

# Cactus Heart

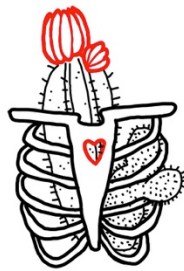
A painting of a forest scene. Tall, slender trees with green foliage frame a central path. In the lower center, two small figures are visible: one is a person in a dark suit, and the other is a figure in a brown, bear-like costume. They are standing on a patch of ground illuminated by a bright, yellowish light. The overall style is painterly and somewhat somber.

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The Speculative Issue

# Cactus Heart

## *e-Issue #11*

The Speculative Issue  
Guest Editor: Kate Sheeran Swed



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# Guest Editor's Note

There's wildness in the pages ahead.

A tree swallows a woman whole. A bird-watching expedition takes an unexpected turn. A wolf cub learns what makes him different from his siblings. One after another, the characters in many of these stories discover that the line between human and nature is blurrier than they'd once thought.

When we asked for speculative-themed work, I expected to receive a wide variety. Speculative, after all, stretches from spaceships to fairy tales; swords, sorcery, and ghostly visitors only scratch the surface. When the boundaries overlap, it's even better.

I like to think we called a little bit of magic into e-Issue 11. I didn't talk with Thea, Marin, or Killian about the fiction I was choosing, even when themes began to emerge—they selected the poetry, nonfiction, and art as usual. When I went to put everything in order, I realized how beautifully the pieces dovetail. They speak to one another, and it's quite a conversation.

—Kate Sheeran Swed, Guest Editor

# Editor's Note

I met Kate my first day of grad school, in PDX airport. We'd both flown in from the East Coast, and I think we were both shy and tired, and we made polite conversation until we boarded the bus that would take us to Pacific University.

By luck or chance or fate, we were suite-mates that first residency. And then by friendship built via email over that first semester, we were roommates every residency that followed.

What I've discovered about Kate over the almost three years I've known her is that she is not only a talented writer, she is a rare combination of hard-working, smart, funny, loyal, and wise. Not to mention she unabashedly loves a good story.

And so when I asked Kate to guest edit our Speculative Issue, I knew the issue would be a doozy. Her fiction choices are brave and weird and wild, taking us to the most imaginative of worlds. Her orchestration of e-Issue #11 will keep you flipping the pages—the artwork and essay and poems sing alongside the stories.

Fasten your safety belts, and get ready for one helluva ride.

—Sara

Trevor Tingle

## “Do We Really Need the Moon”

—Headline from the BBC

The last time we saw the  
moon  
the tide went rushing out.

Aquatic vegetation  
fell limp like the broken backs  
of lost laborers revealed,  
though the ocean returned  
and grew calm after that  
and all the locks along  
the Irish sea became  
false practicalities.

And thousands of baby  
sea turtles paddled into  
the streets of Charleston,  
died and dried so that  
children, upon finding  
them in the morning,  
collected and traded them,  
vying for a favored  
color, size, or shape.

And the fishermen from  
Gloucester to Dar es Salaam

stoked fear on shore with stories  
of the departed wandering  
darkened waters with no  
direction home, though  
these same men never  
neglected to return  
    to the deep where their catch  
    remained undiminished.

And all across the globe  
babies continued to be  
born and women continued  
to bleed and poets found  
new objects to lay at  
melancholy's feet.  
And the wolves and the dogs  
and the coyotes would howl  
at anything as it  
turns out. Our city lights  
never burned brighter and soon  
the moon became another forgotten guest  
    slipping out the door of humanity's party.



Debra McKellan

## Origin

I still have trouble walking. This constant step step step jars my brain, and I am dizzy. The river is red with the others' blood. I hate them more than the gods who did this. We told them this would happen.

But what did we know?

Where are you? Do you remember that day as I do? We wheeled through the meadows, one of my hands and one of your hands, then my other hand and your other hand. The grass was the sky then, until one of my feet and one of your feet kicked it, then the other ones. Blue sky overhead again. Where were we going?

