



Cactus Heart

spiny exterior
succulent interior



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CACTUS HEART

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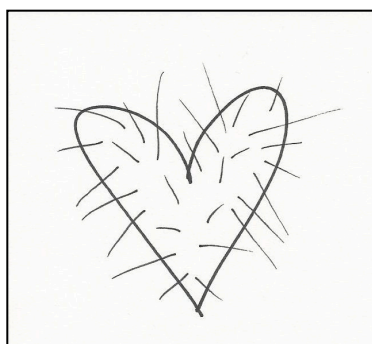
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Contents

Editor's Note 5

Fiction

<i>Bird Bower Blue</i> Holly Ringland	7
<i>Genetic Footprint</i> Jules A Riley	25
<i>The E Word</i> Stewart Lewis	45
<i>#alifebetweeninvertedcommas</i> Sian Cummins	50
<i>Man to Man</i> Jesse Kuiken	69
<i>Where We Belong</i> Janet Freeman	81

Nonfiction

<i>The First Three Weeks</i> William Henderson	27
<i>The Silence of the Language</i> Carol Piva	59

Poetry

<i>How Did the Everlasting Begin?</i> Flower Conroy	21
<i>Littoral Beach Song</i> erin feldman	22
<i>Afterglow</i> Ben Nardolilli	24
xxxiv. <i>in an artistic experiment gone wrong, rainer maria rilke is transformed into a werewolf</i> Theresa Williams	26
<i>Go Spider Go</i> Glen Armstrong	43
<i>And exit left.</i> D Lep	49
<i>Cure for Madness</i> Courtney Hill Wulsin	55
<i>The Coming of Her Age</i> Christine Brandel	57

<i>Chimera</i> Christine Gosnay	66
<i>What the Koel Wants</i> Anthony Lawrence	67
<i>shooting gallery</i> Alysia Angel	97

Photography

<i>Surrender</i> Meegan Schreiber	6
<i>Sea Out</i> Eleanor Leonne Bennett	23
<i>In the Web</i> Merlin Flower	42
<i>Pomme</i> Katrina Pallop	54
<i>Cadence of Spheres</i> Jenna Whittaker	65
<i>No Man's Land</i> Christopher Woods	80
<i>Montreal Spring</i> Meegan Schreiber	108

Reviews

<i>On outskirts by Sue Goyette</i> Nico Mara-McKay	100
<i>On The Death of Bunny Munro by Nick Cave</i> Stephanie Callas	101

Contributor Biographies	103
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EDITOR'S NOTE

When I began this adventure in February, it was a leap (February 2012 was a Leap Year, and the first quarter of my year has been filled with leaps—both personal and professional). I had no idea how responsive the writing community would be, how supportive my friends and family would be, how exciting it would be to design a website, solicit new work, and read and view submissions from all over the world.

As I sat down with the 29 pieces featured here, I was overcome with a profound sense of gratitude and belonging. To be creating this aesthetic, and to be featuring the brilliant, honest, heartfelt and well-crafted work of so many talented artists. Every single time I read or see every single piece in Issue #1 I get excited.

This first issue of *Cactus Heart* really is a dream come true. I hear a lot of negative press about the state of publishing these days, but I'd venture to say that the media is wrong. The world is full of talented writers, so many of them looking for a place to be read. I'm honored that *Cactus Heart* can be one of those places. The world is also full of committed and generous readers, as has been evidenced by the words of encouragement that have flowed in from every direction.

So without further ado, I present to you Issue #1. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do, and please let me know what you think: sara@cactusheartpress.com.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke underneath the name.

PS. The first person to email me with the correct number of birds featured in Issue #1 will win a free copy of Issue #2. (Birds seem to be a theme here.)



Surrender | Buenos Aires, 2009 | Meegan Schreiber



Bird Bower Blue

Holly Ringland

He had remembered the morning before the accident.

Tom knew before he opened his eyes that the lingering dream was another thinly veiled memory resurfacing. He could feel the familiar weight of it in his limbs. Weak sun fell through the window onto his face and rippled across his closed eyes. His fingers twitched. Sifting his past from the murky silt of his mind always left him depleted.

Yawning, Tom rubbed his jaw as he surveyed the clutter around him. He made his routine check of the menagerie, looking for a piece of that morning by the sea. Every shelf, every wall, every nook in the room was proof of his memories as he had remembered them, all one color. He searched halfheartedly, knowing already there was nothing to show for this new shard of his past going through him now, its edges snagging on his insides.

They had been on holiday together, their first as a family. Liam had a bucket and spade. Clara wore a bright summer dress.

Tom leaned forward over his knees, trying to breathe through his mouth as the counselor at the hospital suggested. His surroundings changed in varying shades as the clouds crossed the sun and the hours rolled by, but the color remained the same. Relentless. Vibrant. Endless. The same. The absence of possessing something he could attach the new memory to taunted him. When the late shadows of the leafless

trees appeared, Tom readied himself to leave.

The tram was tepid on the dark winter afternoon and Tom felt damp to his bones. He rested his forehead against the steamy window and watched Melbourne roll by in a watercolor blur. As the carriage swayed and rocked through the city, Tom hung his head in an effort to avert the motion sickness he had suffered since the accident. He studied his shoelaces and noticed the left bow was bigger than the right. Lopsided rabbit ears reminded him of Liam's shoes. A muscle in his eyelid started to tic. He stood and pressed himself through the fold of passengers around him to get off at the Acland Street stop.

Crossing the road Tom headed for Indigo, the dimly lit café bar on the corner. He needed a whiskey. The back of his throat ached for smoky heat and oblivion. He pushed the door open and exhaled as he heard the bell above it ring. With his head down he walked the length of the bar; he only ever stepped on the blue tiles, never the white.

At the empty table in the back Tom shrugged off his coat and scanned the staff behind the counter. He couldn't see Josephine. He checked his watch. She usually started at five on weekdays but there was the odd occasion when she was on the closing shift. That being the case, she'd be in for half-six. Another hour.

He sat down and took his notebook and pen from his jacket pocket, placing them in front of him. They were both black. They had to be, otherwise they too would become part of the collection; there was only one color Tom had been able to see the world in since that day by the sea.

Patting his other breast pocket, he felt the hard outline of the scissors under his fingers. Today would be the day he brought them with him to Indigo, and actually had reason to use them.



Josephine chewed through her fingernails feeling the blue varnish on them splinter into bitter flakes on her tongue. She spat them out of the side of her mouth and jiggled her leg. She checked her watch. Her shift was due to start in an hour. She had been sitting in the waiting room at the Chapel Street clinic for twenty minutes already but was yet to see the nurse, swallow her pill, and nod away routine questions. Work was another fifteen-minute walk, at least.

Panic rose in her throat. Her cheeks were hot. She leaned her elbows on her knees and rocked forward, pressing her forehead against her clasped hands. It's okay. You still have time. It's okay.

Rain lashed the window, preempting the loud clap of thunder that reverberated through the floor and traveled up her legs to her stomach. She felt the vibrations in her bones and fleetingly wondered if she might shatter. It was her first winter without Dan.

Later, as methadone pacified the beasts in her blood, Josephine walked briskly along Fitzroy Street umbrellaed by her coat and the plague of her past, always blue. Again it was Dan's eyes, and her memory of their hunger, and bruises, and veins. It was Dan's skin the day she came home and found him with the syringe still in his arm.

Her thoughts congealed and scattered like the oily surface of the gutter puddle she stepped into when she crossed the road. As she did countless times a day, Josephine recited the conditions of her suspended sentence: *rehabilitation therapy, full time employment, sustained independence in assisted housing*. It was the closest she came to praying.

She stopped at a pedestrian crossing, checked her watch and ran against the traffic, wincing when she heard the blare of a car horn. At the end of the block the lights of Indigo twinkled in the wet afternoon. She exhaled with relief, victoriously scratching one more line onto the tally wall in her mind.



The hour passed quickly. Tom wrote, took measured sips of his whiskey-double, and re-read. He ordered another round from one of the other waitresses to whom he paid no mind. He wrote, sipped, re-read. He punctuated a final full stop. Perfect.

A question appeared that hadn't occurred to him before. The sudden curve of it pierced his gut, deep in his bowels. He tensed as his stomach churned. It's okay. This happens sometimes. Take a deep breath, you'll remember in a minute.

His pen hovered over "satin."

In those splinters that separated before from after, when Liam was asleep in his car seat and Clara was gazing out the passenger window, had she said "satin bowerbird," or just "bowerbird"?

He grimaced as he pushed through the muck in the corners of his mind.

The bell over the door rang and Tom's watery eyes darted from the page. Josephine dashed inside holding her coat over her head. Her pale cheeks were flushed. With her back to him she hung her dripping coat up by the door.

He glanced down at his notebook. "Satin" taunted him from the page.

Tom fixed his eyes on Josephine. His heart feathered as he took in the sight of her hair. It hung halfway down her back, a sheath of brilliant blue.



The bar was cloudy with the noise of after-work drinks. Josephine made her way out the back and locked herself in the bathroom. She avoided the mirror. Her hair had started to feel like a fancy dress costume.

It was just a dark day, as she had told her counselor earlier that morning. The rain hadn't let up for a week, June's chill had reached her bones, and the pills from the clinic weren't softening the incisors that gnawed through her insides.

I can't do this. Holding her breath, she turned her back to the mirror and took one

of the clean aprons out of the cupboard. I can't do this.

She was thirty-three days sober.



Tom over-handled the memory in his mind until it was a complete blur. He drained his whiskey glass and flinched as he slammed it on the table. He turned to a new page in his notebook. Attempting to start with *aqua* he tried to make a list, but there was too much noise in his head. Squealing rubber. Screeching glass.

He looked across the bar. Josephine was serving a table, wearing a vacant smile. He tried the list again, glancing between his page and her hair. The ink of his small print ran slowly together.

aqua azure cerulean cobalt indigo navy royal sapphire teal turquoise

Breathing more evenly, Tom steadied his hand and turned to another new page.

Frail.

Pale.

Bruise, and star.

I see you.



Josephine looked up and caught Tom staring at her while she worked. At first his unflinching gaze had made her uncomfortable but the more often she saw him in the cafe, the more she grew used to it.

She gave her order to the kitchen and restocked the menus. He was still staring. He always sat there by the window writing obsessively in a black notebook. His hair hung over the collar of his shirt always buttoned to the neck. His eyes were dark, a bruisey-blue that popped against his pale skin, unlike Dan's that were the same shade as a

summer sky. One of the other waitresses had called Tom “Johnny Cash” the first night he came in dressed head-to-toe in black. Not long afterwards Josephine started humming “Ring of Fire” whenever she saw him. Goosebumps rushed across the back of her shoulders now as she realized that was generally every time she was on shift.

Tom seldom smiled. He stared into his hands and didn’t say more than necessary to order whiskey on the rocks, one after the other until he left. Usually around eleven o’clock just before the last tram. Never in a car, she’d never seen him arrive or leave in a car, not with a friend, never in a taxi.

And, despite his neat uniform appearance, there was something crumpled about his gait. Something hunched about the way he carried himself, as though he wasn’t sure whether or not he could trust his spine.



“Can I get you another drink? Whiskey would be my choice too on a day like today.”

He didn’t look up. She scratched her arm self-consciously, beginning to wonder if she had in fact spoken.

“Why is your hair that color?”

“My hair?”

“Yes.”

“Why not, I guess?”

“Well, what’s your natural color?” He looked up and met her eye. His gaze went through her like a pin through an insect.

“Pale. Fair.” Another life. She breathed deeply. Another girl. “Almost invisible, I sometimes think.”

“I doubt that.” He looked down and began rearranging the bouquet of toothpicks in the small jar on the table. The ice cubes in his glass cracked quietly as they melted.

A latch opened in the dark cage of her chest.

“We call you Johnny here,” she blurted. The words hung absurdly in the air. She looked at the emergency exit door to her left, almost tempted.

“Johnny?” He took all of the toothpicks with the blue cellophane tips and lined them up in front of him on the tabletop, a miniature picket fence.

“The Man In Black.” She gestured up and down at him. She guessed he might have been her age and, by the look of his eyes, in the same need of sleep.

“Have you ever been to Queensland?” he asked abruptly.

Dan’s plan for their sobriety was a fever Josephine had caught too. It started with talk of a camper van, then a road trip up the east coast to a patch of rainforest by the ocean. They’d plant a veggie garden, get a couple of chooks, read each other poetry, and drink herbal tea over a campfire. They’d cleanse themselves in the Pacific, he promised. They’d dry out in the endless Queensland sun.

“No.” She fidgeted. “You?”

He held her gaze and tapped on his notebook. A moment passed.

She asked again if he’d like another drink. When she brought him his whiskey she noticed all the blue-tipped toothpicks were gone.



Frail.
Pale.
Bruise, and star.
I see you.
I wonder who you wear your bower for.

Here is the secret you don’t yet know: you can begin again.

Towards closing time Tom shut his notebook and readied himself to leave; the scissors knocked against his ribs as he put his coat on. He moved slowly, watching

Josephine clear the tables at the front of the bar. His hands were sweating.



Josephine returned the salt and pepper shakers to their designated homes behind the counter and lined them up in pairs. The bar was almost empty. The cook was out the back giving the kitchen a last once-over. She glanced towards Tom's table. He was getting ready to go.

She sighed as she slid her empty tray under the bar and grabbed a dishcloth and spray to wipe down the tabletops. All that awaited her was a single bed within the cold walls of the halfway house. Before she could stop herself she imagined a deep bath of scalding water.

Josephine bristled. He was behind her. She stood rigidly, unwilling to move. There was a sound, a quiet metallic sigh, and a sensation at the base of her scalp. Did he just cut off my hair? She reached for the tingling spot at the back of her head and gasped when she followed the lock with her fingers to feel a shorter, blunt end. As she spun around she saw he was already out the door.

"Hey!" Josephine's voice echoed.

"Yeah?" The cook called back.

She hurried to the front of the bar as the eleven o'clock tram arrived. Straining, she tried to catch sight of Tom amidst the group gathered for last service. The crowded tram slid away and a hollow confusion whistled through her. The street was empty.



Tom kept his hands in his pockets as he walked, giddy from the whiskey and adrenaline shuddering through him. He tripped on the front step and jammed his key

in the lock, before eventually stumbling inside.

At the end of the hall he paused at the door to the only furnished room in the rented house. He bowed his head for a moment before walking inside.

It had started with an abandoned blue pen lid. He had spotted it on a tram in his first few days back in Melbourne after he had returned from Queensland alone with the luggage of three. Tom had placed the pen lid on the windowsill in this room feeling the weight of blue on his shoulders like it was a Greek god's burden.

Acquired synesthesia, the doctor said when Tom had gone for a neural check-up and confessed he was seeing his memories in one color. Common in brain injury patients, the doctor explained, as was memory loss. Not harmful, nothing to worry about. Tom had fidgeted with a lighter in his pocket while he listened and imagined setting the doctor's speech on fire to watch the words go up in blue flame. Not harmful, nothing to worry about.

Standing in the center of the room, he remembered the toothpicks in his pocket and wedged them beside the pen lid on the cluttered sill. He appreciated them as an aperitif and made himself wait until anticipation throbbed in his temples. When he could stand it no longer, Tom slowly lifted Josephine's hair from his jacket pocket and held it in his palm.

The color made him nauseous. It was regret. It was yearning. It was his memory of the sea under a tropical Queensland sky.



Josephine heard the bus arrive while she was still locking up. In her rush she entered the wrong alarm code three times before finally getting the green light pardon. Yelling, she ran down the alley behind the bar and across the road, waving her arms uselessly as the bus pulled away from the curb. She slumped against the light post,

lacing her hands together on top of her head.

