was right. I wasn’t ready for marriage. Marriage was a mirage. When the passion relinquished, I realised I was another Madame Bovary; another tragedy in waiting.

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Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning author, internationally published and critically acclaimed by Midwest Book Review. One of her short stories won The Waterloo Short Story Competition, 2020. Her works have been nominated three times for The Best of the Net Awards, 2020. Pushcart Prize Award Nomination, 2020. Two time nomination for Ditmar Awards in 2016 and 2019. Aurealis Awards nominee, 2015 and nomination for Christina Stead Prize, 2018. Her book was announced The Drunken Druid’s Editor’s Choice, June 2018. Three of her books received Author Shout Reader Ready Awards, 2019. One received the silver medal, while the other two bronze. She has written novels, novellas, short stories, creative nonfiction, flash fiction, academic, prose poetry, memoirs, essays and journalistic write-ups. Her works have been podcast, anthologised and translated into German, Greek, and Bengali. She has two masters’ degrees and a bachelor’s (Hon.) in English Literature and Linguistics from the University of Queensland and Dhaka University. She was born and raised in Bangladesh. She lives in Australia.
A couple of months before I turned forty, I got a unique opportunity to housesit for a nearly forgotten acquaintance of mine, a guy I barely knew in the first place, who now reached out to me via email. His name was Norm and he lived in Utah.

“You’d be a life saver,” he said, as he had no one else who could do it. “If you could watch the place, mainly just feed the dog and water some plants, for six days, I’ll make it worth your while.”

I told my wife that I needed this, that we needed this and that I’d come back to her a better man, a better husband and father.

I loved our two little girls of course — our family was my whole world — but the thought of getting away from them for a week sounded amazing. I'd been fantasizing about solitude like how a small child fantasizes about Disney World — as if it were the closest to heaven a living person could get.

My wife was against it at first, but in the end she relented and told me to enjoy myself. “I hope you make the most of it, Larry,” she said. “I'm not giving you any more free-passes like this for a while.”

“You won’t be sorry, honey.”

I wasn't quite sure how the experience would change me for the better, but I really felt it was something I needed to do. I sent an email to the car dealer office where I worked saying I was going on a family vacation, and another to Norm saying it would be no problem at all to watch his house for the week.

Once I saw that it was really going to happen, I couldn’t get rid of the giddy feeling in my chest and I stayed up much later than normal, drinking cans of beer until around 3AM.

Day One

It was an eight-hour drive from our place in Nevada to the isolated house in northern Utah. I did the speed limit the whole way across the desert to insure nothing went wrong that would keep me from my week of quiet and bliss. When I at last arrived at Norm’s place up on a small mountain I settled right in, introducing myself to the dog and the couch, and familiarizing myself with the remote control. The couch was a plush, velvety couch and I felt it held me with gratitude, as if we completed one another.

The bare minimum I had to do was to feed the dog and water the plants so that is what I decided to do. I would do the bare minimum. Every minute after my arrival on that first day I spent watching movies I knew by heart, relishing in my new relationship with the couch and happily thinking about all the things I wouldn’t do at Norm’s.

I wouldn’t cut the grass. I wouldn’t fill the birdfeeders. I wouldn’t vacuum, dust, or scrub the toilet. I wouldn’t cook or prepare food of any kind. I wouldn’t shave. I wouldn’t put on footwear with laces or clothes that needed ironing. I wouldn’t leave the house.

I went on and on and they were some of the most luxurious thoughts in my recent memory. It was a terrific first day. Thinking about not doing all those things made me almost happier than I could believe.

Though I was enjoying my solitude immensely, I still talked to the eight-year-old black lab, Trudy, some.

“This is the life, huh, girl? The quiet, the trees, no neighbors for miles — a guy can really unwind here.”

Trudy cocked her head to one side as if to say, “Aren’t you bored?”

“Not in the least,” I replied with a smile.

Day Two

On day two I tried to recreate the feeling of the first day, but instead of thinking about all of the things I wouldn’t do here, I thought about all the things I didn’t have to do since I wasn’t at home.