The mountain. The others were probably conspiring already, but what we did felt good, so we did it often. That day, we wheeled to that mountain which rose up through the clouds so we never saw its peak. We sat beneath the pomegranate trees at its base and touched. You told me all you had seen on your side as you reached back and ran your fingers up my thighs and down

between. I leaned my head back against yours, and you guided my hand to that part of you I see on the others who are like you but are two of the same in one. That part of them swung when they wheeled around, and you laughed when I asked once if that was what yours did, too. It stiffened at my touch, and your fingers slipped into me in appreciation. I never could finish telling you what I saw on my side. Your touch warmed my body so that I couldn't breathe without moaning. That part of you turned to stone as I touched it, but you, as always, pulled my hand away when your breath moved the quickest. You never wanted me to feel what happened next. Your arm shook as you panted, and your fingers still inside me pumped faster and faster, tightening and burning me. We always breathed the same then, wild and fast until when we breathed out we were crying out with no words, just low, guttural tones. The world spun differently after as we wheeled to the river. The air soothed that part of me, always open like those who looked like me but are two in the same. I still felt you there.

The river was still clear then. We sat on the large rock that we used to cross the river. I cupped my hands to that part of me and washed it. You had a lot more to wash. The way our bodies reacted to our touches was different. Did it feel different, too?

When we finished bathing, we met with the others. We were supposed to prepare for worship at the temple, but they said they wouldn't. He said the gods were inferior to us, that they only had two hands and two feet, and no one to carry with them always. She asked what could the gods do to us, since we were two in one and obviously stronger than those (who made us? Who formed the earth around us?) who were only one. You cried that they spoke madness, and I begged them to silence themselves unless the gods heard them. He told us to shut our mouths and wheeled to the statue. They knocked it over! It shattered into large, white clumps and rolled past our feet. They all laughed and declared that we were better than the gods, that we need only worship ourselves. I felt your heart race in my back as mine raced in yours. They spoke heresy and spoke it freely, in the temple!

The gods' wrath was quick. We were the first to leave, and as we did, clouds of coal rolled across the sky. The others wheeled out around us and looked up to wait for the rain. The clouds turned from black to red, bubbled as though they boiled in the sky.

And then fire shot down on us all. The flames pricked my face and burned my eyes. We wheeled faster than we ever had before, but we all bumped into each other, screaming and crying from the pain. His and Her's hair flickered yellow with flame, and

the smell singed my nostrils. I choked and hacked, and you begged for the gods to have mercy on us all.

Thunder cracked, and sharp, hot fire ran down our necks. Your hands flailed and smacked our shoulders. The flame seared and sliced into our back, and my scream scraped my throat. Were you screaming? I couldn't hear. My sight was painted red, and my mouth filled with sour water from the depths of me. I thought we had fallen, but I felt lighter against the grass, as though half of me had been torn away. Tiny hands with nails like blades ripped my skin and pulled it tight. I writhed, the earth hot and burning as everything else was. The hands twisted my skin and wrenched at my belly, and I slept for a long time.

When I awoke, SheandShe...no, it was just She. She was no longer on her back, and She crawled across the black ground with her two arms and two legs, and I reached behind me to feel you. You were gone. My skin was tight and aflame, but I sat up. My stomach hurt, and there was this ugly, twisted knot tucked inside a closed hole where my skin had once been smooth. I stood and fell. Him tried the same thing and called for His with a raspy, dry voice. Her was screaming for He, and her hair was red with blood. My body shook and heaved. His tried to wheel, but he fell on his head and was asleep again. Were we like the gods now? Did we have to walk?

I stood and fell again and again until my feet adjusted to being without you. I stepped forward once, and the world moved without me. I closed my eyes and pulled my other foot forward. The blood on my lids made it hard to open my eyes again, but when I did, there you were. You had blood on your face. Water in your eyes cut through it down your cheeks. My chest was tight as I gasped for air. You had a knot in your belly, too. Why did we have these now? A piece of flame ignited my veins when I touched mine. The water in my eyes stung but cleared away the blood. Your hand was hot on my cheek, and I wanted to be one with you again. I pulled your face to mine. I pressed my lips to yours over and over, and we wrapped our arms around each other. We sobbed and pressed our lips and bodies together despite the pain, despite our bleeding skin.