She checked her watch. The next bus was forty minutes away. Josephine flicked her index finger against her thigh. She could almost smell Acland Street and its ivy of cures. There were so many different ways to kill time.

Looking over her shoulder, her gaze followed the falling light from the streetlamp down the sidewall of the bar and through the window where it pooled like milk on the back table. At first she thought her eyes were just making things out of shadows but as she walked closer she realized what she saw was real.

She broke into a run for the back door, fumbling through her bag for her keys before she could fully understand what she was doing.



A nagging in his mind woke him. Tom glanced groggily around the room from his crooked slumber on the couch. Everything was still. His heart was beating fast though, sounding in his ears like an alarm. He looked over the menagerie to where the new addition of Josephine's hair sat in a soft coil. Nothing was out of place, yet something was missing. Tom sat up and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

He leapt to his feet, slipping in his socks as he ran out of the room and down the hall to the coat rack by the front door. He grabbed at his jacket and searched the pockets frantically. They were empty. Tom breathed hard through his clenched jaw. His notebook was gone.



Josephine ran her fingers along the spines of abandoned books on the bookshelf in the common room. She had vaguely noticed it there before, a large and thick old

hardcover, and couldn't imagine any of the other girls in the house wanting it. Clucking with satisfaction when she eventually spotted it on the bottom shelf, Josephine heaved *The Encyclopedia of Australian Birds* under her arm and scurried upstairs to her bedsit.

She put the kettle on and opened the musty book on the kitchenette counter. After checking the index she flicked through until she found the right page.

Satin bowerbirds are most known for their unique and complex courtship behavior where males build a structure and decorate it with objects of a singular color, mainly blue, in an attempt to win the affection of their chosen mate.

Josephine ran her fingers over the glossy images. The birds themselves were quite plain, black feathers with blue-black eyes, but the bowers they created were ornate. Intricate constructions of twigs, bark, and sticks stood vertically to create walls in and around which were arranged a variety of objects in different shades of blue. She leaned in towards a full-page photograph of feathers, berries, stones, leaves, flowers, and shells adorning a bower, and snorted in amusement when she noticed pen lids, candy wrappers, sunglass arms, and a sunscreen bottle amongst the loot.

Leaving the book open, Josephine made herself a cup of mint tea. She stirred the tea leaves and considered her bower. It was both curse, and talisman.

She had been the only person to attend his funeral. Afterwards she stood in the hair dye aisle at the chemist for two hours, wringing her hands as she searched for a box of dye the same shade as his eyes. She hurriedly chose a tint called Lagoon when the shop was closing.

Josephine sipped her tea. She tried to remember the shade of her natural hair, or her world; the color of anything before she and Dan stained everything together. She tugged a blue strand loose from her ponytail and wrapped it around her index finger. There was no other color than this. Dan had seeped through all of her, as though she was porous before him and ruined after him.

She sat on her bed and set her teacup on the nightstand beside her one plant, a potted violet. Reaching into the back pocket of her jeans, Josephine retrieved Tom's notebook and flipped through the pages again. She ran her fingertips over his inky memories. Lying on her back, she stared up at the water-stained ceiling. She thought about the satin bowerbird painstakingly gathering blue for offering, for promise, for love.

Josephine rested his words on her chest.

Here is the secret you don't yet know: you can begin again.



She did it when she finished her first cup of coffee the following morning. Afterwards, brave with the thrill of adrenalin, she called Indigo and swapped her shift that night to one later in the week. The rest of the day she spent mostly wandering back to the mirror and marveling at the warmth in her chest every time she saw her reflection.

An hour before her shift would have started Josephine took a seat at the window in the take-away shop across the street from Indigo. She lifted his notebook from her handbag and flipped through it again. She sipped from a bowl of sweet and sour soup. She waited.

Tom looked haggard when he arrived. Josephine watched him hurry inside and walk straight to the back, searching frantically under the table and behind the seat before he turned and half-ran to the bar. When the staff shook their heads apologetically he slapped the countertop, and Josephine flinched. His face was radiant with pain as he strode to the door. She scrambled her belongings together and rushed outside, following Tom's black coat.

Acland Street was crowded and Josephine had to push through the hoards to keep

up with him. She trailed behind at a distance when he reached the tram stop on St Kilda Road, city-bound. Hovering at the edge of a swarm of brightly dressed young girls, Josephine boarded and sat four rows behind him.

Melbourne's CBD glittered to life in the winter twilight. She could have been a foreigner, arriving in a new place unsure of local culture. But that wasn't the case. This had been her kingdom. This had been her fairground. Josephine jiggled her right knee and bit the skin around her fingernails. This was the first time she had come into the city without Dan.

She followed him from the Westgarth stop, hanging back until he was a block ahead of her. When he turned off the footpath into the overgrown garden of what might once have been a beautiful terrace house, Josephine ducked behind a hedgerow across the street. She watched him unlock the front door and stagger inside.

Josephine slipped across the street and into his garden, her eyes trained on the dim light she could see falling somewhere at the rear of the property. She crept slowly down the sidewall of the house with her arms protecting her face from un-pruned rose bushes and spider webs.

The curtains were not drawn. Josephine's skin prickled as she inched towards the open window.

Standing in the shadows she pressed a hand to her chest and willed her heartbeat to slow as she recognized the ornate collection inside. She stood in the darkness, unwilling to move, bewitched by the sight before her.



The next morning Tom watched the sunrise illuminate the varying shades in the room around him. He had not dreamt, he had not slept. His mind swam with delirium. He imagined he was in the sea, something he could surrender to and drown in. His

notebook was gone. He had lost them all over again.

The staff at Indigo had hung up on him after his sixth call the night before. He listened for Josephine's voice every time someone picked up but she didn't answer. He had wondered if she was sick, if something terrible had happened to her, but his panicked thoughts quickly returned to his notebook. He was sure he left it on the back table. He was always so careful.

He stared at Josephine's hair. When he touched it, a shock went through him; Clara and Liam played by the sea.

Later, he stood under the shower until the water ran cold. He dressed, raked his fingers through his hair, and shuffled unsteadily into the kitchen. Tom made himself a cup of coffee and stood at the sink to drink it while he gazed through the window.

After a while, he glimpsed a shimmer of something sitting almost out of sight on the doorstep. The cup clattered into the sink when he dropped it and hurried to the front door.

Tom struggled to breathe as he stared down at the bundle on the doormat.

Her hair was bird-egg blue and warm in the morning light. He held it serpentine between his hands. His mouth watered with the bitterness of longing.

Slowly, he reached for his notebook. The pages fell open to the place marked with a pressed violet.

He sat on his front step.

He stayed there for a long time, in the muted sun, reading and re-reading the watery blue ink of her hand.

So too can you.



How Did the Everlasting Begin?

Flower Conroy

Kiss, apocalypse. Body, a configuration of 6,000,000 fiber-glass threads & a pair of eyes broken into */hysteria in the soul*.
It began with a wrist. The wrist touched a hand. The hand held itself to the fire. There was nothing spectacular about the orange fire, its smoke slithered into the hungry ether. The wood went from young to bone. It began with a look. The flexing shadow of a sundial while the garden played with itself. In each fiber of the body. The wrist of the rosebush. The somethousand petals, the 2 billion stars. How lonely you stood miniaturized in the overgrowth. When the flashfloods thrash the landscape, it is the clouds' fault. There was everything spectacular about the fire because it was so ordinary. Because it was contained & then it was not.



Littoral Beach Song

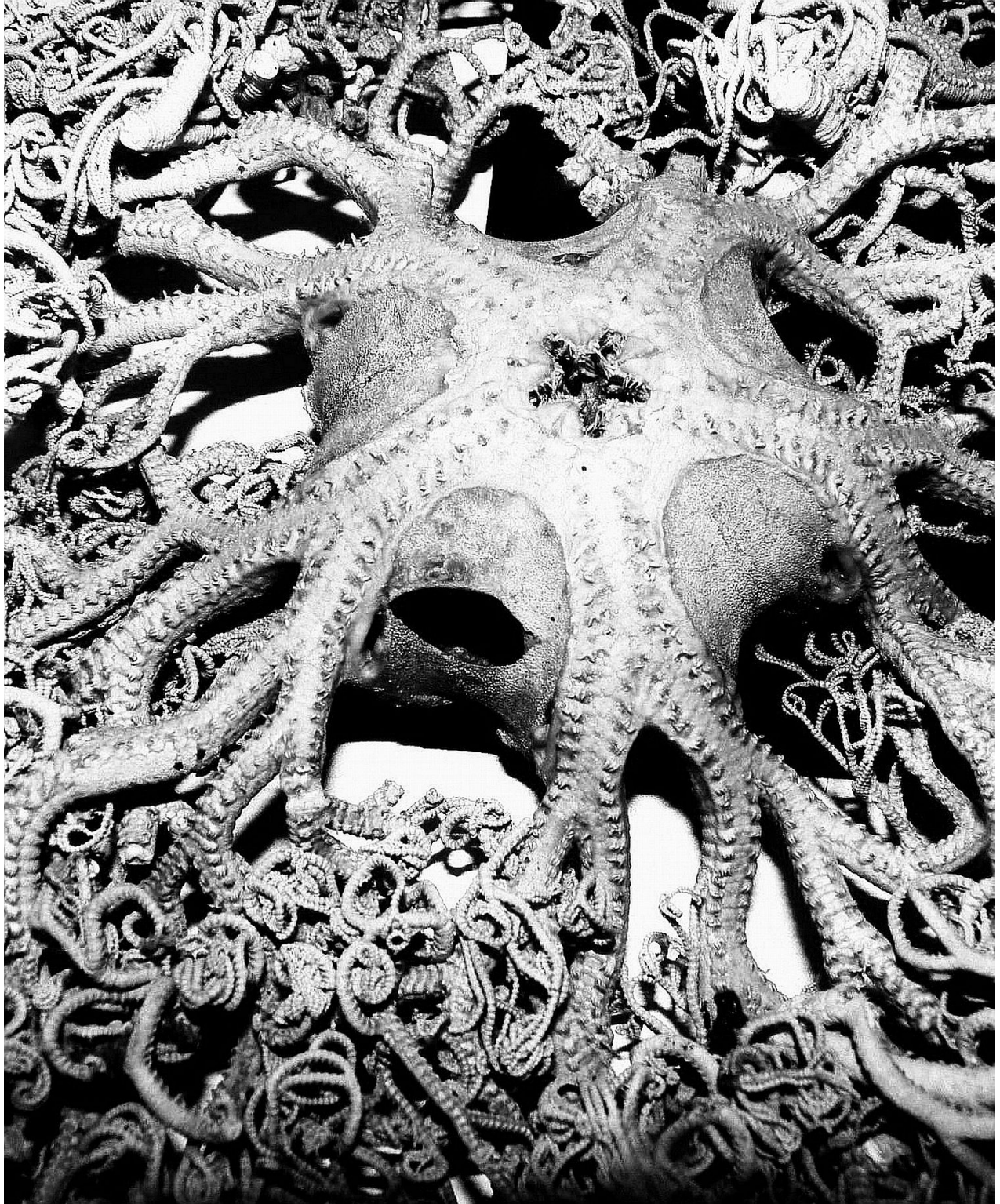
erin feldman

By what obsession or nerve did my fishy
family ooze their way out of the rhythm and
spray to test their recently darwined selves?
With lobe-fins and robust bony legs
my earliest tetrapodish grandmas
stopped their gills and powered up lungs

I'm not sure I would have joined that team to
adventure forth to the yet uncharted dry parts of the planet—
especially if I had known what would come
(the great leap forward Global human trafficking Khmer Rouge
Rome rape of Nanking Russia Haitian Earthquake Katrina)
Those ancestor amphibians of the deeps *couldn't*
have had a fishtail flash of
prescience with visions flickering
buildings of stone and wood, the crosses, the screaming horses
or the systematic burnings

It's been a long time since I swam in the Atlantean Heaven
But my heart beats to the waves' tempo
and my blood's chemistry is the same
I can imagine the faceted beauty
of a sunset from under the waves
the smell of no air there is home
to a predecessor imbedded deeply dormant in me—

I wonder
with what gumption will *she* surface?



Sea Out | Eleanor Leonne Bennett



Afterglow

Ben Nardolilli

Little I can remember about that night,
 Except the dance,
How was your porcelain broken to curves?
I had dreams of my hands caught in brown rings,
The soft mail of your coif,
Called *ricci* by your ancestors,
 And mine.



Genetic Footprint

Jules A Riley

Nearing his thirteenth birthday a boy had the urge to shave. He found a rusty razor in the dark recesses of the bathroom cabinet. He knew it wasn't Pa's, for Pa sported a luxurious waist-length beard. The boy nicked himself badly. When he healed long hairs sprouted around the scars. He shaved them off but this encouraged further growth. On his thirteenth birthday the beard luxuriated to waist length.

"Have you been using the old razor hidden in the dark recesses of the bathroom cabinet?" asked Pa.

"I sure have."

"I thought so."

"Did *you* ever...?"

"Sure did, son. I felt the urge when nearing *my* thirteenth birthday."

"Where did that razor come from?"

"Probably Grandpa's or his pa before him."

"Did Grandpa have a waist-length beard?"

"You bet."

"There's nothing wrong in following in your pa's footsteps."

"There sure ain't, son. But it's time to get rid of that razor."

"Why's that?"

"I caught your sister shaving."

xxxiv. in an artistic experiment gone wrong, rainer maria rilke is transformed into a werewolf

Theresa Williams

23 february

dear swag,

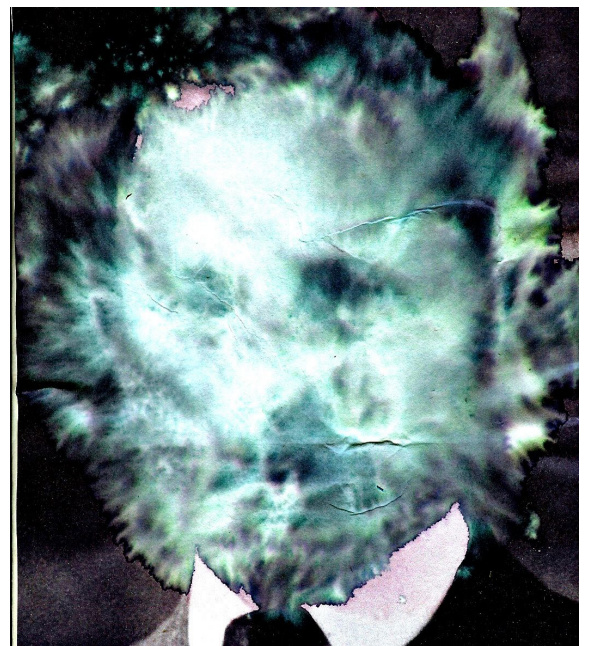
he loves it. he s never been so alone.

they say a picture of him exists, a hairy face above the stiff collar of a man s shirt. he goes naked now, having hung his clothes in the cottonwoods beside the lake where he bathes, makes sonnets to the moon.

he loves it. solitude like that mentioned in the new york times today by the people of manhattan. half of them now live alone, a change in the way people have historically existed.

he has no taste for human flesh, only the dusty rose petals from the old neighbor s garden. he evaluates their softness with his razory teeth while she nightly thumbs pages of almanacs, suspecting beetles.

he loves it. his claws run ink and he stays up all night scratching at his papers.



Theresa Williams



The First Three Weeks

William Henderson

A second date one week after a first date. I can call last Friday a first date, now that he and I are on a second date. Let's pretend we didn't meet for sex. Let's pretend we knew all along that we would enjoy ourselves enough to want a second date. Let's pretend, and hope no one asks how we met, because we will lie, and I am already keeping enough secrets.