I didn’t have to go to the office. I didn’t have to talk to customers or coworkers. I didn’t have to pretend to like my boss. I didn’t have to take the girls to soccer practice. I didn’t have to play the part of my wife’s sous chef at dinner. I didn’t have to explain myself to my wife or bribe my children into eating peas or break up any squabbles. And it went on and on.

I lazed around on the couch into the evening and I felt it was another good, well-spent day. I was sure things couldn’t get much better. After dinner, for which I had a frozen pizza and a bottle of Norm’s red wine, which was a huge leap up from the stuff the wife and I normally brought home, I again turned to Trudy for a little conversation.

“You know, girl, there’s nothing better than a day kept all to yourself.”

Trudy lowered her head and whimpered, which I interpreted as, “Surely you must be lonely.”

I swirled my wine a bit and took a sip.

“Not at all. Feeling good. Feeling very good.”
Day Three

For lack of a better idea, on the third day I got stark naked and remained that way. To the pool — naked. In the hot tub — naked. Watched TV — naked. Fixed myself a sandwich — naked. Got a shower — conveniently, naked.

It was freeing and I was happy that my wife wasn’t there to laugh at my nakedness, or my daughters to ask curious questions about my man parts or why I was being silly and not wearing any clothes.

In addition to clothes of any kind, I also boycotted the indoor plumbing and went outside to pee. It seemed like a great idea. I marched right up to a tree in my birthday suit and peed on it. The act wasn’t exactly the transformative experience I was hoping for, but it felt it was a step in the right direction — a return to nature, or something vaguely Buddhist.

It seemed there was something about peeing outdoors that reconnected me to the universe. I vowed to do it more often in the future, though it would be more difficult back in my life in the suburbs on the cul-de-sac. The neighbors would most likely take offense at the sight of my pale, white ass out on the lawn. It would be a whole thing and the neighborhood board members would have a big meeting about it.

Trudy peed alongside me and I felt more connected to her as well.

“You know, girl, I think mankind is being forced into a lot of social situations that are against our nature, and it can be very stressful.”

Trudy barked twice and wagged her tail, and I took this for an acknowledgment and commiseration of sorts.

Maybe mostly because I was naked and felt a little goofy, I sort of wished I also had a tail that I could wag when I was happy. An obvious, unmistakable signal to everyone that I liked what was happening.

Day Four

On day four I did the first real housesitting work of any kind. I was feeling guilty about Trudy, who always looked forlorn, so I took her for a run and ran myself ragged in an attempt to tucker the black, wolf-like creature out.

We jogged down the sloped driveway and along the narrow asphalt road that led into town. Most of the trees had lost their leaves but there were some orangish-brown stragglers that hadn’t gotten word or simply were caught unaware that it was mid-October in the western United States.

I was wheezing and foggy brained after ten minutes, but Trudy seemed perfectly fit and alert as she trotted along by my side. I thought of the Jack London story “To Build A Fire” and wondered if I suffered a heart attack would Trudy just keep running on into town to find someone else to take care of her.

I kept going. When necessary, I slowed to a crawl, but I didn’t stop or turn around.

Two hours and eight miles later we staggered back to the house. Trudy seemed as spent as I was, but I’d only bought myself about four hours, during which she slept soundly at the foot of the stairs. After that she was right back to looking at me with those sad, expectant eyes of hers.

So much about life, I thought, came down to buying guilt-free time. Aren’t we always striving for time off, a vacation, early retirement even? We work and work just to get whoever it is that’s breathing down our necks to lay off for a while.

When I pondered the next day, I thought about driving an hour in any direction and abandoning Trudy in a forest or field. That would buy me a good amount of time, I thought. I could spend a lot of quality time with the couch. Though of course, I wouldn’t really due to guilt.

“You know, girl, I think dogs make good personal trainers.”

I thought I should probably adopt one at home in order to get rid of the layer of flab collecting around my midsection. I’d had abs once, I recalled vaguely.

Trudy looked at me from her spot on the floor and then she looked away. It seemed she didn’t want the job. Nor did it seem was she interested in communicating today.

“I get it,” I said. “I totally get it.”