But the breath of the gods ripped us apart. I reached for you, and you reached for me, but they blew hard on us until we were scattered away to wherever, as long as we weren't together.

I need to find you. My legs are so tired of this walking. I want to sit with you and touch as we used to, your back to my back. Find me so you can tell me all you've seen. I need you. I am incomplete. We must be made whole again. Find me.



Diana Smith Bolton

## Lilith

We were born  
from vacuum, breath, and wish.  
At first light, I gave him glittering sons  
and luminous daughters, each pulling  
their being, like tubers, from the dirt  
of the universe.

What did she give?  
A lump of raw meat, a bawling voice  
that shreds air, an empty stomach.  
How much more alive, with fruit  
on the tongue and the eyes' shutters  
clattering off, and there, the world,  
bare and blinding.

J.G. McClure

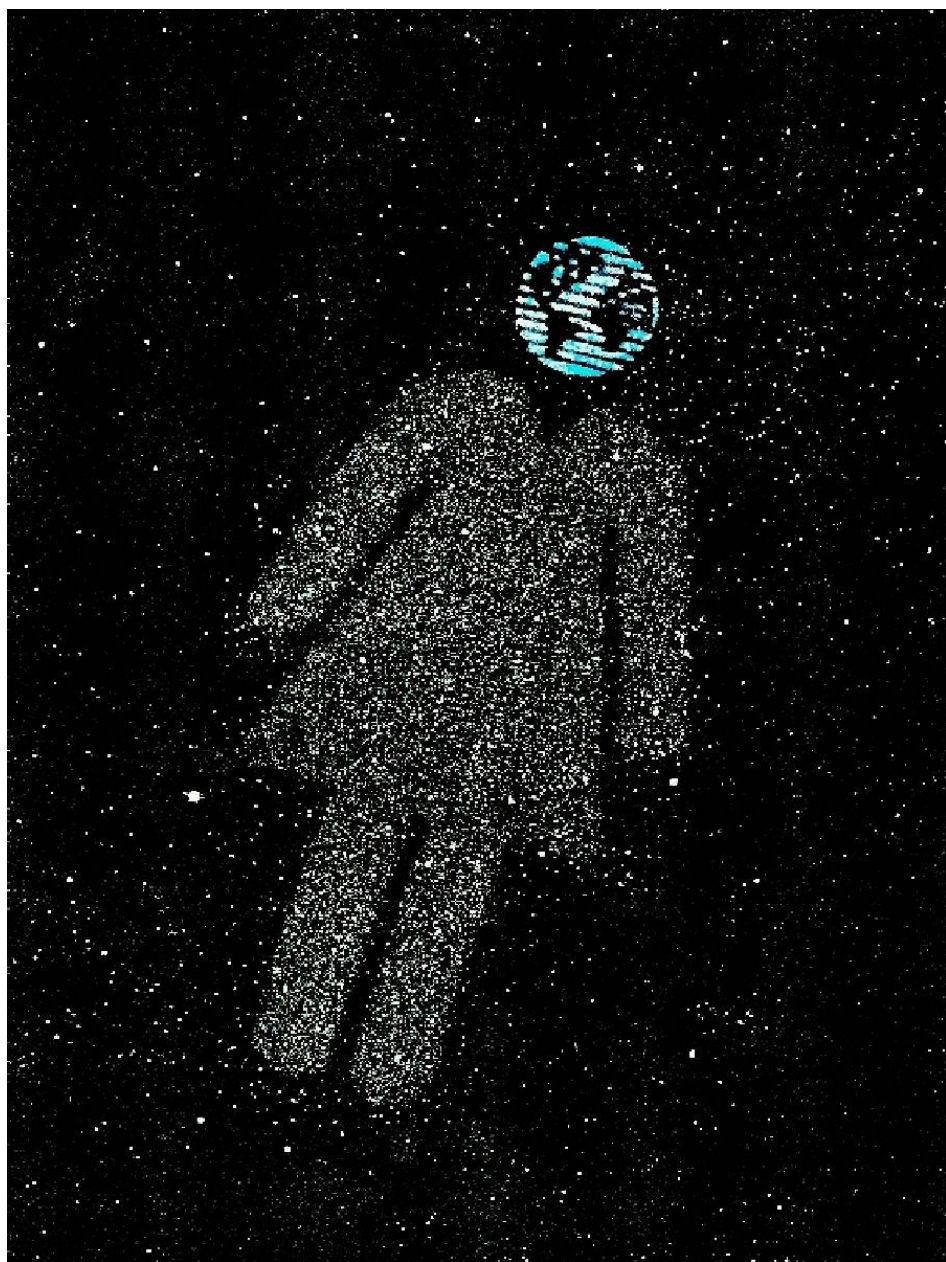
## The Astronaut

It turns out there's nothing to think of but yourself.  
There are stars, yes, and Earth,  
hanging there like a big wet baseball.  
It's nice at first. Then it's routine, then it's new  
versions of the old problems. Insomnia,  
for instance. You spend a life  
sticking your head on a pillow, but now the pillow  
just floats away. So you tape it to your face.  
Every night you tape the pillow to the side of your face  
and you and the pillow float around together,  
bumping gently into walls. You always feel  
as if you're falling, so it's dreams of not-falling  
that startle you from sleep.

Outside the ship you're inside the suit—  
a pressurized gray-white skin  
that holds your bones and meat together.  
Your toes are cold and you're bursting to touch someone,  
to feel anything beyond your clumsy, padded body  
(just like at home). But outside of you  
is cold and dark, radiation  
and vacuum and if you could touch it  
you'd burst in earnest, the breath  
in your lungs exploding outward  
in a rush that might sound—