D, four years younger, a couple of inches taller, thinner, a British accent he picked up while going to boarding school in England, earrings, a tattoo of the Buddha on his back, shaved head, some facial hair, blue eyes, contacts. And me, everything he isn't, or I think I'm everything he isn't. Heavier, and shorter, and blonder, and no longer shaving my head, and 16 tattoos, and pierced nipples, and green eyes that change to hazel and blue, depending, and glasses.

He and I, walking to a nearby sushi restaurant. Near the end of January, 2010, snow and ice on the ground. I'm wearing a sweater and jeans, and he's wearing a sweater and jeans, and we're both wearing black pea coats. Before we left, he wrapped a scarf around his neck, knotting it effortlessly. I've never understood how best to put on a scarf. We're about two hours into our second date, and we're walking down the stairs leading from his apartment building to the sidewalk.

I'm hungry, of course I'm hungry, I haven't eaten since breakfast. I have a love-

hate relationship with my body; I think I am more attractive on days when I don't eat since breakfast. And, because I want to have sex with him, later, now, in his apartment, in his bedroom, where we had spent our first date, talking, and drinking wine, and then having sex, or something very much like sex, I haven't eaten since breakfast.

When I had kissed him goodbye at the end of our first date—I will not call our first night together anything other than a date—I said *Goodbye, White Rabbit*, because calling him *White Rabbit* felt right somehow, and he said, *goodbye*, and I knew, then, what I had suspected hours earlier, that I would see him again.

Which was a problem, or would be—is—a problem. I am married. To a woman. And have been since 2001. She and I have been together since my senior year of college, 1998. She had been a junior. We got engaged nine months after meeting and less than six months after our first date on the Fourth of July. We remained engaged for nearly two-and-a-half years before getting married.

It gets worse, or, what I'm doing is worse than cheating on a woman who mostly loves me—and loves me even when she hates me, because couples can love and hate at the same time—because she and I have a son. He's a few months past his second birthday. Holly, my wife, and Avery, our son, conceived via in-vitro fertilization. The problem was mine, or, not problem, but the reason we used in-vitro fertilization was because of me. Initially, lazy sperm, my version of my diagnosis, but she and I haven't had sex in years, and when we've tried, I haven't gotten hard.

When we conceived Avery, we froze a couple of embryos, and we've implanted each, separately, in the past 12 months. Neither embryo took, though the second one lasted a few weeks longer than the first. She miscarried when she was at work. She texted to let me know, told me not to meet her at the doctor's office. That night, she buried part of what she miscarried in the front yard of our condo complex. I had been sleeping.

Holly is beautiful, no other word will do. She has red hair, and freckles, and big breasts. She's thin, and about five inches shorter than me. She has hazel eyes. Men look at Holly when she's in a room. If she knew how beautiful she is, and how easily she could replace me, I think she would. Avery looks like Holly, could even be a clone of Holly, which is better than his being a clone of me.

Me being on a date with D isn't payback, or even an attempt to figure out what I already know to be true about myself. I'm gay. And, if asked, I bet Holly would admit as much. But I love her, even when I hate her, and I love her, even though I am not happy being married to her, and even though she isn't happy being married to me, and most nights after work, I come home and pour a drink, and then a second drink, and then a third, and then I watch television.

I'm a fucking cliché, and I know I'm a fucking cliché, and the only thing I have going for me is a close relationship with Avery. Holly works weekends, to minimize Avery's time in daycare, so while she's at work, I get Avery to myself, and Avery gets me to himself, and we play outside when the weather allows us to play outside, and we play dinosaurs inside when the weather doesn't allow us to play outside, and he's kind of my best friend.

D doesn't know about Holly, and he doesn't know about Avery, and I know I should tell him, but how do I tell him about my wife and son without losing whatever he and I are becoming, and we must be becoming something because our first date became a second date and he and I have texted frequently this past week.

Holly and Avery are asleep; neither know anything about this, right now, who I get to be when I'm not with them, who I like being when I'm not with them. And if I tell D that I am married and that I am a father, he will ask me—albeit politely, because he seems to be polite—to leave and not come back, because I think if I were him, I would ask me, perhaps less politely, to leave and not come back.

And D and I are walking to get sushi, and I like D, and I think he likes me. Or is

starting to like me. Or, even, will like me, in time. Snow and ice on the ground. Matching black pea coats.

“Can you hear it?” he asks, as we walk. We haven’t said anything since leaving his apartment, or, we have, but only that we each want a third date, next Friday, less than 168 hours from this moment.

And I listen, and I don’t hear the sound to which he’s referring, and I tell D that I don’t hear the sound, and I keep walking.

“There,” he says. “Crunch.”

“What?” I ask.

“The snow and ice,” he says, “it crunches when we walk.”

And I listen to the sound he makes when he walks on the sidewalk, which is covered in snow and ice, and the sound sounds like a crunch.

“I hear it,” I say, and he smiles.

The restaurant is a few blocks from his apartment, and we go inside. A band is playing, and he asks if I want to order the sushi to go, which I do.

“About 20 minutes,” the lady who takes our order says, and D pays, which reminds me that I haven’t been on a date, let alone been taken out on a date, in years.

I like being taken out on a date.

“Let’s wait outside,” D says, and I smile.

“Sure,” I say. I don’t tell him how cold I am, and how I regret not wearing more than a sweater under my pea coat. Hadn’t expected to leave his apartment, and when he suggested we go for sushi, hadn’t wanted to turn down the suggestion.

Christmas lights still on storefronts and houses. A comic book store around the corner, a parking garage, Verizon across the street, and banks, three, his near Verizon and my bank two buildings down from where the sushi restaurant is. I should have worn a scarf and hat, maybe earmuffs.

D leads me to a nearby courthouse, which abuts the parking garage. We climb a flight of stairs and end up near a corner, protected from the cold on two sides.

“I have something to say,” he says.

The way D says *I have something to say* makes me think that the night—and he with me, together—has been drained of any possibility.

“I’m a former crystal meth addict,” he says.

Guess I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew that someone like him liking someone like me came with a catch.

“I haven’t used in a while, but when I use, nothing else matters. And the last time I used, I destroyed my life, hurt people I loved, and almost died. Crystal left me with nothing, and I know if I use again, I will not come back. I will use until I die.”

“But you don’t use now,” I say, like I am asking, not telling.

“No, but I like to occasionally get high. I only recently started smoking. I never buy it. My roommate gives it to me.”

I say nothing because I don’t know what to say.

“Will, I don’t know what we’re becoming, but if we’re becoming anything, if you ever think that I may possibly use crystal, or if you think my drug use is growing out of control, then you have to promise that you will do whatever it takes to stop me.”

I focus on his eyes and his head. He shaved his head before I came over. I like him with a shaved head. I like him. And I like him despite this confession.

He unwraps his scarf and ties it around my neck. I can smell him on the scarf. His scent, something else that I like, and something else that I’ve already started to recognize.

I know he’s waiting for me to say something.

“Yes,” I say. “I promise I will do whatever stopping you takes.”

We don’t say much on our way back to his apartment, or when we stop to get wine, two bottles. I figure one bottle is for us, tonight, and I wonder with whom he

will drink the second bottle. I shouldn't wonder with whom he will drink the second bottle.

While we eat our sushi, he feeds me part of what he ordered, and I feed him part of what I ordered, and he smiles at me and I smile at him. Hadn't even known how much I missed this until right now, in D's kitchen, at his small table, he on one side, me on the other, our food in middle. *Our food.*

"I like you," he says.

"I like you, too," I say.

"No, I mean I *really* like you," and then he stops talking, as if embarrassed.

I keep talking, not about liking him, which I do, which I *really* do, but about what I'm eating, and then about the wine we're drinking, and then about the music he turned on when we got back to his apartment, anything to keep him from taking back what he had said. I haven't felt this kind of liking in more than a dozen years. I like feeling this kind of liking.

Two days later, I come over after he gets home from work. He works in human resources at a retail store. I work as the editor of a marketing team at a health plan. I've worked as a reporter, and as an editor, and as a freelance writer. I don't like my job, but my job is a job, and writers in Boston are a dime a dozen, and I have a family to support. He hates his job, too, which we had talked about during our first date, or, I had talked about because he hadn't said much of anything, and when I had apologized for monopolizing the conversation, he had said that he had liked listening.

And now I'm listening to D talk about his day, and about a customer who had complained, and about how he will have to deal with the customer's complaint tomorrow, and he has already started smoking pot.

"I didn't smoke much before you got here," he says. "Do you want to smoke some?"

“No,” I say. I take off my shoes and get in his bed. I watch his exhalation.

“Do you want to hook up?” I ask.

“OK,” he says. “I know that’s why you *really* came over.”

He puts down his bong, and he gets out of the chair where he’s been sitting, and he comes to me in his bed, where I am already on my back, ready for him to take off my clothes. I’m glad that we’ve been talking by candlelight. Sexy, this moment, by candlelight.

Maybe hooking up *is* why I really came over.

Holly and Avery are asleep when I get home. I told her earlier—as I had told her before going out with D on our first and second dates—that I had to work. She believed me. I think she likes me not being home. If I’m not at home, then she gets to focus on Avery. She and I are selfish, and I know that she and I are selfish. We’ve cultivated relationships and friendships with people to keep from acknowledging our broken marriage. And from acknowledging that our marriage cannot be fixed.

I think what I’m doing with D isn’t wrong. As long as I don’t fall in love with him, then I won’t have to leave Holly, and if I don’t leave Holly, then I will not become a part-time father. Avery is why she and I haven’t divorced, and Avery is as good a reason as any why Holly and I haven’t divorced.

She wakes up when I get into bed. She can smell the pot and asks about it.

“I was with a friend who gets high,” I say. “Hung out with him after work.”

Holly doesn’t say anything else. Just wraps a blanket tighter around Avery and goes back to sleep.

“I like you, and I can’t stop thinking about you, and I wonder if you would like to date it out,” D asks the next night.

I’m at home with Holly and Avery. We’ve watched a movie. Now, Holly and Avery are putting together puzzles, and I’m talking to D via text messages. I know

texting is writing, but texting is really talking, or I like to think of texting as talking. When I read D's words, as I've gotten used to doing in the last 10 days, I can hear him talking, British accent and all.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Do you want to be in a monogamous relationship with me?"

"Yes."

Dating D should be fairly easy. Holly has no reason not to believe me when I tell her that I have to work late, or that I am starting to work on weekends. Nights and weekends are always a possibility; she knows that. And since I'm salaried, she won't expect me to deposit any extra money on payday. And, since Holly and I don't have sex, agreeing to monogamy is easy.

But acknowledging my relationship with D on Facebook, which he asks me to do the next day? Can't. D's relationship request comes with an attached red heart. I ignore the request, which he brings up later that week.

"I'm not out," I say. "My brother can see this. My colleagues. I'm not ready for my relationship status to be fodder for gossip."

"I'm not willing to be pushed back into the closet," he says. "An ex did that to me, and I promised myself I wouldn't let it happen again."

"Give me time," I say.

And he does. His Facebook relationship status acknowledges that he is in a relationship, but does not link to the profile of the person with whom he is in a relationship. I signed up for Facebook to say I have it. I'm 32; I've never relied on social networking to communicate my relationship status. Holly and I have never linked our profiles with a *married* relationship status; Holly isn't even one of my Facebook friends.

D and I don't act like a couple at the beginning of a relationship—though how *do* couples act at the beginning of a relationship?—so he and I say that we were fated to

meet, or that we have spent several lifetimes looking for each other, and now that we have met and reconnected, the pain of not being together has evaporated and the joy of union has coalesced in a cocoon we have built for two. We cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. And we don't want to know where one ends and the other begins.

We talk. A lot. Stories overlapping stories overlapping stories. Over dinner and during sex and via text messages while we are working. He works a few blocks from me, and lives a couple of miles from me. Our proximity is another reason why I think I'm meant to date him, maybe end up with him long-term. Even though I'm lying.

But I'm not lying, I convince myself, because if I think about Holly and Avery, and if I think about telling him about Holly and Avery, then I can't think about loving him, because I've started thinking that I love him, or that I'm falling in love with him, which is against the rules. Or, rule, singular. If I don't fall in love, then I'm doing nothing wrong. He and Holly would disagree. Most people would disagree.

He and I don't reveal ourselves to each other all at once—or in full, in my case. I ask him questions, to shift attention from me to him, and from what I'm not saying to what he's willing to say, because I haven't figured out how to explain more than a decade of my life.

"I don't know how to talk about everything with you," he says one night. "I'm going to sound awful."

"Then don't talk about the awful parts," I say. "Not now, anyway."

So he doesn't. Instead, he talks about where he's lived, Texas, North Carolina, and, when life stopped going the way he wanted life to go in Texas and in North Carolina, with his mother in Peoria. He isn't close to his brother, doesn't talk to his father, and calls a woman that his mother helped raise his sister, even though his mother never adopted this woman.

"You'll meet her one day," D says with such certainty that I believe that I will meet

her, even though she lives in Illinois.

One night, D describes the events that led to the creation of scars on his forearms, twin scars, though one scar is darker and larger than the other scar. He hadn't wanted to die the night he cut himself; he just hadn't wanted to feel.

"I'm not suicidal or anything like that," he says, "in case you were worried."

"I wasn't," I say, and I wasn't—am not. I noticed the scars during my first date with D and wondered about the scars during each subsequent date. When I look at him, I see the scars. I expect that one day I will stop noticing the scars, as I have stopped noticing the scars on my body. Both knees, childhood accidents, and a fingertip on my right hand, which I sliced open with the top of a can of tuna fish. And the scar that wraps itself around my body, a reminder of a series of surgeries I've had to undo years of overeating.

During my sophomore year of high school, I stopped eating, and in 10 months, I lost 110 pounds. Too much too quickly, my doctor told me and my parents, but I wanted to be thin and not eating seemed like the best way to get thin. Initially, people encouraged, and even applauded, my weight loss; then, as I started shrinking faster than people liked, I was taunted. The people with whom I went to high school wouldn't walk on the same side of the hall with me. Rumor was that I had AIDS, and that I was dying. I was a virgin.

Most people assume I'm gay, and have assumed I'm gay since I was in fifth grade. Maybe sooner. Maybe fifth grade is just my first memory of recognizing what other people believed true about me. But coming out as a gay man in 1987, when I was in fifth grade, or in 1993, when I was a sophomore in high school, was impossible. Central Florida was no place to be gay. Might not be still. I haven't lived in Florida since graduating from college. If I could have sex with women, then I couldn't be gay. That's what I told myself. And that's what happened. I dated women because I could have sex with them, and I loved women because not loving women meant that I'd

have to love men, and loving men meant that I am gay, and coming out meant losing everything. So when Holly and I stopped having sex—when I stopped getting hard with her—I blamed everything but being gay. But I have no problems getting hard with D. Case closed. Or, case mostly closed. Gay.

Nine years after losing the weight, as a 25th birthday gift to myself—a gift that Holly and I spent two years saving for—I had liposuction, and five years later, I had a tummy tuck. I hated how I looked before, and still hate how I look. Probably always will, which is why when D asks me to take a shower with him one Friday night, I hesitate before saying yes. I'm sure he's seen the scar; he just hasn't asked about it.

Only when he's in the shower, waiting for me, do I turn off the light in the bathroom and take off my clothes.

“What are you doing, rabbit?” he asks. *Rabbit, his nickname for me.*

“Mood lighting,” I say, before getting into the shower with him. He gets out of my way so I can get under the water, and the water is hot, the way he and I like showers—but not baths, because in baths, he feels like an ingredient in soup—and he kisses me and I kiss him and we are getting hard and then we are hard and then he is on his knees, sucking me off.