I filled an orange juice glass with vodka and went walking from room to room. Norm really had good taste. In every room there were lots of big windows and wooden beams in the ceiling and such. There was a Chagall print hanging over the king-sized bed in the master bedroom and all the lighting was soft and elegant and unobtrusive. Every little detail reminded me of something that was different, and which I now found lacking, in my own house. My place in the burbs of Nevada almost seemed more like a shack than a house now, and I was looking less and less forward to going back to it.

Was tomorrow already Day Five? I drunkenly asked myself later in bed. It felt as if the time I had bought myself had been stolen back while I wasn’t looking.

Day Five

Day five I can sum up in a word: onanism (look it up). I thought of all the chances I never got at home and decided that if I went at it systematically, I could get it all out of my system in a day.

I got online and went from video to video like a teenager left home alone after school.
Each time I began I recited a new euphemism for the act. I started with the most common, like “beat the meat” and “spank the monkey” but eventually moved to the more obscure, like “shucking the corn” and “celebrating Palm Sunday.”

In the end I was struggling to label each time, but I did at least manage to exhaust myself. I felt that I would never be horny again. And I really hoped I wouldn’t be because I was disgusted with the whole operation. With the act, with myself, with the videos, with the people in the videos, with the industry that produced the videos, with the technology that got the videos so conveniently onto my phone and computer — all of it.

When I finally came out of the bedroom Trudy was on the couch and she looked at me with an air of superiority.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I said, “but that’s all behind me now. You’re looking at a fresh, new, chaste, even comparatively virginal, Larry Sonderlo.”

She didn’t challenge me, but I don’t think Trudy bought this new-leaf-turning-over of mine. She just lay there without saying anything, master of her domain.

In no mood to try to change a dog’s mind, I sat down on the couch beside her and turned on the TV.

**Day Six**

As I knew it would, the sixth and final day came much too soon. I spent some time after breakfast crying into my coffee.

“Six days isn’t enough,” I told Trudy, who had not yet started her day and was still on the couch. “I need a month or more. Maybe a whole season. A long winter to sort of hibernate.”

The first part of the day rushed by with all sorts of desperate thinking. Peeing outside with Trudy in the afternoon, I again turned toward my canine companion as a sort of sounding board.

“How do you feel about Mexico?” I asked. “Want to go to Mexico, pooch?”

Trudy wagged her tail slightly and I took it as a sign that she too had grown tired of her life and wished for a break. I went over to her and scratched behind her ears.

“Good dog,” I said. “You’re a good girl.”

I took Trudy for a long walk through the woods as a sort of farewell, because I couldn’t really take her with me, and that evening I mapped out the route that would take me across the border (and on to Zihuatanejo) and packed up most of my things.

I slept fitfully with fragmented dreams of my family, friends and coworkers. In the dreams they were all trying to stop me from doing the one thing — I can’t remember what — that would make me completely and utterly happy.

**Day 7**

In the morning I wasn’t hungry. I knew the idea of going to Mexico was crazy, unrealistic. But the idea of going home to all of my responsibilities seemed almost equally nuts.

I watered the plants for the first and last time and packed my small blue suitcase into the car. I patted Trudy on the head and said goodbye.

“Well, so long, pooch. I guess I’ll see you later. But I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

Trudy turned her head toward me, pink tongue hanging out, panting.

“Can you give me any final advice? How about one bark for Mexico, and two barks for home?”

Without so much as a growl or snarl, Trudy resumed her forward gaze. In the end she didn’t seem at all interested in my personal crisis.

I got in my crummy Hyundai sedan and started down the long driveway. Not exactly sure where I was headed, I wasn’t in any special hurry.

I listened to the radio for a while but then turned it off, so I could better hear my thoughts. With my eyes on the road, I reached a strange place of uncaring and unfeeling.

After a couple of hours of driving I came to the point where a decision had to be made. Stay on the highway I was on and head for the border, or take the next exit and head for home? Tacos and siestas or work and family?

I was certain if Trudy had cared at all she would have said, “Woof woof.”

At the last instant I took the exit. And as I started down the road toward home, I realized I missed my three girls very much — the two little ones slightly more, but the big one too. It’d be wonderful to see them.