if there were such a thing as sound,  
or anyone to hear it—like a clear  
clear whistle, or a call.

I'm not sure if this answers your question. But I'm glad  
you want to be an astronaut  
like me when you grow up.  
There's still a lot out there we haven't found.



She's Flying | Fabio Sassi



Pills from Outer Space | Fabio Sassi



Kelly Zientek

## The Lost Princess

Three thousand years after I closed my eyes for the last time, Nifé-en-Ankh stands beside my corpse and whispers my name, and thus, breathes life back into my nothingness.

At his words, the walls of Hades collapse around me, and my spirit gushes upwards, engulfed in my final memories of my mother and sisters wailing and Nifé-en-Ankh watching with lonely eyes from behind a pillar. The pain that brought me here reverses itself and sears my waking mind, leaving me gasping.

I am aware first of sound. I hear muffled murmurs of strangers, but Nifé is not among the sounds. I am aware next of smell. I smell salts and perfumes and a faint acrid odor of embalming spices, but Nifé is not among the smells. Finally, sight returns to me, and the first thing I see is Nifé. But this is not the bare-chested laborer who wooed me beside the rushes of the Nile. A fine, dark cloth tames the muscles of his chest and arms and legs, and his hair waves away from his face in a glistening arch. And his eyes—in the depths of his eyes, his Ka

shines outward, thrilling and terrifying in its intensity, welcoming me back to life, to our love.

He gazes back in wonder, I presume at what his words have accomplished, as well as my beauty, a trait I had allowed him to comment freely on in our nights alone together. To spend another moment in his presence yet not in his embrace is the cruelest torture. I reach for him, but something is wrong. My arms do not move. Am I bound? I feel encased, immobile, able to transcend Hades, but unable to annihilate what little ground remains between us. Why does he not reach for me?