After, I tell him about the surgeries, and about how my surgeon cut away the skin where my belly button used to be, and how my surgeon had prided himself on sculpting a fairly perfect belly button for me.

D sticks his finger in my belly button.

“It feels weird,” he says.

“I could have asked the doctor to leave off the belly button,” I say, which I never would have done, but making a joke about my belly button is about all I can do with D so close to the parts of me about which I feel ashamed.

“That would have been weirder,” D says. “You should pride yourself on sculpting a fairly perfect you.”

Then, D kisses me.

“I don’t look like a page from a magazine.”

“You look like a page from a magazine I have been waiting for, and now that my first issue has arrived, I am not going to cancel my subscription.”

I believe D, because I want to believe D, and I think that D must mean what he says because he told me that he will never lie to me. And I’ve told him that I will never lie to him. Which is a lie. I know my saying I will never lie to him is a lie.

Three weeks is how long I’m able to hide my life from D. He doesn’t understand why I haven’t invited him to my home; or why I don’t stay the night with him on Fridays, which we’ve claimed as our night; or why I’m never available during the day on Saturday or Sunday. He asks me if I’m seeing someone else. He asks me if I’ve changed my mind about dating him but haven’t figured out how to tell him. He asks me if I want out, and out is the last thing I want, but I suspect that if D knows about Avery, that my not wanting out will no longer matter.

A Sunday. Holly is with friends. I’m home with Avery. And D texts and invites me over. So I get Avery ready, and I drive to D’s apartment. When I park downstairs, I text D: I’m here.

I get out of my car, unstrap Avery from his car seat, and carry Avery to the front door of D’s apartment building. Avery is happy to still be up. If he and I were at home, I’d be trying—and probably failing—to get Avery to go to sleep. I tend to let him stay up until he falls asleep on his own, which is one of several differences in how Holly and I parent Avery.

D opens the front door, and he looks at me holding Avery. D steps back, lets me in.

I walk up the stairs leading from the foyer to D’s second-floor apartment. The front door is open, so I walk in, and then down the hallway, and then into the kitchen,

where D's roommates are eating. Avery squirms until I let him go. He introduces himself to D's roommates, or he offers what passes for an introduction by a two-year-old.

"Who's the baby?" one of D's roommates ask. She works with D, and is planning to move out in a few weeks.

"He's my son," I say.

"No shit," D's other roommate says. He's D's dealer. I had met him the night I met D. Roommate and his boyfriend were getting high, and I had walked into the room where they were when I was trying to find the bathroom. I had been shirtless, and I had been embarrassed to be shirtless when I saw the two of them in bed, getting high, mostly naked.

"Yeah," I say. "He's two."

D stands at the doorway to his bedroom. He hasn't said anything. I'm afraid to look at D. I'm afraid I will see disappointment, maybe even anger.

Avery runs to, and then past, D. In D's room, Avery takes books off of D's bookshelf, and then Avery taps at several of the keys to D's computer keyboard, and then Avery asks D for "up."

D picks up Avery, who hugs D tight around the neck.

"I don't know how to entertain a small child," D says.

"Maybe we can watch a cartoon," I say.

D finds a cartoon on his computer, and pushes play. He sits in the chair near his computer, and Avery sits in D's lap. Avery watches the movie, which he hasn't seen before, and he sits still, which he rarely does.

"How?" D asks. All he asks. How?

And I tell D the answer I had prepared: Holly is my best friend. She and I met in college. We decided to have a baby together. We live together and co-parent Avery. We've talked about a second child. We've also talked about raising children while

living in separate homes, *which Holly and I haven't done, but probably should, and should have long ago.*

"I'll have to meet her," D says.

"OK," I say, though I do not know how I will introduce D to Holly. She will know. I won't have to say anything, and she will know, just by looking at me looking at D looking at me.

"I knew there was something," D says.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Is there anything else?" D asks.

"No," I say. *A lie—another lie—when I promised not to lie.*

I watch how D holds Avery, and how D wraps his arms tight around Avery, and how Avery makes himself comfortable in D's lap.

I can spend my life with you, I think; I want to spend my life with you.

Since Avery doesn't have the words he'd need to tell Holly where I took him tonight, or that he had seen me and D hug—though not kiss, because I am not ready to kiss D in front of Avery—I won't have to ask for Avery's complicity in hiding my relationship with D. I can't tell Holly that watching D fall in love with Avery—because D had fallen in love with Avery the moment Avery held up his arms and asked for "up," or maybe in the moment after Avery had relaxed into D's body, head on shoulder, feet barely reaching past D's knees—is another reason why I think what I'm doing is, or will be, OK.

I still take you and your son, as is. I'm not scared. I'm not going anywhere.

A text from D, not five minutes after Avery and I left to go home so Avery could sleep.

Holly is sitting on the couch painting her toenails when Avery and I get home. She is wearing a pink bathrobe, and has wrapped a towel around her hair. I put Avery in the bed where Holly sleeps, which is the bed she and I shared. I haven't slept in that

bed since the night I promised D I could be monogamous.

“Where were you guys?” Holly asks.

“He was fussy, so I took him for a drive,” I say.

Holly continues painting her toenails.



In the Web | Merlin Flower



Go Spider Go

Glen Armstrong

Casting a shadow that nightfall would envy.

Sparking interest in the inner
workings of a spider.

Retaining its size while becoming the world.

Propagating spider-think to the creeping
borders of Spiderland.

Using up every inch of its anthem.

Releasing the music box key.

Turning back to the day's dark events.

Taking credit for the naturally darkening sky.

Changing each mother's lullaby to

go spider go,
go spider go.

On top of the world the spider strums
a toy ukulele, it's other six legs
free to couple with longitude lines,
three of its eyes hoping Orion's belt
will ask them to the junior prom.

It starts to sing a little song
about the golden age of spiderkind
but the words don't come
since there were no words
in that most idyllic golden age of spider.



The E Word

Stewart Lewis

Breathe.

You will forget to turn your watch forward, and arrive at his house early. No one will be there except a dog, waiting for you as if you were expected. You will sit against the sun-soaked wall and feel comfort. The dog, a Labrador with droopy eyes, will look at you like you're a best friend. It will nuzzle its snout between your breasts, making you laugh a little.

He will arrive in a black jeep, one arm waving to you, the other on the woman's lap. The woman in the passenger seat. The dreaded, wretched woman who now has all the power, the one who molded him into her faultless world where the whites are always whiter, the brights always brighter. The woman whose name is Eliza but you refer to her as the "E" word.

He will get out of the car and hug you. He will still look, act, and smell like a boy. You will want to curl him up in your arms and keep him safe.

The E word will appear slightly addled by your earliness, but immediately warm up after the martinis are shaken, poured into three chilled and frosted glasses. One plump olive will rest on the bottom of each glass like green, meaty eyeballs.

You will offer to cut vegetables, knowing that they won't let you. Eliza will slip off to the shower, leaving her olive in the glass. You have eaten yours with the second sip.

While talking to him, you reach into her glass and eat hers, giggling faintly while chewing it.

He will cut the vegetables like a boy, looking up at you with those shy, disarming eyes that could never harm. You will eat a few of the freshly cut, raw vegetables because you need to have something in your mouth. It will feel good to move your jaw, swallow. You will want another martini already but won't dare ask. Instead you will try to accentuate the empty glass, nudge it a little closer to the cutting board.

She will reenter the kitchen dressed in something casual but well thought-out. You will ask about her bracelet and she'll tell you it was given to her by her ex-husband, then look up and close her eyes, as if praying. You will wonder if her ex-husband is dead.

He will be sautéing, in his own little cherub world, while his cheeks redden from the heat rising off the pan. He won't notice the ex-husband comment. You will wonder if he just appears naive but notices everything. You are sick of noticing everything, which you have started doing ever since you left him. You are beginning to think leaving him was the worst thing you could've done, even though you have told yourself for two years it was the right thing. Move on, change, work on yourself, be alone. Ever since you've been alone all you do is eat, drink, and notice things. You are exhausted.

The dinner will taste salty and good; you will have two helpings. She will talk most of the time, while you steal as many looks of him as you can without doting. She will have this way of including you in the conversation, but only for brief intervals. He will inject a few fake laughs that will cause you quick flashes of nausea. There is no real way to prepare you for this, but he will look better than he ever did.

After the fancy decaf, the E word will show you the guestroom, hand you a sea-foam green towel. She'll tell you it was really nice meeting you and that you're always welcome in their home. Her smile will look stapled to her face.

He'll come into the room after he does the dishes and bring you a strawberry. You won't want to eat it because you just brushed your teeth, so you'll awkwardly place it on top of the dusty alarm clock. He will kiss your forehead, his sharp chin brushing the tip of your nose. The look on his face will be the warmest, most real thing you will ever know.

You'll dream that Eliza is some sort of vixen superhero who saves you from falling off a bridge. After she saves you, she kills you.

In the morning, no one will be there except the dog. You will feel crooked delight in having an unfamiliar house all to yourself. You will peek into little drawers, spray strange bottles of perfume, suck the tip of your finger and dip it into the jar of brown sugar. You will dance down the hallway into the master bedroom and stop at the sight of his favorite shoes, the ones you had bought him. Black and shiny, square cut at the front, a band of flexible material at the ankle for easy slip on. Only then will you feel a quick flood of tears, and blink them away.

You will take a leisurely bath in the master bathtub, turn on the radio to classical, and call your nonexistent messages from the cordless phone. You will place a few calls to the few people whose numbers you know by heart, and they will say things like *where are you* and *are you drunk?*

You will start to try on the E word's clothes, matching certain shoes and jewelry. You will put on her pale lip gloss and walk around the house with her languid gait, quoting some of her lines from the night before.

You will end up looking at yourself in the mirror and think, *this is ridiculous*. Then, the whole experience will suddenly change, like when an uninvited person enters a party, drunk and trying desperately to undo something terrible that has already happened. You will frantically wash your face, peel off the clothes and let them drop in crumpled piles at your feet.

You will think of the period of time since you've left him. The horrible dates, the hurried sex, the sugared drinks in tacky bars.

You will hear the front door open, keys dropping hard on the table. You are naked, and you notice that the Pilates is paying off.

The footsteps in the hallway will get closer. Instead of scrambling to cover yourself, you realize it's too late. Nothing is going to save you. Except maybe a man who is still a boy. The only man who ever made you consider bearing a child.

At that moment you won't care about the sale of your condo, the death of your father, the impending job that would move you here, to Seattle, a place that you never imagined living until now. Nothing matters except who the person will be, gripping the lock on the master bathroom door, turning it slowly.

The door opens and you look straight ahead at yourself, a smile teasing the corners of your mouth.



And exit left.

D Lep

My fingertips are peeling
where they touched your skin.
Is it wrong to find comfort in the living?
To hide away in a moving pulse?
The only salt you've spilled
is for yourself.
And I'm in love with everyone else.
This is our dilemma.



#alifebetweeninvertedcommas

Sian Cummins

Say it twice in the same update and any word is made ridiculous. Try it. Try any word; try the word 'great'... a word people say too often...it needs to be mocked.

@nothingdoin Guys, this great new place is so great #whyarentanyofyouhereyet
#great

Well now it's 'the morning after' and she's doing her 'walk of shame.' She wonders if #great is still trending in her area.

The tights have ridden down and the crotch is sawing between her inner thighs. When there's a hiding spot, an alley or a tall bush, she could try and get the waistband up where it belongs. Frankly, it'll be straight down again.

She is queen bee and can't afford genuine loss of dignity. So let's trend this minx before it becomes fact. #walkofshame is this morning's #great. Better still, let's make it a minor meme, for that is where true ridicule lies.

@nothingdoin Morning Twitter. Can you see my arse? #walkofshame

And before they take her too seriously:

@nothingdoin Where can I get knickers with #walkofshame on the arse, new style must?

The ‘nippy’ morning is therapeutic anyway, and she hopes the walk will metabolize some of last night’s large reds. And one should always, always be a moving target. Target for comments, though her arse is by far and away covered by her vintage A-line, and again by her coat. But both shout PARTY! and it’s eight am on a Sunday.

Ignoring the raw red lines being drawn out of sight she compiles the to-do list in her head. Get home, have a poo, drink a glass of water, remove tights, eat something salty, sort cat (should do this first?), shower, change, hangover brunch with girls.

She can’t miss that, no matter how rough she is. Those girls need her. Because of the trendy area where they live, their social circle overlaps with a few genuine B-listers. No big deal. But some of her impressionable friends are dating them.

You just have to do what you can around these famous blokes. Tread carefully. She’s seen noses turned up at the domesticity she wraps around them all—her girls, their rock star boyfriends—she’s heard cruel words like ‘bandwives.’ These boys are in their late twenties at most but they’re already part of the old guard. People are buying their records for the first time, they’re just graduating from the toilet circuit—but they’re aged by it all. They’re brittle. What they need are wives, but hipster wives—wives who take MDMA, drink red wine, and cook big decadent dinners. And the girls need the

dinners more than anyone; they need somewhere to go, to get away from the intensity and maleness of it all.

There's nothing wrong with dinner, although someone has maligned it on Twitter this very morning. She had to climb over two other fully clothed bodies who'd shared her bed. Untwisting the mangled knickers from her crotch with one hand; logging on with the other. No one woke up as she let herself out—twenty or so of them, sleeping lions on floors and furniture.

@jonnnnytweets having to go 'to dinner' with parentsinlaw—why this arbitrary eating ritual?

She's reading a novel where the writer twice uses 'dinner' as an adjective for something stock or substandard: 'dinner jazz' and 'glib dinner party phrase.' And she's seen 'dinner theatre' advertised on the tube and it sounds like something drab—a bad deal for the actors. Stodgy, and laced up in Dickensian ideas of 'falling too.' (Not the same as 'dining out' on something, which sounds more dynamic.)

She, for one, has no problem with dinner. It's important, it's a work of solidarity for the bandwives (if you must), and they're all excellent cooks as a result.

It's already hot. A paste is forming under the straps of her dress and animal good sense would mean taking the coat off, but the coat is all that's between her and a true #walkofshame.

At the end of her road the sawing action of the gusset becomes almost unmanageable and she just about saves herself from having a fall. (When you get to a certain age it

stops being ‘fell over’ and starts being ‘had a fall.’) Just in time, because the permanently pregnant TV star is coming down the avenue with her existing four kids.

She’s not sure, herself, about having kids and the disingenuous way you have to talk to them. She feels as if—for childbearing—she has the hips but not the inclination.

By the time she reaches her front door the waistband is three inches above her knees and scarcely short of coming into view. By the time she’s up the communal stairs and squeezing past the cat into her hallway it’s around her knees and she laughs at herself and swears gently at the cat.

She checks her notifications while having that poo. The cat watches her, with her tights round her ankles and her lifestyle in her own hands.

She finishes and escapes from the warm greasy scent of her own insides. She goes into the lounge. She lets her head sink against the cool backrest of her granny sofa but won’t let her eyes close. She needs to get ready for the brunch. Girls don’t let each other down. Whatever people say, a female friend will always be there for you. It’s down to her, the queen bee, to keep up morale.

She’s dozing but shakes herself and gets herself standing up. In stories it’s always ‘the next thing she knew.’ She is knocked senseless and wakes up in the infirmary, where a benevolent headmaster ties up the loose ends. Or she falls asleep over a book and is carried away to bed. Always the passive voice. God is always in the machine in stories. In real life she has to do things herself.