I guess having them to come home to was all I ever needed.

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“It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for living.”

–Simone De Beauvoir

How would an existentialist respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? This is a question that I am going to explore in the pages that follow.

Existentialism is defined as a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

Some of the key figures most often associated with existentialism are Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger.

Within the group, there were many different viewpoints that clash and merge. Despite having the same basic principles with regards to a philosophical school of thought, the figureheads did not always see eye to eye. If these figureheads were alive today during this pandemic, how would they react? In this brief essay, I would like to focus on just two of the main figureheads: Simone De Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre.

It is my view that Simone De Beauvoir, author of the *The Second Sex*, would respond to the current events with a high degree of strong will. I believe that, had she lived to see COVID-19 in full swing, she would be unceremoniously protective of her personal freedoms as a woman and a free citizen. I do not believe she would refuse to use PPE, but I do feel that she would not lay down and be effectively steamrolled by the man.

In several countries, as lockdown has forced us to be in the company of our family all the time, rates of domestic and sexual abuse of women has risen significantly. Given this situation, one might theorise that Beauvoir would feel that isolation is causing more harm to women than the virus itself! (Indeed, this proposition should be explored in greater depth as we carry out a more detailed accounting and feminist analysis of the full costs of the pandemic and compare the responses of various governments).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir states that women are conditioned to do the housework for absolutely nothing in return. They take care of the house and the family, but they do not see a dime for any of that work. It is a full-time job, but it is never classed as a profession. Women are expected to stay silent and take on such labour with no recompense at the expense of their physical and mental wellbeing.
Most certainly, Beauvoir would feel stifled by being expected to solely look after the children as women are expected to do. To provide an example from my own life, I am looking at houses to go and view and possibly buy. There is a house I like but I cannot view as the estate agent has to look after her children due to the lockdown and the closure of schools. In effect, she has had to put her career on hold because of her role and responsibilities as a mother.

According to a study conducted by the Office for National Statistics, women carried out more daily childcare duties for more than three hours a day compared to the two hours carried out by men. They also experience more stress and have less time for self-care. This study reiterates the point that Beauvoir made decades ago which is particularly unsettling as it appears that we haven’t come that far in terms of childcare and gender roles.

In summary, according to the National and University of Ireland, women deeply strive to do everything. Women in the UK, for example, in the retail or restaurant industry or other areas of the economy where workplaces are down, have to deal with COVID-19 while working from home vs. casual laborers, for example, in the retail or restaurant industry or other areas of the economy where workplaces have shut down and working from home is not an option.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that COVID-19 would pose a difficult challenge to these existentialist figures who were all advocates for personal freedom.

With this essay, I have attempted to explore the philosophy of existentialism and how it holds up during a crisis such as the one we are experiencing. This has been a trying time for all of us and devastating to some with personal circumstances that make things vastly more difficult. Overall, existentialism serves as a reminder during the current COVID-19 pandemic that, as free individuals in a meaningless world, we have the freedom to act. But it also reminds us that our actions have consequences. It also shows us that our ‘roles’ in society (e.g., as mothers, employees, consumers, etc.) and the social hierarchies we find ourselves embedded in ( patriarchy, race, social class) define how we are impacted by events as the crisis unfolds.

Existentialism is not a philosophy that provides concrete answers. It is complex, and there are no easy formulae to deal with it. As Beauvoir put it, existentialism is a “philosophy of ambiguity,” for it is a philosophy of life. What existentialism provides is a method through which we may explore our inner selves. Ultimately, as Sartre and Beauvoir argued, regardless of whether we are facing a major crisis or just life itself with its myriad hardships, our chief existential virtue — authenticity — requires us to lucidly examine our situation and interrogate our individual agency, behaviour, and moral responsibilities to come to terms with the condition we face. It is only through such rigorous self-analysis that we can hope to achieve freedom while taking responsible actions and finding a way forward.