Then I notice another man standing beside Nifé. He is dressed in the same dark clothing, with a matching golden clip affixed to his left breast. The man turns to Nifé smiling broadly, and they each grip one hand of the other.

“Félicitations,” the man says, shaking Nifé’s hand. His words make a twittering sound, unlike the language I remember, but Nifé seems to understand, meeting the man’s eyes and grinning. The man claps Nifé on the shoulder as he walks away, leaving my love standing in front of me, beaming at me, and entirely unaware of what he has done.

“Ahmed!” A disembodied voice calls a word that sounds more similar to our own.

Nifé jerks his face toward the voice. He nods his head and turns from me.

“Nifé!” I shriek, a coil of panic appearing in the pit of my stomach. “Don’t leave me!” The last time we spoke, I had used these same words in harsh whispers behind a pillar on the day before I was to wed another, one deemed worthy of the hand of a pharaoh’s daughter. Nifé does not hear me and begins to step away. The panic uncoils and thrusts my being forward as I cry out with the effort. Nifé pauses and turns back to me, leans closer and studies me without recognition, then crinkles his brows and walks away, leaving me gasping in despair.

At his departure, my sight falls to a small cloud of condensation that has formed on a glass in front of me, a closed window perhaps. It clears, and as I catch a glimpse of my reflection, tingles of terror prickle me. I do not see a lovely young woman freshly awakened from the dead. I see a decayed body, hairless, eyeless, skin shrunken and dried across bone. The odor of embalming spices wafts back into my memory, and I understand. I didn’t reincarnate after all. My Ka simply awoke. Inside my mummy.

A scream fills me, but I am the only one who hears it, and the condensation does not reappear. I thrash against the confines of my corpse and shout again. The smell of my own decay sickens

me. My glass tomb is more stifling than death. I must escape. I heave all my energy toward the glass. My effort yields not even a quiver in the crusty bones.

Pausing, I lift my gaze, and an entire room opens before me. A room filled with people and glass boxes on pedestals. A market, it seems, containing combs and earthenware, jewelry. The people, albinos mainly, do not touch the items in the boxes. An elder stoops and inclines his spotted head toward a necklace on my right. I remember the necklace my father gave me when I was twelve, when I became a woman and my body was no longer my own, and I can still feel the weight of the gold's latticework, cold against my budding chest. The elder shuffles away, and at his departure, a glint of light captures my attention. A fine piece of gold wire wraps around the cord at the clasp. A memory surfaces—the night my mother discovered me stealing away to see Nifé. I recall how she caught hold of me, her hands reaching for me and grasping the necklace as we exchanged fierce words, until finally I tore away from her and the necklace. She had it repaired so that I could wear it on my wedding day.

I look again at each item, this time with recognition. They are mine. I burn with humiliation at this naked display of my belongings. And myself! I've been on display before, by my father's command, but always to showcase my nubile radiance to

a political ally or an important relative, never like this, never in such shameful grotesquery. My eyes leap from case to case across the length of the room, shame turning to anger as I gather the full extent of this pillaging of my tomb. I will have these people, whoever they are, arrested and slaughtered for their atrocities! My gaze stops on a distant wall adorned by strange symbols. My eyes trace their unfamiliar outlines, and find above them symbols I do recognize. Although the lines lack the grace my father's scribe taught me to form, I can still decipher the meaning:

“Meketaten: The Lost Princess”

Lost? No, I am not lost. I am right here.

“Mais jamais découvert son corps...” A voice approaches. The firm staccato of our language is absent, but I recognize its tone immediately. My love has returned!

He stops in front of me, his back to me. A trio of girls surrounds him, giggling to each other as they stare at the bones protruding from my dried skin. Thin, rude cloth like that of cheap whores clings to their sprouting breasts. Their eyes flicker from Nifé to me as he speaks, their cheeks reddening whenever his gaze falls upon one of them. Repulsive creatures.

Nifé gestures and turns toward me, pausing his speech as his eyes travel the length of my body, his face cracking into the



brilliant smile I have longed for all my life and death. Then he is speaking again, not taking his eyes off me. He lowers his voice conspiratorially and turning to face the girls. The girls fix shining eyes on his.