Pomme | Katrina Pallop



Cure for Madness

Courtney Hill Wulsin

If there was a cure for madness
it would be measured out in tablespoons
and taste chalky and bitter.

Those of us who needed it most
wouldn't be interested.
Choosing want and full ache
to calm seas.

These days sanity is relative.
Hindsight and foresight
blurring the lines
of the present moment.

I keep on.
Sleeping in blinks beneath full moons,
eating when I remember.

I have the rest of my life
to take care of myself.
Right now I can take some time off.

You are gone, but you are still here.
The smell of you trapped in my nose.

How many years is it now
days, weeks, hours...

It seems not to matter
time refusing to heal wounds.

Tonight as the sun set
I thought of you
and the night we got drunk on sangria.

How that night was a second chance
and a last chance
and I still lost you.



The Coming of Her Age

Christine Brandel

After the sacred bath came life, rich, renewed
and hopeful. They won't break their vows now.
The world will not end.

Twilight cradles everything her mother dreamt
daughters to be. She spends the nights arranging.
Rows of small girls grow but starve from lack of light.

The things friends become...he's resting
and she's waiting. It was simpler. He remembers
and wants to cure. The way he treats her,
lying behind like a stranger,
unaware, the taste of this honey.

A group of females took her hand.
She watched, stupefied, as her new form
emerged from between their legs. It took so long
for her to learn to carry herself away
from others, all others, to stand.

After watching her father's fall,
she no longer believes men can skate to her
without turning and skating away.

She wears so many doubts in faith
yet she greets revelation: she will not be woman.
She reads and bites her fingertips,
remaining the foreigner, hiding her prayers.

Seduced by a boy with a black book,
she adds darker profiles and larger fists
to the family resemblance. Does he dream
he can dance before this bride?
Does he dare to hold her, to tie her
stone around his neck. She still waits
in white, kneeling as if praying for him.

The day she decided to plant the garden
she never intended to tend it.
The soil reeked of fertility and she lost
her footing and left scars where a child might sprout.

Only once did she raise a piece of wood, nailing
her forehead to this—her building—her body.
Burning the temple, cleaning the skin.
Life comes again from the warm sacred water.



The Silence of the Language

Carol Piva

“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” And a vast field of expectations spreads your senses to run across this opening-with argument, as pure as powdering, by the brilliant Virginia Woolf... Words—these touching yet unornamented words—put together, rhythmically, to blossom out... one single day... of a person(a). Ready to be seen through a frail window made of multiple perspectives from then on... Objects and signs, persons and personas, events and plots—they belong together. The scene, its *behinds and beyonds*, even its unpredictable bays and knots are intertwined to make you—oscillate, and go in. The whole *set-the-stage* begins to match up to your realm of *-isms*, or some kind. And the silence begins to dance. In front of you, for you. To end up connecting—you, and your doubles, and all your whirls-around with those *plot*-mirrors...

What you see looks at you. It comes from an abyss of breakdowns and perpetuations and resonances. When you realize there’s nothing to back out of, or that it’s just foolish to tie up yourself at any point [for there won’t be anything to spark you off], you seldom know what to. Or how to. Your *rather than’s*—where are they, and your quests, the slots transforming your troubled dreams into anything? Might they be anywhere far, or too much closer for making you... quiver. And you enjoy—don’t you? —this *why’s-and-where’s* flippancy—with tenderness? vicariously?

So the wind dwells where the breath is dead...

The *silence*. And the *language*. You look absently at those wires carrying electricity over the [cuddly-looking?] town you live in; you—clacking along that grey asphalt [made of many *settings-aside* on your part], every day, as if there's always a limit to your whistle, to your sweat, to your clapping-hands on any stage, so you feel barely up to think over the syncopated rhythm you are embroiled in before you cross frantically the streets of your cemented [non-]places. How about—*oh!*—the shrieks you walk in on while they reach the insurmountable side of those towns, with their dead wires machine-operated to outline your evanescence? You store them up—your desperate whispers—for some day, for your *not-at-alls*. They are many, you are only... the same. Viaducts and avenues—making you scruple overmuch to disclose what must sprout from your... skin?

The *dewdrop*—as slender as puissant. And the *swell*—as long as or as short as those things tying you down, tied to do... Those wires you never notice when the roads of your town cross over into you—they are cold, as usual. Perhaps working up to bringing you... the same unfortunate motion, coffee with bread, coffee with bread. Coffee. Coffee... No bread—you are so... the hunger one. The asphalt is grey. The passersby are grey. The wires, cold as always. Carrying over... whatever—you do not know how to. But then, abruptly—and how intriguing it may feel!—a bird, a little blue bird dressed in transparency just springs from anywhere as vanishing as close—to you, to your hang-flight, to those discreet doors exerting yourself to envision nothing but that push-me-and-pull-you... *world*. Your *white blindness*. Flowers you will buy yourself. *Some day. Some never...*

The more you contemplate this bird's forward motion—which challenges you and scares you and tilts you in favor of *nothings* yet *everything*s—the more you draw on insane conjectures whether you should relinquish or not those shivers and myopic-like

freedom that have overwhelmed you and so your series of days-in turmoil inside. For what? To what extent? Your *silence*... beats. But the *bird*... tunes. And lands, delicately, on that cold wire. Rests a little, closing both eyes and just putting out the weary. That mild... bird. Draws in some fresh air you no longer feel yourself able to. And then, although it seems devastating to let behind the comfortable on-a-wire position, for it seems to chime in with a desirable shelter, worth seeking or achieving... for... Well-you... gaze at this little creature that... endeavors. To fly. Away. Once more. Freely. Unfitly? Just once again...

The *blindness*, the *quietness*, the *crudeness*. And the *kingdom of the words*. In any event, you are. You? Enticed to dance. A delicate dance. Most beautifully—to *flute*. And to dwell in possibilities... Even if it's apparently forbidding to rewrite boundaries you have crisscrossed by, or back-in-the-day silences you have glowed in the dawn, you sense the power of whispering in sparks... It is possible to reframe what is jumping out from your... everyday-life verisimilitude. Isn't it? And so you are ready. To crash, to fail, to become lost. But especially to pulse, and unwrap. To penetrate deftly the kingdom of the words. And capture the pure enigma of what they invite you to.

Man after man. Women. Their delicacy, their secrets. All the pleasure they tease out of you, close to your touch. Deviations. The dawn in the day. Clothes. Gestures. Intimacy. Mysteries, mysteries, mysteries. Woods—you are about to enter. Man after woman after steps after clouds. Children. Roofs. Promises. Crossings. Rupture. Inertia. Aspirations. Objects and signs—exposed and hidden, simultaneously, under the light. Discrepancy. Persons and personas. Plots. Signs, masks, objects. Variations. Slots. Your eyes off, those eyes on. Streets, viaducts, and avenues...

You begin to play—with the words...

... at which point your plaything ends up playing—with you. Dangerously? The very-insanity point is—isn't it?—to take the risk and... give in to. Hands that will move by

zigzags—yours. You are only able to breathe—the obvious. Those who believe that writing equals the act of expressing [whatever] are overly mistaken, for it is a process—of looking out what is looking at you. And a process in which you do not properly give form to the words yet you shall give them birth. It is, thus, necessary that not you, yourself, outline the words, but the words themselves enrich your vision and set up... your voice. To touch them, in a double movement of hearing them out and giving them back to the organic matter they come from. This is the one-and-only way to free them up from their *dictionary state*. So you will be ready to blow them as what they are meant to be read—as *language* itself. Its silence will cascade over you. And then you will write to become—*invisible*!

The deeper you step into this *in-between* space few persons have ever entered before, the more difficult is to breath, and you may grow in solitude and dark. Once you go there, there's no going back. Anastrophes and alliterations, third banks of the river, images and metaphors, drops of reminiscences, they all irradiate from your perception lens while beautifully tighten your hands to a word-culling hunting-for, so that—even in no-despair—all this takes your breath away. Softly and violently, as it should be. This connection fundamentally changes you—hand in hand with the silence that will become *language*. A diamond to be born and lapidated—that's what will make you whole, you and the words you have conversed with. And what outers you to the core...

Writing for me passes... Oh, it feels like it is still possible to come home, notwithstanding the chaos I feel overwhelmed by. Or all the nausea—outside. There will be flowers to pick up from that grey asphalt above which the cold wires are tricking me into my [or anyone's] *not-at-nots*. And I absolutely do it, I desperately or tenderly write to become myself—*invisible*. No external traces. No fingerprint. No profiles. But intersection. With or without distortion, from this or that brevity we are all encapsulated in, the mirror hollow is covered. However, the words submerge

disarmed from any labels, as they shine. In the very beginning, they almost do not breathe, tick-tack, tick-tock, the present and the future, all those tedious compromises, to and fro, tick-...! The same no-texture environments in which I felt myself empty, and still insensible—blindly, there's nothing to be afraid of but the same prosaic gestures. The very battle, as a writer, is to protect everyone from them—the fool gestures into taking the *silence* and making it to bloom as... *language*.

Voilà! What would you have to write about? Marriages, fortunes, accidents and incidents, the lacking of time? Misery, desperation, chronicles of your boring everyday life? Your these or those *orientations*? Achievements? Misadventures? Struggles with? Not even love itself is an organic matter if you do not know how to extract life from the voiceless... from those flowers you are supposed to buy yourself *some day* to put aside *some what*. The *language* dwells where words are more willing to reverberate *silence*. And then you feel—misfit. Or you stumble into faces and faceless sides of everythings, myriad of them, to figure out that anything might be—*fictionized*?

What you see only lives in your eyes through what sees you

Creative writing is, for me, what allows the words to make their match on this beautiful spark that will spread them out, and in all directions: their freedom. Their beauty and the beautiful, creative use of the language result from your hand-in-hand touch, but especially from the words' unbroken power to feed off—whatever they are ready to, regardless of how strange or dazed their shapes, or colors, or resonances might be. For the words do not exist to dwell in quantity-status marks or labels. Even by silent chords or thundering gestures, the words are not meant to embellish or to spark like fake gold. The words are meant to say. And to give-back birth to..., with delicacy or impetus. To rekindle..., by gloomy or astounding tunes. And to invite you to dance, to risk, to breathe their lightness, their everything that cuts across an ad-infinitum overland... for them.

The words are alive, they are organic. Even a cold stone, Kafka once said, if well sensed and lapidated, can be converted into significance, and a valuable matter for any writing. There should be no fixed rules but the respect for this precious: the very significance of whatever you write must team up with every single word you find vital to use—one after another, as if layers inside other layers to finally reverberate. And mean. What they, not you but they feel lively to. That's, by the way, what in my opinion makes this by-any-standard opening—"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself"—one of the most beautiful in terms of language, in the realm of literature. It's a universe of universes that unfolds your senses. And beautifully breaks you down... Beautifully. Unexpectedly. By opening up in front of you, and far beyond you, multiple instances for the words and for everything they claim to...



Cadence of Spheres | Jenna Whittaker



Chimera

Christine Gosnay

There you are, polishing up the counterfeit silver
with the stolen 6am steel wool after you had the
nerve to sing karaoke like Bob Dylan all night
in the middle of the road, in spite of the fact that
no one asked you to take off all your masks and
no one ever asked you what white boys know
about chupacabras.

This is a dusty cabin you've got here—
very National Parks Service—
what with all the boots you've dragged in
and out the door, what with
all the rattlesnakes and pheasants, well,
there you are in the chickweed,
three states away.
There you are.



What the Koel Wants

Anthony Lawrence

It wants to be loved, distantly.
Incubation is occupation.
Like any parasite, its host
provides security, sustenance
and a reason to go on and on
disdainfully, as if the dark blue
metal sheen of its plumage
has given it bragging rights
over the lorikeet, whose eggs
it covets secretly. Feed it what-
ever comfort you can salvage
from the day: a glance
or a word cut back to its origins
will give it strength. Too much
attention, and it will remain
out of season, a cuckoo
with a name exotic as a flower-
head in Indonesia, where

it winters. Burn cones
of sandalwood and leave
the window open. Hide your rose-
embroidered bag and give
thanks for ruthlessness
without malice. Be watchful
and kind. The living mantras
of the lonely are beautiful
and strange. Be generous
with your blessings and your time.



Man to Man

Jesse Kuiken

Ben hears his rollicking laughter before seeing him. Bull-broad, bit of softness in the middle, keen blue eyes. The other man smiles in Ben's direction. Scorching as the sun at the rim of the sky, and cocky. Ben looks down. His torn work boots, secondhand, tread held on only with duct tape. They've brought him here to this dusty little ranch, out past Elbert. Rancher put word out extra hands were needed for branding. Ben figured with the wages he could buy new boots, or at least ones that fit. Fantasized about rolling into bed without massaging dime-sized blisters.

He looks up. The other man's paying attention to the ranch foreman, a stooped man with a silver beard. He and the rancher's two sons are rounding up the dozen men and lanky boys gathered in front of the ranch house. The calves were rounded up earlier and wait, corralled below. The foreman and the rancher's sons lead and the men follow, down a steep hill.

A flicker in the blue-eyed man's face and body, flame-like and hungry. He moseys over. Ben hopes it's slow and easy enough the others won't pay any mind. Just one man talking to another. He's tall, fairly blotting Ben's sun out. Gray shines in his chestnut hair and his lashes are fine, long and darkish. Up close, Ben sees furrows ploughed under his eyes, giving him a resigned look. Prim lips made for smirking, or a

firm, silent line. Smiling down at Ben and he suddenly hates how small he is, always will be, with other men.

“Nathan,” the man says, extending a paw. Valleys of his palm softer than the cracked, sun-browned knuckles. The faint, cool hint of aftershave on him as well.

“Ben.”

“What?”

“Ben,” he repeats, louder, firmer.

Nathan nods, introduces himself to a few of the others. Ben allows himself a glance up and down Nathan’s body, drinking the sight: the easy musculature in the forearms and shoulders, masculine and graceful gait.

There’s no way a man, of any caliber, even graying and a bit doughy at the waist, would have interest in him. Ben thinks himself mousy at best: dull brown hair, round face with a bud of stubble in the chin. He looks nearer to fifteen than twenty-one. Girls would like him ok—he’s small, unthreatening—if he wasn’t skittish as a cat around water. Men are gracious in the way men are to one another, fondly dubbing him “the little guy.” But he’s unremarkable, even forgettable, and sometimes doesn’t mind it that way. Keeps him from trouble, and harm.

Nathan’s heavy tread falls into step with Ben’s. Shortening his lengthy stride, Ben notices.

“I’ve never castrated a cow before,” he babbles, because he has nothing else to say.

“Cows generally don’t need castrating.” Nathan’s tone without irony.

Ben laughs nervously.

“Just don’t dwell on the details.”

Approaching the corral, the stink of animal sweat, shit, and piss, thick and humid. Ben holds in a grimace. Not used to working with animals: one job he works construction, the other he stocks shelves at the hardware store in Elizabeth. He doesn’t sleep much; this would’ve been his day off, except he needs the boots more.

The corral is dented old metal and a grind of calves grunting and tearing the soil. Under the marshy animal stink, the vague scent of broken earth. Same dark, sweet smell Ben likes when putting up a new house, moist soil cut open and aired. Makes his flesh tingle; he remembers being back in Iowa. Fine glassy dew in the mornings, smell of plowed earth from the farmer's fields. A rebirthing scent, earth waking up, seeds sprouting.

The corral feeds into a chute, a gate, then out into open ranchland, dead grass mingled with the pale green of new spring grass. In the distance, the rest of the herd is a long brown smudge.

Men spread out around the gate, in groups of four. The foreman and the rancher's sons move between, supervising.