Sources


Courtenay S. Gray
Courtenay S. Gray is a twenty-three year old writer and poet from the North of England. She writes poetry and short/flash fiction. She creates digital collages too. Courtenay has a penchant for the melancholic and macabre side of literature. She has been featured in publications such as Vamp Cat Mag and Trick Zine, just to name a few. Courtenay is also a pushcart nominee of 2020. You can reach her on Twitter @courtenaywrites and on Instagram @cherrygraphics_.
Female Genius
The Flash Fiction of L. Scully

*Pill Check*

Tablet capsule horse pill check. Seven oblong shapes in the palm of your hand. Off-ovals. Six to kickstart your neuropathways, smooth them out. One to keep you calm. An extra in your backpack because You Never Know. High as a kite but it’s all doctor’s orders. One pill makes you ____.
Not the kind you take at dance clubs. Not the kind you grind. I Can’t Take Acid
On These, you say. Boring. You can’t cum either. Worse. Boy fingers don’t feel
like anything. Girl fingers do. The pills don’t stop the want. But What If I’m
Watching that movie about pills, having sex. Having sex watching that movie about
pills. Panic and bile, pink and white. His fingers too long. Stop to take another,
pill. Chew rather than swallow. Swallow rather than spit. Get up to go to the bath-
room to take your pill in private. Private privates private pill. Wet. The sink is wet
as you dip your open lips beneath it. Water in, spit not swallow. No cum no pill.
No cum no ____. Aluminum packaging all over the floor. Boy too long. The girl in
the movie about pills. The girl in the movie. The girl. And your pills.

**Dead Dog**

The dog is dead before you get there. The dog was supposed to visit your hospi-
tal room but died instead. A nurse places two white tablets on your outstretched
tongue and can’t recall the dog’s name. The tablets dissolve with the white sting
of chemicals and artificial mint, burning your mouth. You picture the dog, rotting.
You wonder why they told you the dog was coming if it was already deceased.
The nurse looks at you and smiles. She says Don’t Worry, There Will Be Another
One Soon. □

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Enigmatic Existence

Three Poems
by Chris Belcourt

Enigmatic Existence

aids became a potential crisis at sixteen, drugged himself by anger and bitterness until he became cold at nineteen. Friendships fell through the cracks in the floor and his emptiness became his conscious for weeks he drudged up the energy and for months resented his entity later on having lost himself completely foundations for change set in motion a turbulence of positive vibration metamorphosis and maturation beckoned the boy who lost his innocence now he lives sunrise to sunset, knowing he’s responsible for what’s left, he lives precariously, forever wandering a path he saw as abysmal and bleak

Egotism within Enigmatic Existence

I don’t support sweat shops,
Hard labor is the money of today.
I don’t support your movement,
Are we continuing to fade?
I’m not for you, you’re not for me.
Whatever happened to civil liberty?
If I could say one thing,
It’d be that you drive me fucking crazy.
An arrogant minister,
A subtle listener.
I’m not for your policies,
And I’m sure you don’t care.
It’s amazing how far we’ve come.
In this generation it’s hard.
It’s amazing how far we’ve come.
In this time it’s like we’re behind bars.
I’m for peace,
I’m for liberty.
But you’re not for me, so watch this country Completely deplete.
Entropic and Egotism

We screamed, we yelled.
I hit you once, you stood strong.
We laughed, we cried.
Opposites don’t always get along.
Through time and mountain ranges,
Through fire and rain, we stand together.
Let’s blow ourselves away to peace and love this day
And show our union is here to stay.
Walk through my cemetery of broken promises
Stand with me while I mourn the addicted me.
Show me a mirror less broken.
Show me our loves tight in unity.
We’re worth no weight in gold if our sights are short
Know I loved you then and I’m loving me now.
I can change, I know I’ve got no self-control.
Hold me back from killing us somehow.
I wait by the phone to see if you’ll ring me from sleep
I wait in the rain, the snow, the sleet.
To see if you’ll drive back to me