He finishes and turns again to me.

“Nifé!” I howl now, desperation fueling me. “Nifé-en-Ankh, I am here! Hear me!”

He purses his lips and cocks his eyebrows slightly. I gasp with hope. But in the next instant, he turns back to the wretches. They giggle at his words. One scrunches her nose as she scrutinizes me. She opens her mouth and utters a brief phrase, its tone relaying her flippant dismissal. No one has ever insulted me, and at first I am stunned. But her tone echoes within me, its meaning sinking in. I feel a rage uncurl against this worthless street urchin, against this unspeakable, senseless disgrace leveled against me.

“Begone, worthless harlots!” I roar, roiling against the confines of my mummy.

For a moment, it’s as if an echo of my anger has reached their ears. The three jump in unison, and without another glance at Nifé, scamper to a less interactive sight. Nifé has become quite still. He is staring at me with wonder in his raised brows and open mouth. He senses me; he knows it now.

“My love! I’m here, my love!” I shout to him. I lean my being toward him as far as my position allows, which is nothing, but everything I can possibly do. I can see his Ka struggling to connect with his conscious, his ancient knowledge reuniting with new.

“Meketaten?” he whispers, pressing a palm to me against the glass case.

His touch is enough. It draws my spirit forward, through the case, and when my spirit collides with that precious hand, the glass melts. I gush outward, freed again by the power of our love. I swirl into the air of this modern world, swept into the expanse above the glass boxes. A loud piercing noise halts my jubilation. It continues its pulsing rhythm and light flashes from the walls. Below me, the gentle order has erupted into an erratic push of the strangers stampeding from the room, herded by men in blue clothing. I spot Nifé standing in shards of crumbled glass, surrounded by the blue-clothed men. Fear has replaced the wonder on his face. One grasps his shoulder, and Nifé winces, stumbling as they shove him forward. Another memory rushes before my eyes: The day the footman tore the reeds away and exposed us to my father; the day Nifé stooped under the blows of the guards as my father watched in the great palace, and my

knees bruised and bled from pleading. The day I promised myself to another in exchange for Nifé's life.

No. This will not happen again. I will my spirit to move forward to defend Nifé, to throw myself between him and the man in dark clothes who now enters the room. Meketaten is back, I will shout at them, frightening them into submission, and I will not stand for this abhorrent treatment of my Love! But instead of terrifying the man whose face has reddened with the effort of berating Nifé, I bob in the languid flow of invisible currents. I am simply another wisp of air, helpless to the words' blows, able only to watch Nifé's shoulders wince at each of the man's outbursts and how they slump at the final words. I bump mercilessly against a wall and sink slowly to the floor as the men lead Nifé from the room.

A congealed cloud of dust wafts along the floor beside me and I ache with the cruelty of this new exile. At least in death I did not possess the awareness of my helpless isolation. Mired in this self-pity, I almost do not hear it at first. Clouded by despair, I can hear only the crackle of my own heart breaking over again. But then I catch a hint of it and gasp mid-sob. I hear it again: a whisper gathering in intensity, like a wave cresting for the shore until finally it crashes over me.

"Go, precious one."

It's a hum, a vibration, but it carries meaning. It is the ancient ones. I look around me and realize, this room contains far more than my own belongings. In the particles of what remains of our days, the spirits of the ancient ones breathe here too. And in their exhale, they speak to me.

"Go to him, precious one."

"But how?" I wonder, when I cannot even distinguish myself from a common dust pile.

"Go. Be," they whisper.

"Hurry."

The last word chills me. "Why?" I ask.

But they are silent.

I concentrate on the more encouraging words. "Go," I tell myself. "Be." In obedience to this mantra, I feel my Ka rising from the floor.