The chute is opened, releasing a calf at a time, until each group has one. At first it's a jumble of men's limbs, bodies, voices, scruffy calf bulk and legs, hooves, bawling. Dust sprays into Ben's face. A couple men in his group—Nathan and another—are flankers and wrestle their bull calf to the ground, bind the limbs, hold the animal down. Ben and another man, with the help of a ranch hand, handle vaccinations, branding, and castrating.

The branding is hard enough for Ben. The bull calf bellowing, iron hissing. The smell of burnt hair and flesh sharp and pungent as they move on to castrating. Ben steps aside, offering help to the flankers. The ranch hand and the other guy roll their eyes at him, then let it go.

Even as a child Ben wasn't fond of gore, refusing to dissect a frog for a high school biology class. It was excused because he was a girl, though he knew plenty of girls who seemed to relish it as much as the boys. He's yet to get in a physical fight with another man, though he knows the day is coming when he may have to. It's a day he fears less the longer he's been on hormones and notices how much easier it is for him to haul heavy things around and the new muscle in his own arms, shoulders.

A few weeks ago, he met a woman in the night. Walking home in Elizabeth, the town dark, cool, and secret around him. He barely noticed her until they nearly ran into one another. He smelled alcohol and cigarettes on her before she scuttled quickly out of his way, clear to the other side of Main Street. He realized, with an unsettling jolt, from the taut look in her face and stance of her shoulders, she thought he was a threat.

He hunches against the bull calf's shoulder, near Nathan, who's sat on the calf's flank, holding a front hoof. Ben looks away as the silver of the jack knife burns. The bull calf jerks, young muscles flexing and the flankers brace. Nathan doesn't seem to dwell on it either. Though the muscles in his body tense and ripple from keeping the calf down, he occasionally strokes the animal and lets a few soothing sounds drop from his lips.

The emasculator crimps the cords and the ranch hand applies a quick dressing to the wound. The calf is released. A bit wobbly, but it makes its way down to the herd. Watching him go, Ben thinks he might, in a strange way, share more gut empathy with that calf than the rest of the men here.

The remainder of the morning is more of the same, men sweating and grunting as the sun heads for midday. Lunch break is called and they're suffused in a cloud of dust and animal shit and hair. The sweat's collected beneath Ben's binder, between his shoulder blades and compressed breasts. His skin feels slimy and he wishes he could have a moment alone, to take his t-shirt, wife-beater, and binder off, feel air on his skin. Instead he sweats and the binder itches. He has to remind himself not to scratch. Rubs his watering eyes as the men stumble back up to the ranch house. Nathan bumps him in the shoulder. They walk in silence together. His eyes are red from dust, and he coughs now and again.

"Dirty work," Nathan comments as they come to the top of the hill. Ben murmurs something and forgets not to scratch. Nathan gives him a wry look.

A few of the men have brought lunches. The rancher and his wife come out and hand out sandwiches and lemonade. Both past their prime years, he with gray hair and a bald spot blinking at the sun, she with ashy curls, wearing a long denim skirt and a purple blouse embroidered with wildflowers. Ben likes the blouse and the softness in her expression. Nathan takes a couple sandwiches and lemonade, nodding to her just a little.

“Nice lady.”

“Reminds me of my grandmother,” Ben says faintly. They sit down on a bit of fencing, felled and skewed by weather and time.

“Oh yeah? Your grandmother ranch?” Nathan chews. Ben watches his Adam’s apple, shiny with sweat, bob for a second.

“No. Farmer’s daughter. Back in Iowa. Though it’s been awhile since anyone in my family farmed.” The words keep falling from his mouth and he doesn’t know why.

“Your family from Iowa then?”

“Mostly. My parents are there still. Grandparents. Sisters.”

“What’re you doing out here?” Nathan shields his eyes and looks at Ben.

He usually says he wanted to see mountains and smell fresh air because Iowa is so flat and stinks of hog shit. He left after his father and him had a fight about Ben becoming a man.

“No child of mine is gonna be a freak,” his father said, promising to put a bullet in both their heads out of mercy. He’d made the threat drunk on rage and fear, Ben knew, though, his father’s willfulness had backed it. A kind of stubbornness that grew with the landscape and people inherited from their parents, back to the immigrant Dutch farmers who founded the town. The same stubbornness that made troubles and troubling folk disappear, like the brown man and woman with their baby who attended his parent’s church. People like this were ignored until they left or did not exist. This stubbornness refused to accept the nature of things unless they could be

bent and warped around a person's will, such as the time his father refused to give up his '67 Impala after the accident. Everyone else insisted it was hopeless for his father to even try rebuilding the thing, but he succeeded anyways. It was an attitude that ensured work got done, the fields were harvested, silos filled, kids grew up strong and knowing how to work. It was how people had survived, hacking earth and praying for rain. And if rain didn't come, it would come. By praying hard enough. By wanting it enough, down to their teeth, and bones and genitals, until they were raw and ached with it. And if rain still didn't come, it was because they didn't pray and want hard enough to eat, or have warm clothes for winter.

"I don't talk to my family," Ben says finally. Tries to say it softly, but the words weigh too much and drop like bags of cement.

"Shame."

Ben shrugs.

If he'd stayed, it wouldn't have been a bullet from his father's gun that'd done him in. Confined to that small place, with its bright white-painted fences, a church of hard brick and cold stained glass hunched on nearly every street corner. Forced into a white wedding dress and then having armloads of children. Better the bullet.

Out here the landscape is wide, brazen. The church in town peels paint, and creatures nest in the rafters. There's a level of determination, unconfused with stubbornness, to the people here, and an easy-going kindness even towards outsiders. He can live as a man on his own terms, he feels, even if that freedom scares him sometimes.

"What about you?" he asks Nathan.

"What about me?"

"Where're you from?"

"Chicago. Been all over the place since. Have a sister in Nashville. Her son, my little nephew, thinks I'm a superhero."

“Cool.”

“Yeah, it is,” Nathan smiles and looks at least a decade younger.

More silence. A few of the men have stripped their shirts. They lounge against fence posts and pine trees, sweat beading their chests and backs. Ben’s dick twitches. He looks resolutely at his boots.

This is one of many things about becoming a man. There’s hunger big enough it felt like he could literally eat an entire horse, or five, and still not scrape the bottom of his appetite. Seeing a beautiful woman, or a handsome man, and having the sight seize up all his senses but one point, focused in the groin, scalding as the branding irons they’d been using.

Nathan’s eyes dart towards the shirtless men. Quick, oblique, barely noticeable. Then he looks at Ben; the two of them smile, awkward, but aware of what they share.

They finish eating, go back and work a few more hours through the afternoon. Heat and dust smoke the landscape, until Ben’s sure he’ll be knocking dirt from his hair and clothes for a week. His boots fill with gravel, which dig into his blisters and cracked heels as he saunters back with the others. Hands cut and raw. A few bruises in the arms and one in his ribs from a couple calves who tossed around a little more than the others. Throat and lips shriveled, parched.

But when he gets to the top of the hill, and the rancher comes out and puts that money in his palm, the exhaustion and ache shed themselves from his body, and, for a minute, he feels just about as tall as any other man there.

He pockets the bills and starts walking down the gravel driveway, wondering how he’s getting home. He doesn’t have a vehicle; a friend dropped him out here. Could get a ride with one of the other men, or, stick out his thumb. He looks around for Nathan and sees him leaning against the open door of a truck cab, talking with a few other guys. He makes his way over. The other guys nod and walk off. He squints at Nathan, backlit by sun.

“Need a ride?”

“Yeah.”

“C’mon. Time doesn’t go backwards.”

Ben snorts, gets into shotgun. The cab is hot, cramped. Nathan closes his door, turns the ignition.

“Where you live?” he asks as they pull out.

“Elizabeth.”

“That’s a ways.”

“Yeah.”

“My house is between here and there. Mind if we stop? Could stand to have a beer.”

“Sure.”

Formalities, because if he’d been serious about hauling him home right away, he’d have asked before he got in. Ben’s suddenly aware of how dirty, grimy, and sticky he is. He glances at Nathan, and, telling by the film of dust on his clothes and the dark sweat stains under his arms, he probably feels the same.

And then, through the fog of heat, of pride, of tiredness, the adrenalin of actually climbing into the cab with this man he doesn’t know, Ben wonders how the hell he is going to explain his particular situation, and if Nathan wouldn’t just shoot him on spot. The seats burn through his jeans and it’s hard to sit. Nathan dials up the radio and hums along. Outside, gold and green plains roll past, long and lazy.

“Maybe I should just go home,” Ben says when Nathan pulls off the county highway. The truck bounces along a dirt road, weaving through pines.

“What?”

“Maybe I should just go home.”

“Oh,” Nathan frowns. The years go back on his face.

“We’re almost to my house.”

“Oh.”

“Have a beer and I’ll take you home.” And he says it in such a manner it means they will only have a beer. Ben nods.

His house is a trailer sheltered in a small thicket of pines. Neat, small, but weather-worn. Tiny inside, just enough room for one man to stand in the bathroom. They take turns. Ben’s relieved to wash the dirt and stink off his hands, dust some of it out of his hair and clothes. Out back are a few sun-scorched fold-out chairs, a pile of logs stacked between two pines. Through the gaps of trees, the land unfolds before them, naked except for a few clusters of brush. No houses, no buildings. A wind-chime sings as Nathan brings two cold bottles of beer.

“Nice view,” Ben says. Sits and drinks in one of the chairs.

“Yeah. About the only good thing about this spot,” Nathan settles in the other chair, splayed-legged. “Roof leaks, pipes freeze in winter. Electricity, well. That’s the thing,” he swigs. “When you’re young, there’s so many things you dream of. You never think you’ll end up living in some trailer, ekin’ out a living working shit jobs, sleeping alone, noticing how your joints ache more every year.” He drinks. “Sorry,” he said, after a minute. “Didn’t mean to carry on.” He looks suddenly so sad, and so tired, it makes Ben sad.

“This is nice,” Nathan says after awhile, looking through the trees. He sighs.

Ben licks his lips. He thinks on it for a minute before putting his beer bottle down carefully on the ground.

He’s only had sex with women. They smelled nice, felt nice, under his palms and mouth. They are safer and more forgiving of the kind of man he is. At least, they couldn’t do him physical harm so easily as another man. But being with a woman makes him feel vaguely unsettled. Chafing like an ill-fitted pair of pants. It seems to him men and women grate against one another, and he’s unsure why he’s supposed to appreciate that, or how his parents and grandparents seemed to endure, always

bemoaning their lover's male or female quirks with as much adoration as frustration. He thought maybe he hadn't found the right girl, yet. But the hormones have woke his body to new desires, including a hankering for men. He's not figured out how he'd do it though—sex with another man.

Until he straddles Nathan's lap, nearly toppling them from the straining deck chair.

"What the—" Nathan laughs and puts his beer bottle on the ground, runs a damp palm up Ben's spine.

He grins and kisses him, sloppy, both of their tongues cool and beer-tasting. Ben likes how their stubble grates. Nathan's body underneath him is solid, the belly comfortably soft. He's dusty too, yes, but underneath that, the hot scent of sweat, briny and masculine.

Quiet, save for their breathing, Ben kneels between Nathan's legs. Undoes his fly and zipper and his hands are shaking. Nathan runs his thumb down his cheek, murmuring something like *you don't* which he ignores. He kisses Nathan's dick, thickening through the cotton of his boxers. Nathan puts his hand on the back of Ben's head, at the nape of his neck. There his hair is short, skin sensitive. Nathan strokes circular patterns with his fingers, and Ben shivers. Nathan grunts, groans. A quiver and Ben tries to roll with Nathan's hips, an acrid taste against the back of his throat, Nathan panting, the sweat glazing his throat and cheeks, stray hairs falling across his forehead.

Ben brushes the stray hairs out of the way as he stands. Feels as if the earth should rupture for him, or rain come singing down. He can sprint across the open plains and never come to the edge, either in the land or his energy.

He kisses Nathan on the temple and sits back to his chair.

They drink for a minute, Ben trying to calm the quiver in his body.

"You want me to return the favor?" Nathan says finally.

Ben looks at him. They both laugh.

“No. It’s ok.”

“You—sure? I mean—”

“Yeah. Thanks. Uhm.” There’s a pause before Ben adds: “Think of it as a charitable donation.”

Nathan nearly spits up a mouthful of beer. “You sayin’ I’m ugly or old or something?” He’s grinning.

“Wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.”

“Fuckin’ kids these days.”

They finish their beers, chuckling softly to one another. On the way home, they don’t say anything, just listen to the radio and hum along. Wind whips through the open windows of the cab, smelling warm but fresh to Ben. All around him the country sprawls wild and loose and without end. He feels the money in his pocket and, with a sigh, knows his feet will stop hurting soon.



No Man's Land | Christopher Woods



Where We Belong

Janet Freeman

My name is Aara Van Morrison and I live in Tucson, Arizona. If you're thinking *Van Morrison* is a name only a dead Irish rock star could have, you might be right, considering my real last name is a secret carried to the grave by my mother.

Sharon Papadakis died giving birth to me. Nothing is known about the man I might otherwise call my father. Grammy and Gramps, owners of a Greek diner out on I-10, have raised me since the day I was born. As a small thank-you, I spend my afternoons helping out at the restaurant, chauffeured straight from high school to Zorba's by Gramps, who, despite two knee replacements and a creaky hip, insists on getting out of the car to open the door for me. It used to embarrass me, how he puts his hand on the small of my back as I slide into the passenger seat, but now I don't mind: I decided it's comforting having someone care enough about the direction of your footsteps to want to guide them even just a little.

Today when Gramps lumbers out of the Oldsmobile, he's wearing Bermuda shorts with black socks and slippers. No shirt.

"We've got to run by the house," he says, giving me a little squeeze; he smells like garlic and onions and peppermint Tums. "I forgot the payroll receipts."

"And your shirt."

"What's that?" he asks, cupping his hand to his ear.

“Your shirt! You forgot your shirt!”

“Oh, this?” Grinning, he pinches a fold of fat that sits at his waist, the kind the cheerleaders call “muffin top” when talking about how their moms embarrass them by wearing jeans that sit too low on the waist. These conversations take place in the locker room before gym, when they’re all busy comparing how much food they’ve managed to upchuck between lunch and fifth period. I hate them, and myself, for wanting to be like them—if only because they have mothers they can complain about. “It’s my new look,” adds Gramps. “What do you think?”

“Doesn’t it violate the health code?”

“Health code, schmealth code,” he says, waving his hand dismissively. “Let them eat a piece of your grandmother’s baklava. Then they won’t care whether one old man has hairy tits.”

“Gramps!” I say, and we burst out laughing. Once it dies down, though, I sneak a sideways glance at this old man behind the wheel, wondering if I should worry. This has always been my fear: that he and Grammy will develop that memory disease, or cancer, or have a stroke before I turn twenty-five and meet the man of my dreams, the one I’m going to marry after we’ve been engaged a minimum of three years. How this man looks when sitting on the couch reading the newspaper—does he stick his pinky finger in his ear and sniff the wax, like Gramps?—and how he earns his living are still a work in progress. Sometimes he’s tall and thin and possesses a silky voice he uses to croon chart-topping songs on the radio. Other times he’s blond and stocky, with sun-bloomed freckles sprinkled across his nose from playing halfback for the Los Angeles Galaxy soccer team.

One night he appeared in my dreams looking eerily like my mother, with dark hair the color of a moonless night and sharp, green eyes that lasered straight into my brain. I shot up in bed, groping for the shoebox under my bed, where I keep my small collection of photographs I’ve stolen from Grammy. My favorite is Mom’s sixth grade

school picture, where her bangs can be measured in centimeters and she's smiling that same crooked smile that would follow her into adulthood, only here it's so big her cheeks are puffed-up apples.