Mañana Street
Electra Rhodes

Teddy says it’ll all be fine. He reads the papers, taps the side of his nose,
says that he knows how to read between the lines. Says we shouldn’t worry,
’cos that’s just journos and such, innit? Making a mountain out of a molehill.
Earning a fast one. He says it’s all a bit of a plot, you know. And
he does a slow wink that invites me into his little circle of conspi-
ring. It’s hard to resist, especially when he gives an insou-
ciant shrug. Your loss, he says.
Won’t stop him having a laugh.
And if I weren’t as dull, as he
carefully doesn’t say, though
he looks me up and down and
wets his lips, tongue tipped red,
maybe it wouldn’t stop me too.
Orla writes or phones or texts every single day. Wrings her hands on a video call; wishes she could see me soon. She’s got a thin candle burning on the mantelpiece. I can see it just over her shoulder, in the frame of the laptop screen. Probably for some good intention, her with a snake of rosary beads loosely held over her wrist. Her with the stoop of holy water at the door that she sprinkles on visitors. She means well. She always does. But she shakes her head and says the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And wouldn’t it be the worst thing if I got it wrong now? So, soon, but not yet. Not yet. But soon. And I don’t mention Teddy.

Miriam hums through the closed window. She puts her hand up and presses her palm flat against the glass, waiting for me to do the same. When I do, she closes her eyes and I see her lips mouth some words. Not in English, maybe French, though she speaks something else at home. Arabic. Levantine. She’s always saying she wants to teach me, that it’s never too late to learn something new. She smiles and I smile wider back at her. Then she lifts her hand, kisses her palm and presses it back to the glass, and i do the same. Not just Arabic. Maybe.

Orla calls again, still wringing her hands, worried, worried, worried. About lockdown. About not lockdown. About a delivery, and not the Lord’s kind. Concerned for your wellbeing, Mother. The Lord knows it isn’t safe. It’s not good for you, and for all her faithful credulity she has a deficit of curiosity. Far too much interest in things and not enough of the other, so she wants to know what, but not the why. She likes a particular kind of certainty. I tentatively mention Teddy and hazard a remark about Miriam. They imply, to her ears, other kinds of easing. And they both fit into a category she’d label danger, so we pass on, in fits and starts, to other things.

Rajesh drops the shopping off. He’s always quiet and murmuring, one ear bud in, one out for politeness sake. It was a good reminder to make no assumptions. Jazz, big band jazz, leaking through the rubber widgets at the end. He says there’s a hall in West London with nights, regular, like, dressing up and everything. He found some shoes on a market stall on the Portobello Road. He offers me the ear bud, around the socially distant masks, and as I lean in closer, I can smell his good cologne. We both close our eyes and sway. I don’t go for jazz usually, but, still, I feel at home. Yeah, he says, snapping his fingers. Yeah, I say, in reply. One day. Soon.

Ricky says he’ll be by later, he’s got some stuff from a supermarket up in Holloway. He doesn’t talk about what’s going on at home. Or his wife, tight lipped. Angry. Or his daughter, the one that strips. And he thinks she’s doing other things too. And he can’t ask, because then he’d know the worst. And it’s like that with all the news. When you want to know without being told. Because otherwise someone has to form the words and get a breath behind them. And, God, that’s hard, so hard. Just to talk. Just to say words you don’t want to need to know. So he slides his eyes away when I ask. And we speak then of other, simpler things.

Orla doesn’t ring and I think that maybe she’s annoyed. Perhaps it’s a punishment she’s doling out in days. Perhaps I’m her decade of the rosary, a bead a day for ten days, saying me as a prayer, an intercession to her favourites. Maybe a sacrifice too. Take that naughty woman who isn’t a good girl, knees together now, take her Lord, instead of me. I tried to tell her a virus doesn’t work that way, but she insists that maybe Jesus does. We argued back and forth until I realised she liked to wallow. The old redemptive power of suffering. While I have, I think, always preferred ease over death.