Another was taken on prom night, where she sits at a round linen-covered table with her hands in her lap, gazing into the distance. A blizzard of blazers and wilted corsages are heaped around her, but she sits alone. Had she been stood up?

Your mother always had problems with men, said Grammy, when I asked. *They liked her too much, and she couldn't stand one thing about herself. You can imagine how difficult this made things.*

I like boys—that much I already know. I have a huge crush on Ethan Kaufman, who sits in front of me in English. His hair is curly, and short, and he's the only boy at school who wears button-up shirts and khakis. One day last week as his hand flew over a test paper, I had the feeling his skin might taste like marshmallow. Overcome with an urge to follow the contours of his lifeline with my tongue, I ran from the room, splashed water on my face. I hardly recognized the splotchy-faced, swollen-eyed Swamp Thing staring back at me from the mirror over the sink.

Is this what happens when you like someone? I wondered. *You immediately lose sight of who you are?*

Now, as we pull into the drive, I'm first to notice there's a man sitting on the glider on the front porch. He's hunched over his knees, smoking.

"There's a strange man sitting on our porch."

"So there is," agrees Gramps, swinging the Oldsmobile wide so we run up over a patch of Grammy's daffodils.

"What can I do you for?" says Gramps, when we've stepped from the car.

The man squints up at us, scratching his shoulder in a move that seems staged, somehow, rather than the honest result of an itch. "I heard there was a job," he says. "I heard you might be hiring."

“We don’t hire men who wear women’s shoes,” says Gramps, with a curt nod at the man’s flip-flops.

“Ah,” says the stranger, turning from Gramps to wink at me. My heart does a little back flip; whoever this man is, he’s *gorgeous*. “Next you’ll tell me I can’t have long hair or a bathroom break to change my tampon.”

“What was that?” says Gramps, cupping his hand to his ear, an old trick for when he doesn’t feel like talking to someone, which is most of the time.

It makes me tired, he says, all that how do you do and did you see we’re getting a thunderstorm later today? Bah! Just let me back in the kitchen. Vegetables don’t talk. Soup doesn’t talk. Your grandmother—she talks. But I already know most of what she’s going to say, and not a bit of it is gibberish. You want to know what kind of man you should marry, Aara? Marry a man who doesn’t think you speak gibberish. It’s okay if he speaks gibberish—most men do. He just can’t think that you do, too, otherwise you lose the awe factor. And you always need the awe factor, Aara. Trust me.

“I tell you what,” says the man, tossing his cigarette into the yard. “Give me one shift. You hire me, I’ll buy *you* a new pair of shoes.”

“Speak up!” Gramps shouts, hand still to his ear. “My EAR doctor is being sued for medical malpractice!”

“After you pay me handsomely for my services, of course,” adds the stranger as he stands up, stretching his arms over his head. His T-shirt rides up a little, exposing a tiny belly button ringed in the same dark hair that’s on his head.

“Just say *yes*,” I hiss, nudging Gramps in the ribs.

“YES!” says Gramps. “Yes, yes, yes!”

The man saunters down the steps, finger and thumb hooked into the sagging belt loop of his pants. “I’m Adam,” he says, so close I can see he’s missing a back right upper molar. “Nice to meet you.”

“Did we meet?” asks Gramps, confused.

“Nice to meet you, too,” I say, scalp tingling when Adam takes my hand in his. His

green eyes are bright, intense, a somber underpinning to his grin.

“Today’s generation...” mutters Gramps, shuffling up the porch steps. “No manners, no sense of decency...”

“See you around,” says Adam before bouncing off down the sidewalk. I watch him disappear, shivering when a cloud crosses the sun. I wait until he’s a small dot on the horizon and then go inside, wondering if I’ve been hit with the *awe factor*.



Everyone down at the diner adores Adam—even hard-to-please Grammy pinches his cheek, calls him her little *anghele*. By the end of his first week, nearly all the female customers are asking for second helpings of spanakopita or moussaka and lingering over their last cup of coffee. They tip him so generously Grammy divides everyone’s haul between the waiters and waitresses, busboys and dishwasher. Even I get a cut now thanks to Adam, who likes to saunter over to the hostess station in the middle of his shift to gossip about his customers.

“See that one over there?” he’ll say, nodding toward a corner table, to an older woman with long blond hair. “She’s having an affair with the governor. The shit’s about to hit the fan—next week her face’ll be plastered all over every newspaper in town.”

“She *told* you this?” I’m constantly amazed at the amount of personal information Adam’s customers volunteer.

“Uh huh,” he says, snatching two menus as an elderly couple shuffle up the front steps. “People tell me things,” he adds, with a shrug. “I have no idea why—it’s just always been like that.”

Adam might not know why people tell him things, but I do: when they speak gibberish, it’s like he’s hearing the world’s most beautiful symphony.



“Your grandmother’s getting forgetful, Aara,” says Gramps, sliding into the booth across from me. “She sent out a plate of falafel to Mrs. Reilly—you know as well as I do that woman only ever wants a hamburger and side of cantaloupe.”

“I’m sure it was just a mistake,” I say distractedly, folding a linen napkin.

He shakes his head sadly, pops a Tums in his mouth. “I’m beginning to worry, I really am.”

I take a deep breath, raise my chin. “Gramps?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did Mom hate herself so much?”

His tongue slowly rolls the toothpick he’d stuck in his mouth. “Who said your mother hated herself?”

“Grammy.”

“Ah, well.” He nods, slowly. “It’s certainly easier for her to think that. Then she can blame someone else.”

“Blame someone else?”

He looks away, shifts the toothpick with his finger. “Never mind, Aara. Never mind.”



Today at school the Big Deal is that Ethan Kaufman was busted for plagiarizing a paper on the fall of the Roman Empire. Coming into English, his eyes are on the floor, his cheeks red. People whisper.

“Hey, Ethan.” I poke him in the back with my pencil, wanting to make it clear he

still has at least one friend—even if we’ve never spoken. For a minute, it looks like he’s starting to turn in his seat. But then his right hand snakes around his back and his middle finger hoists up like the black flag of a pirate ship.

Screw you, I mouth.

After class I rush to the bathroom, splash water on my face.

Nothing personal, I think, as Swamp Thing rises up in the mirror. But I never really wanted to see you again.



It’s 9:00, a half hour past closing time and Grammy and Gramps are inside reconciling the cash register. When Grammy asks me to take out the compost, I wrestle the plastic bag from the trashcan that sits next to the cutting board, head outside. Earlier in the year she planted a garden out back and started having everyone save raw food scraps. The local paper ran an article on the whole thing, snapping a picture of her posing next to the three black composting bins Gramps brought to the restaurant one by one in the trunk of the Oldsmobile. At the time, he complained about the extra work and was even caught flushing lettuce scraps down the toilet until it jammed and a plumber had to be called in. Grammy was so angry she made him sleep on the couch for a week but after the article hit, business picked up and both of them were happy. They started opening the diner on Sundays, and that’s when they placed the ad in the paper that brought Adam to our front door.

Outside, it’s surprisingly cold as I divide food scraps between the three bins. Turning to leave, I see a flicker of smoke rising up from behind the dumpster. Curious, I cross the parking lot, hands stuffed in my pockets to keep them warm.

At first I see only the fire, a heap of wood enclosed by stacked bricks. Then I make out the figure sitting hunched behind it, the dark hair that blends with the night,

the flickering light dancing on closed eyelids. Adam's lips move slowly, repetitively, but no sound comes. Spooked, I tiptoe to the shadows thrown by the dumpster. Across the lot Gramps sits reading behind the wheel of the Oldsmobile, light spilling from the windows. The restaurant is dark—Grammy must be locking up.

I peek back toward Adam. This time his eyes open, and he smiles.

“Aara.”

I spin on my heel, sprint for the Oldsmobile.



Today when he picks me up from school Gramps doesn't get out of the Oldsmobile. I even give him an extra few seconds to see if he's just moving slow, but the automatic window rolls down and he motions me inside.

“Happy birthday,” he says, kissing my cheek. “Did you have a good day?”

“It was all right,” I say, carefully—my birthday is a tricky one for Grammy and Gramps, since their own daughter died giving birth to me. “Lots of people gave me presents and in gym class they even had a cake.”

Truthfully, not one person even said *happy birthday* to me, but it makes Gramps happy to think I have a lot of friends.

“That's nice,” he says distractedly, patting my leg. “How about a drive? Won't make us too late.”

“Sure. Where to?”

He doesn't answer. We drive out of the city, past the airplane graveyard where old Air Force bombers are left out in an open field to be scavenged for parts. Some of them are ancient, their metal parts so brittle it seems they'd shake to dust at the slightest touch.

Before they opened the diner, Grammy and Gramps lived out here, and on

Sundays Gramps would take me to see the planes, pointing at each model and telling me which war they were used in. It always gave me the creeps, and still does. I close my eyes as we drive past, open them again as he turns onto a rutted dirt road.

“Your mother liked to come out here when she was a kid,” he says. “Chase coyotes and hunt rattlesnakes. She was a real tomboy, your mother. Until she got to junior high, that is. Then it was nothing but boys, boys, boys.”

He sighs, pulls the car to the side of the road. In the distance Mt. Lemmon, snow-peaked and ragged, looms like a made-up mountain in a movie.

“Gramps?”

“Ye-up.”

My voice is small. “What happened to my mother? Why was she in Mexico? I’m old enough to know the truth. Will you tell me?”

He’s quiet for a while, gazing out the window at Mt. Lemmon. Finally he turns to me and says, “You must swear on this bottle of Tums never to tell your grandmother I told you.”

“I swear,” I say, one hand resting on the bottle, the other raised to my jackrabbit heart.

Another few minutes pass before he starts talking. When he does, his voice is low and shaky. Goose bumps sprout on my arms.

“Everything started when your mother changed her name from Sharon to Kaia Rain,” he says, without looking at me. “This was when she was 18 and living in Fort Worth. *That* little beauty we found out when she called to say she’d gotten married the night before...” He pulls a handkerchief from his back pocket, honks his nose. “Your grandmother and I actually never met our son-in-law, though I’m pretty sure he’s the one who turned her on to the habit...”

“What habit?”

“She...was arrested, Aara. About a week after she and Gerry tied the knot. She

was at the bar and had gone into the bathroom, when she came back out there were cops waiting outside the door. She'd been selling dope, using the money to buy cocaine. We found out most of this later, of course...

"Gerry posted her bail, and while she was out convinced her to run away to Mexico. That's when she changed her name to Van Morrison. She settled in Guadalajara, started teaching English. We actually got a card from her right around then, a picture of her surrounded by what had to be a hundred little kids. They were hugging her every which way you can imagine! And your mother! I'd never seen her eyes so bright, so full of...something that was beyond her—maybe for the first time in her life. Your grandmother thinks it was the hormones."

"Hormones?"

"I mean you, Aara," says Gramps, gazing out at the planes, a burial ground of clipped wings and busted engines. "*You* were the one responsible for her happiness."



Ethan isn't in class. The meanness that has been bubbling up in me over the past week spills over, and I quickly scribble a note modeled after a slice of graffiti left behind in one of the bathroom stalls of Zorba's, modifying only the main pronoun: "Ethan Kaufman Blows Monkey Balls." I set the note on his desk and bite my lip when the other kids shuffle past his seat, eyes popping wide before they burst out laughing. Mrs. Mueller comes over, tugs a peacock-feather earring as she investigates. Her lips move the way Adam's had the other night, no sound coming out as she takes in my blasphemy. Her silence, however, quickly ends.

"WHO is RESPONSIBLE for this?"

Twenty-eight fingers, pointed at my burning face.

"Let's go," she snaps, snatching the note and also my arm.

I sit outside Dr. Bell's office, his secretary looking over the top of her computer at me with a hard frown. I turn my gaze to the floor, try not to think what Grammy and Gramps will think about what I've done. When the door swings open I turn with a start, surprised to see Adam.

"Hey, Aara," he whispers. "Let me do the talking, okay?"

He goes over to the secretary, talks in a low voice. Still frowning she nods, then picks up her phone, announcing his arrival.

"Dr. Bell," he says, pumping the principal's hand, a tall, blond woman known around school as A.G., for Albino Gorilla. "So pleased to meet you. I'm Adam Papadakis, Aara's uncle. Her grandparents are out of town and asked that I come in and handle this, er, *situation*."

Dr. Bell hesitates, looking from Adam to me, then back to Adam. Finally, a broad smile spreads across her face.

"Yes, please, have a seat," she says, gesturing to the two chairs opposite her desk. "I'm happy you could make it..."



"I told your grandparents I had to run out for some onions," says Adam, steering the Oldsmobile one-fingered out of the parking lot. We drift to a stop before turning onto Appledale, and I turn to face him.

"They...don't know I got in trouble?"

He shakes his head, cups his hands around an unlit cigarette. "They know we were running low on onions."

"Man, I really owe you."

He lights the cigarette, pats my knee. "You don't owe me anything," he says.

On the highway he picks up speed, the Oldsmobile rattling as we blast past the exit

for Zorba's. "I forgot something at my place," he says. "Mind if we take a detour?"

"Won't they wonder what's taking you so long to get a bag of onions?"

He grins. "The first two stores were sold out."

The fact that he's thought of everything—and that we're allegedly going back to his place—should have me worried, but I only feel resigned. So what if Adam is really a serial killer? There are worse things that can happen to a girl, like never knowing who your father is or forgetting the one time you actually got to meet your mother. Did she laugh? Blow on the back of my neck with her dying breath?

I think back to the rest of the story Gramps told me on my birthday, how Mom lived with a host family who prayed nightly for her and the baby's safety. How she ate prunes by the dozen, which is probably why I love them so much. He also told me about the night he received a distraught call, saying she'd gotten into an argument with her host family. She begged him to come get her.

He drove fifteen hours straight, wondering what it would be like to see his only daughter after so many years of her being gone. Was she remorseful? Happy to see him?

"None of the above," said Gramps. "Underneath that Kaia Rain bullshit, Sharon was still Sharon, stubborn to the end. Not one word of apology, but I didn't care. I figured there was plenty of time for that."

There was still a warrant for her arrest, and coming across the border, she agreed to hide in the trunk until El Paso, when he stopped on the shoulder to let her out.

Right away he knew something was wrong: Sharon was passed out, her face blue. A newborn infant, its face equally blue, lay limply on her chest. Horrified, Gramps lifted them both from the trunk and performed CPR, first on the baby, then his daughter. But it was too late: at the hospital she was pronounced dead—a heart attack caused by cocaine. The tag looped around her big toe at the morgue read *Emily Dickinson Gomez*.

“So you see,” Gramps had finished, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Sharon’s trouble was that she had no idea where she belonged. And that’s *our* fault, Aara. She belonged—” he gestured to the desert, the sky, Mt. Lemmon in the distance, “right *here*. Who else can you blame for the fact she didn’t know that but your grandmother and me?”



Adam pulls up to an old adobe chapel. It’s ancient, with a crumbling roof and slanted windows, one of those churches abandoned by the Spanish after they realized no one wanted what they were selling.

“Home sweet home,” he says, cutting the engine.

“The church?”

“It’s vacant. No one here but me and the rats.”

He flicks his cigarette on a choya cactus as we head toward the unhinged door. “We’ve come to the right place, then.”

Inside, it’s dark. A clamminess creeps over my skin. To my immediate right is a large stained glass window, carved to the likeness of the Virgin Mary cradling her only child. The stone floor is awash in vibrant shades of orange, crimson, turquoise. I inch forward between color, feeling as delicate and fragile as a baby sparrow.