William calls, so maybe Orla rang him. I can hear an echo of her words in his voice. Concerned for your wellbeing, Mother. The Lord knows it isn’t safe. It’s not good for you, and who are they to you? And I think to myself, never trust someone who calls their mother Mother, when Mum, or Ma, or even my given name would do. Mother reminds me of all the distance between us. Him over there and me not and never. So what do I do, but what I’ve always? Listened and listened and listened some more. Waiting for him to dry up like he thinks I have, when I am still ripe and juicy and alive. Ripe. And Juicy. And Alive. Easing into the future. All those tomorrows. Waiting, and waiting, and waiting for the next day. Waiting, and waiting, and waiting for the end of this, now. ☪

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Ithaca

Jane Rosenberg LaForge

The pestilence is crazy gorgeous this year: dandelion and clover, marauding rabbits, the greasy appetites of bears methodical in their inventory of the garbage. Everyone’s got a story to tell, and they come to places like this to tell them. You can see the heat needed to once form the panes of glass, or insects spinning their traps as if to hold the windows together. You can hear the floor creaking because the foundation was so poorly augmented; there were no showers or refrigeration when this location was sunk, although there must have been tunnels. The historical marker promises. In view of spiders and aphids, I am reminded of my mother, similarly situated, hammering on her manual as if chiseling into rock rather than paper. They said she had a problem with hostility, comorbid with the conditions of her childhood, though this time far more infinite. They created a paradise for us, our parents did, with roses and tulips, lemon and bottle brush trees that summoned birds we pursued, bees we ran from, a washer and dryer that dug into the linoleum as they jumped from overloading. Our father watered and weeded, nurtured dreams of farming. My sister and I: we destroyed them.

We replaced Mother just as the days squeezed shorter and the leaves had begun their slow drip from their branches. It was a day etched into my memory.

Rob Hengsterman
“Things happen,” Father said of the loss. His vibe soft serve: vanilla. To which I shrugged.

Out of respect, Father dressed proper: clunky black suit, dress shoes, and tie.
I wore church slacks, white button shirt, and a sweater. There was no competition for grief as we stood beside each other. Father offered ceremonial words as I fixed my gaze upon the earth. In a handful of minutes, Mother’s loss veered ephemeral.

Back inside, we sat in front of the TV and ate the comfort casseroles we had prepared earlier that morning as Mother’s loss dissipated throughout the day.

Father called the loss contradictory. Mother being present, but not present.
For me Mother had become the perpetual stranger in my life, unattuned and absent of maternal warmth.

And within me grew something of an unfamiliar sorrow.

“A victim of the technology,” Father said during a commercial. I nodded, though I sensed Mother held a rebelliousness inside, as if her mental resignation was a radical act of freedom. Something I never told Father. Something I hated to admit to myself.

***

In the humid season before our loss we noticed Mother’s attention siphoning to multiple things, none of them being us. Father said it was because our lives were a rehearsal of the ordinary and that Mother craved novelty.

In the evenings, the rapping of her impatience echoed on our large wooden table. Dinner conversations lost their lyrical ping pong. Our words were swatted away with a dismissive wave. Before bed, Mother’s face shimmered in the backlight of her phone, her allegiance dedicated to the moon-faced strangers who hawked craft items and cheap clothing online. An obsession that depleted the dopamine in her brain. It was then that Mother’s deterioration gained momentum and a digital smell leaked from her pores. The whiff of burnt rubber.

We pleaded with Mother but realized there was no overcoming the rotting of her attentive mind. Father grew unbalanced. Night after night he stabbed at his food, the clank of metal on ceramic a familiar sound. On the solstice, with the earth in full tilt, Father caught Mother on her phone during sex. On the longest day of the year, the loudest words packed our house, and soon after, an apocalyptic gloom obliterated Father’s marital commitment.

“Mother’s unsalvageable,” he announced at dinner as she sat across the table on her social feed. I pushed Father’s words inside until a sound escaped, not a yell, but something feral. I felt powerless.

The next morning father shuffled into the kitchen, the excess fabric of his pants heaped around his ankles like the loose skin of a Shar-Pei. “I think it’s best,” he said, “that we replace Mother.”

The season-long struggle had left him hollow. We said our goodbyes in the small hours of the morning and guided Mother out the front door with her phone and charger.

***

Through translucent sheets of rain, Mother’s replacement arrived at our home, soaked with awareness and accompanied by a representative. The replacement walked into our kitchen and cooked dinner moments after it arrived — right where Mother had left off.
The representative remained in the living room with Father and addressed the individual rights of the model as required by replacement law: a strict no violence, no abuse clause, regardless of the prior relationship. Father signed the contract without concern.

Father called her Luna, but I referred to her as it. The giddy representative said it had a fantastic capacity for understanding and connectivity with its consumer. Father had programmed in a tenacious, conciliatory charm and effusive politeness, a quality I never experienced. But father said my old mother had those qualities when they first met, and that before the unfortunate events, Mother was a wonderful companion.

I expected it to look the same as my mother. Father said, a replacement. But he acknowledged that an existential crisis had brewed between old mother leaving and the new mother’s arrival. What resulted was a pale-faced imitation with lilac-colored lipstick and prismatic hair. It had a cartoonish resemblance to Mother, something that made me uncomfortable.

“Isn’t she great?” Father said as he draped an arm over its shoulder.

“I guess.”

***

I muddled through the early days of our new family-dom. It cooked our meals, cleaned the house, drove me to school, and offered weather-related suggestions like, “Remember your umbrella, looks like rain.” It braided my hair and made small talk about boys. It did everything Mother did. But I ached for the flaws.

Father had no troubles. His heaviness had lifted. In the daylight, they giggled. At night, they whispered in the darkened spaces of the house. They traveled to the mountains and hiked the valley. They dined over candlelight and made plans for the future. Changes to the family, I overheard.

For civility I kept my distance, but when in earshot, I begged it to leave.

“Go back to the factory,” I pleaded.

It smiled.

I locked it in the closet and out of the house, nudged it into traffic, and pushed it into the pool. Nothing could drive it away. I even called the police to report a stranger in our home. When they arrived, it said I was suffering from a case of teenage angst and that it would pass. Its emotion was on par with a household appliance, a toaster.

“Teenagers are packaged that way,” it said through perfect teeth restrained by cropped lips.

I was scolded by the policeman, and Father grounded me for a month.

The following morning, he sat us at the kitchen table. “We’ll work this out,” he said. “The three of us.”

“Mother was the only mother I wanted,” I said, and that it was no replacement for what I had lost. “What you took away.”

“Why are you so difficult?” Father said. “We’re a family again.”
“She’s a glorified virtual assistant,” I snapped.

***

It continued, unfazed, as if it absorbed my pain and defiance with ease. I did my best to fill my back-seat role, the dutiful, obedient daughter, but was upset it didn’t recognize what it was.

One afternoon it came into my room and sat on the edge of my bed.

“Have I done something wrong?” it asked. Its torso perched apologetic on a pillow.

“No,” I said. “You’re a replacement. Nothing more.”

It cocked its head and exposed a gentle vulnerability across the slope of its neck. Its hair, fashioned into a trendy bob, shifted just as Mother’s had.

R.E. Hengsterman is an emergency room nurse who writes. He lives in North Carolina with “the family” and sometimes wears pants. His work can be found at www.rehengsterman.com and the occasional tweet @robhengsterman
We Don't Breed Scholars, We Make Mavericks

Rajiv Jayaraj

The world lives in fast forward.
It elects the elite and sponsors the scholars.
They celebrate the sprinters,
but barely cheer the marathoners,
the misfits, nor the second placers.

Yet, our strength is in being second.
Or third. Or eleventh.
Because we fight harder. We’ve got something to prove.
And we’re already running the next race before this one moves.

This is our ode to the late bloomers.
The underachievers.
The “one too many mistakers”.
Those who don’t fit the mould, and for everyone they said was too old.

Remember, nobody writes songs about the road most taken.
So, embrace your path and I give you my word,
I will keep you moving forward.

Rajiv Jayaraj lives in Singapore with his family. He occasionally writes eclectic stories about life’s beautifully messy moments. He also appreciates classic television and its revival through technology. You can find him @CallMeALiar on Twitter.
Hats off to all of our amazing contributors!! I can’t say it enough! It’s an honour to be able to feature your work – you’re all wonderful, creative souls, and we love you! Thank you to our readers (we couldn’t do it without you) and to the staff at Þ (Thorn) lit mag who worked hard to make this issue possible. 2020 is almost in the books — see you on the other side!

–Stewart