“You’re just like me,” says Adam, with a chuckle. “Afraid you’ll break your mother’s back?”

“I don’t have a mother,” I whisper, mesmerized by the serene look on Mary’s face, the chubby red cheeks of her baby boy. I want to pick up a rock and pitch it through her forehead, but instead turn to where it sounds Adam might be, in back. With effort I can make out the outline of his shoulders, his head. He bends over a pallet of blankets and pillows and it takes me a moment to comprehend there’s a person lying

on the floor, a thin, ragged shape, elbows and knees jutting sideways from under a shabby quilt.

“I brought you some soup,” says Adam, pulling out a plastic tub from the inside of his coat. “Lemon and rice. It’s good. And some bread, the pita you like so much.”

He pats one of the knees sticking out, the skin as translucent as the onions we’re supposed to bring back to Zorba’s.

“At least a sip?” He looks over his shoulder at me, smiles. But his eyes are sad—and more than that, scared. “Aara, meet Ernesto. Ernesto, Aara.”

“Hi,” I say, my voice cracking.

Ernesto raises his head, and I see that he’s completely bald. His skin is pasty white, blue veins throbbing at his temple. “Aara,” he says, licking his cracked lips. “What a lovely name.”

“Aara and I can’t stay, hon. The folks who own the restaurant are her grandparents, and are expecting us back. Make sure and eat the soup while it’s still warm, okay? I’m not sure I can get anything else tonight—the two Gs might have an eye on me, you know what I mean?”

Ernesto smiles. “The two Gs,” he says. “Usually you call them Grammy and Gramps.”

Adam’s neck and cheeks flush deep scarlet. “There you go,” he says affectionately, “spilling all my secrets.”

He kisses Ernesto on the cheek, smooths the blankets, tucks them under his chin. “Love you,” he says, straightening up with his hands in his pockets.

“Love you too,” says Ernesto.

The one time I look back over my shoulder, Ernesto’s head hovers above the pillow as he watches us leave, his luminous eyes floating in their darkened sockets. I lift my hand, wave, but his eyes have closed again, a patch of crimson light slicing his torso in half. I say a silent prayer, then stumble into brightness, to Adam already in the

car, lighting a fresh cigarette with trembling hands.

“Where to?” he asks, when I slide in. “We could always make a run for the border.”

“No, thanks.” I, too, sound shaky. “I just want to see my grandparents.”

He shrugs, flicks the match out the window. “One set of grandparents, coming up,” he says, starting the car.



“Aara! Where have you been?” asks Gramps, rushing forward. His hands cup my chin, greasy and cold at the same time. “Your grandmother and I have been worried sick!”

“Getting onions,” I say, shrugging free so I can press my cheek to his chest. He smells the way I imagine Ethan Kaufman might, in a few decades—like cinnamon and almonds, a pinch of mint. “Didn’t Adam tell you?”

“Aara.”

His tone is serious. I pull back, ashamed. I’ve forgotten this is a man who’s experienced what it’s like to lose someone, bit by precious bit. Someone who, all these years later, still blames himself for a death that wasn’t his fault.

That’s when it hits me: in bringing me to the church, Adam had been asking me to witness something larger than his relationship with Ernesto; if I told the truth of what I’d seen, he’d get fired. But his lie would live on, in another restaurant, another dilapidated church—maybe even another town. Keeping our adventure to myself meant *I* was also now part of the lie. But maybe, this one time, that was okay.

“Seriously, Gramps,” I say, beaming my most convincing smile. “We had to go to *three* stores before we could find any of those red onions you use for the house salad.”

He squints at me, hard. Skirting by with an empty tray in his hands, Adam keeps

his eyes dead ahead.

“All right,” says Gramps, finally. “I believe you. Now get over to the hostess station, will you? Mrs. Reilly will be coming in for her hamburger any minute and you know how she doesn’t like to wait...”



Later that night I lie awake, staring at the lemons outside my bedroom window. Every once in a while a breeze lifts the branches and the fruit gently raps the glass, reminding me of a time in the days before language, when all that penetrated the membrane of my mother’s epidermis were incantations and protective prayers meant to serve as a buffer to the misery of the one who carried me.

I pull the comforter up to my chin.

Tonight I will dream of a red stone floor in a small adobe church. A dying man, nourished by love. And I will dream of my mother, her ear bent to the triumph of her newborn’s beating heart.



shooting gallery

Alysia Angel

i found a
dead baby bird
once
pink puckered
shiny
flesh
and
half feathered
broken body
limp in my
makeshift cradle
hands
and the starlings
laughed down
from the big
oak
where i thought
fairies lived
i sat alone
cross legged
with tears plopping
on the wet ground
until papaw
found me
and
pulled me in his lap
for awhile he said nothing

me with the baby bird
and him with
everything
then
he squinted
at the sky
and said
gravely
starlings
can't be trusted
they're
murderers
cunning
ruthless
(glorious)
he gestured at
his precious plum
trees
letting
his meaty
hand
fall back
on my shoulder
too heavy
for five
and
(softly)
some of god's creatures
are almost too cruel
to love
but we must find a way
to love them that much more
i've been watching
murmuration
videos
when they rise up
into their trusted
black knots
against screaming

blue
skies
i wonder if the
starlings
ever wish
for a
different
profession
and i know
i must
love them
that much more



Nico Mara-McKay on Sue Goyette's *outskirts*

Brick Books, 2011, \$19.00, 111 p, 978-1-92682-968-5

In *outskirts*, Goyette's third book of poetry, the poems are presented in italics, as if whispered in confidence. The first poems relate the changes in her relationship with her children, who we first met in *True Names*. Her son is now a teenager, and her daughter is leaving for university. With this comes a change in focus, from her earlier poems rooted in the mysteries and charms of domestic life, to a widening area of concern.

In "Disrupted" Goyette confronts an imperfect world; in this case, embodied by the unruly children of our neighbors. "The world sometimes is a big wet dog shaking itself," she writes. What we want: "Life but not with a mind of its own." We want something we can control. Yet, if the outside world must intrude, why not well dressed, and with cakes?

Several long poems play with the language of official reports. In "Aquifers" the natural resource of music is under consideration, and "Erosion" tackles relationship degradation in all its forms. The assessments are often humorous and biting:

In Atlantic Canada, rates of retreat can reach out for the police
and voices may ravel up to 10 metres per year, but generally
less than one metre per year if drinking is done in moderation.

In the same language, "Clear-Cut" looks at conversation degradation, where Goyette declares "...We don't listen to hear;/ we look at the person to see what they're selling..."

Where *The True Names of Birds* contained intimate portraits of domestic life, *outskirts* feels more tangential. Many of the poems come at you from the side, metaphors clicking into place, but not always resolving into a coherent picture, or not one that I could easily apprehend. They skirted by—felt, but unseen.

While there were some poems I had difficulty getting inside, on the whole *outskirts* is a wonderfully strong collection. Goyette's masterful use of vibrant metaphor spun through long, flowing verse carries the reader through, stirring up a wealth of images.



Stephanie Callas on Nick Cave's *The Death of Bunny Munro*

Canongate (UK)/Faber & Faber (US), 2009, \$15.00, 288p, 978-0-86547-940-1

It is impossible to name a Nick Cave composition that could be considered middle-of-the-road. This is not to suggest that all of his work depicts horse carcasses being picked apart by crows, or sex-starved devils trying to break into unsuspecting women's bedrooms; however, a typical Nick Cave album does not offer an easy listening experience. Unlike the average chart-topper, Cave dares to proclaim that love is agony, death is inevitable, and life is a struggle. Despite the lack of light-hearted fanfare, it would be incorrect to resolutely label Cave's oeuvre as doom-laden. More appropriately, it is honest. Cave's second novel, *The Death of Bunny Munro*, is no exception. The novel, though gruesome, is also chock-full of Cave's trademark pathos that leaves the reader all at once terrified and heartbroken.

The novel tells the story of Bunny Munro, a nymphomaniacal, sociopathic beauty product salesman who spends every waking minute guzzling booze and indulging in prurient fantasies that put Henry Miller to shame. When we first meet Bunny, he is sprawled on a hotel bed pouring miniature bottles of brandy down his throat and yelling into the telephone to his hysterical wife, Libby, that he is away on business and will be back the next day. The following morning, after successfully bedding a waitress from the hotel restaurant, he returns home to discover that Libby has hanged herself in their bedroom. After a post-funeral evening of booze, drugs, and sex, Bunny decides to pack up the car and hit the road with his nine-year-old son, Bunny Jr. As the title suggests, the expedition does not end well.

With his zebra-print slacks and pomaded coiffure, Bunny is too pathetic to be an anti-hero and too stupid to be a villain; instead, he is somewhere between hilarious and atrocious. Similar to the way that Humbert Humbert lives in a world populated by pre-adolescent "nymphets" in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Bunny operates in his own sexualized world where every woman he sees is desperate to take him to bed. Early on, it appears that Bunny really is a success with the ladies, having so easily seduced his waitress at the beginning of the novel. As we get to know Bunny, it is plain to see that he is a delusional predator. During one scene, Bunny is kicked out of a McDonald's for attempting to stage a tryst with the teenage girl behind the cash

register. Later on, Bunny sees the same waitress he seduced in the hotel restaurant the day his wife killed herself. When the waitress recognizes Bunny, she runs screaming down the street. Bunny Jr. asks his father why the woman ran away, and Bunny replies that she must have “emotional problems”; the exact same thing he used to say about his departed wife.

The only character who has any affection for Bunny whatsoever is Bunny Jr. He sees his father as a charming, lovable superhero possessing infinite knowledge and wisdom. Even though Bunny Jr. can tell that something is wrong when his father takes him on the road, he never questions his father’s demands, nor does he ever lose faith. Bunny Jr.’s unshakable love for his father compels the reader to go against his better judgment and root for Bunny to rise above his vile ways. When Bunny and his son take a side-trip to visit Bunny’s father who is dying of lung cancer, the reader sees for a brief moment that Bunny, too, was raised by a brute of a man. Though rife with debauchery and wickedness, *The Death of Bunny Munro* is, at its center, a tragic story about a doomed relationship between two people who never had a chance.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Alysia Angel is a southern-bred high femme. She has been published in *Salacious Magazine*, *Bay Woof Magazine*, *Curve Magazine*, and is a 2011 Lambda Literary Fellow. Alysia is definitely the kind of girl you bring a pile of ribs and a fresh fruit pie to in bed after an orgasm.

Glen Armstrong's recent work has appeared in *Conduit*, *Juked*, and *Cloudbank*. He holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and teaches writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. He also edits a poetry journal called *Cruel Garters*.

Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 15-year-old internationally award-winning photographer and artist who has won first place with *National Geographic*, The World Photography Organisation, Nature's Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland Trust, and Postal Heritage. Her photography has been published in the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, BBC News website and on the cover of books and magazines in the United States and Canada. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in London, Paris, Indonesia, Los Angeles, Florida, Washington, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Germany, Japan, Australia, and in the Environmental Photographer of the Year Exhibition (2011) amongst many over locations. She was also the only person from the UK to have her work displayed in the *National Geographic*- and Airbus-run "See The Bigger Picture" global exhibition tour with the United Nations International Year of Biodiversity 2010.

Christine Brandel is a British-American writer whose work has appeared in journals in the UK, US and online. She teaches writing at a community college.

Stephanie Callas, 25, lives in Los Angeles, California. An avid music lover and film buff, Stephanie graduated in 2009 from the University of California Santa Cruz with a B.A. in English Literature. Her first published review was an essay on the film "Last Tango in Paris" which appeared in *Cinema Retro* magazine in September 2011. When she isn't writing essays on her favorite works of art, she is working on her memoir about her experience as a college DJ. She hopes that Nick Cave will read this issue of *Cactus Heart* and be bowled over by her intellect. Read her blog: <http://dorkydorkydorky.wordpress.com>

Flower Conroy's poetry has appeared in *Serving House Journal*, *BlazeVox*, *Saw Palm*, *American Literary Review*, *Psychic Meatloaf*, *The LABLETTER*, *Interrobang?!*, *Menacing Hedge*, and other journals. She is currently an MFA student at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her chapbook *Escape to Nowhere* was published by Rain Mountain Press.

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William Henderson is a Boston-based writer who blogs about love (hendersonhouseofcards.com), tweets (@Avesdad), rarely reads directions, and is raising two children, Avery and Aurora. Henderson has been published in *Thought Catalog*, *The Rumpus*, and *Specter Literary Magazine*, among others. His first chapbook, *Edgeways*, was released by NAP Literary Magazine in 2011, and he will be included in the forthcoming *Best Gay Writing 2012*. "The First Three Weeks" is an excerpt from his in-progress memoir, *House of Cards*.

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Anthony Lawrence has published twelve books of poems and a novel, *In the Half Light* (Picador, 2000). His most recent collection of poems, *The Welfare of My Enemy*, is a verse novella, in half-rhymed couplets, about the phenomenon of Australia's Missing Persons. He teaches Creative Writing at Griffith University, on the Gold Coast, Queensland.

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Katrina Pallop is a Brooklyn based photographer, actress, and writer. Her photos have been featured in *2River View*, *Calyx Journal*, and *West 10th*, among others. She is currently wondering how she might bring vaudeville back.

Sobriquet for a *gauche* fictionist, **Carol Piva**, Brazilian, teacher and editor, writes her *fictionisms* to become herself invisible. As a researcher, her writing has appeared in some history books and magazines in Brazil. As a fictionist, in *Pagina Cultural*, *Revista Macondo*, *Red Fez*, among others. She's also one of the editors-in-chief of the Journal of Literature and Art, *O Equador das Coisas*. Once creative writing is a work in progress, meaning it is something as arduous as delicate as the musician and the painter of the words can do, writing literature feels like you are coping with language (largest) implausibility, juggling it all the time, for the (most) beautiful is to listen to, confabulate with and give the words a foundation, not a (re)design. You are very welcome to visit her blog www.theartbrazil.blogspot.com.

Jules A Riley is an Anglo-Belgian writer living in the town of Musselburgh, East Lothian, Scotland. He has been published in various small British literary publications such as *Carillon*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Quantum Leap*, *Poetic Licence & Iota*, and the USA online magazine *pif*.

Holly Ringland is an Australian living in the UK where she recently completed a MA in Creative Writing from the University of Manchester. When she's not at her salvaged desk writing her first novel, Holly procrastinates by searching for documentaries on birds, or hoarders. Larry, the stuffed peacock she rescued from a car-boot sale, keeps watch over her shoulder.

Meegan Schreiber was recently chewed up and spit out by the non-profit industrial complex, and it's a good thing. Now she's finding her sea legs on the open water of creative possibility...

Jenna Whittaker holds a Master's Degree in English Literature. She is an amateur photographer who savors every opportunity to explore her surroundings from behind the lens. For her, this is a place of stillness, focus, and continual discovery. She often finds herself particularly intrigued by the play of textures and shapes in the natural world. Apart from photography, she enjoys horseback riding, writing poetry, and more generally savoring the written word in its many forms.

Theresa Williams has poems and fiction in *Chattahoochee Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Gargoyle*, *The Sun*, and many other magazines. Her novel, *The Secret of Hurricanes* was a finalist for the Paterson Fiction Prize. She's very active in the mail art community and her epistolary poems have all been sent to individual recipients via snail mail.

Christopher Woods is a writer, teacher, and photographer who lives in Texas. He has published a prose collection, *Under A Riverbed Sky*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *Heart Speak*. His photo essays have appeared in *Deep South*, *Public Republic*, *Glasgow Review*, and *Narrative Magazine*.



Montreal Spring | Montreal, 2009 | Meegan Schreiber