"Go. Be." I enter a sort of courtyard where people mill about in their drab clothing and funny-looking hair, faces mainly unpainted and unadorned. Light falls from a patch of sky and as I look up to it, I am overwhelmed with awe. A great glass pyramid rises into the sky.

"Go. Be." I rise from this tomb, through the pyramid, and greet the new world. Tall, square buildings rise before me, save

for one slender pyramid in the distance. The effort it takes to move tires my ancient spirit. I bump clumsily along the streets.

“Go. Be.” The shapes of the city shift. Buildings become broken, streets cluttered with refuse. I feel heavier, weary, but I sense Nifé’s spirit nearby, and with effort, my Ka drags itself two steps up from the street, through a door with paint peeling and knob rusting.

The entrance to Nifé’s quarters prefaced the dinginess I find inside. A window on the far wall lets in sparse light filtered by the bricks of the next building. A ragged rug covers the floorboards under a chair whose fabric is multicolored only as an effect of food dropped, smeared, and forgotten over years. The chair faces a long bookshelf that sags under the weight of books. I begin to sink, feeling my energy seeping like a leaking pool. I cast my eyes absently over words that cover the outer edges of the books. The same cluster of symbols appears on almost each one: Égypte ancienne. The strain of not understanding tires me. Then I notice statues atop the cases. I know them. Each statue is of the Goddess Bastet in her different manifestations: Governess of the Holy Circle, Priestess of the Sovereign Cats, and one of her physical form, a feline. Above the goddess’s statues, pictures adorn the wall. Pictures of me.

He has never stopped loving me.

This thought drives energy into my core, and I find I can rise to see Nifé, standing with his back to me across the room in front of a small, raised fire. He places a kettle atop the flame. I drink in the sight of him, in love with each precise movement. He laces fingers through a ceramic mug from the shelf above him and places a small sachet inside. He tips the kettle and allows hot water to fall in a delicate stream to his cup. Everything he does is beautiful. I sigh.

He stops the pour abruptly and jerks his head to look behind him, to look at me. I catch my breath, waiting for him to speak. A splash of water from the kettle spatters onto his hand, and he jerks away again, slamming the kettle down, and shouting as he waves his hand in the air. He marches through me, dissipating my spirit, and plops onto the chair, sucking on his burned skin.

I reassemble slowly like steam in front of him. He glances up at me, through me, and then surveys the room, shaking his head. His hand goes to the golden pin at his breast, and he removes it, running his thumb over the black symbols that adorn the smooth surface before slinging the piece from him. It leaves a small dent in the wall before it falls to the ground. He does not watch its flight, however. He glowers at the bookcase.

“My love... can you feel me?” I venture, wafting around the arm of the chair. “I am here.”

He whips his face toward me and yelps, leaping from the chair, his hands grasping at the hair on his head. He stumbles backward from me, chest heaving, eyes wide and darting everywhere. He falls against the bookshelf, and this wobbles the statues on the shelf and the pictures on the wall. In one swoop, he leans forward to catch a statue as it topples from the shelf, leaving him unable to stop the picture that shuttles to the floor before his eyes. His mouth gapes open as the glass shatters, and he sinks to the ground, statue sliding from his slack hands.

A gust of wind from the cracks in the door swirls me out from under the chair. I am too weak to resist its current, and it carries me toward the half-open window.

“Nifé-en-Ankh!” I cry. I used to tell him that he was my “nifé-en-ankh,” my breath of life in a suffocating world. I use the last of that breath to call to him once more, “Remember!”

He gasps a sob. The last vision of my love before I sink from his sight is of him crumpled over my picture, face buried in his hands. Darkness has settled in at the edges of my vision, and sounds begin to muffle. I can feel Hades pressing in. It won’t be long now before I return. This awakening has accomplished little but to revive the agony of my final days, so I cannot help but welcome back the nothingness.

I sink onto a steaming heap of garbage. This is how it will go, then. Through my flickering vision, I see a small feline, black as ebony, fixing her green eyes on me. She can see me. It is then I finally recognize her.

“Great Goddess,” I whisper. I remember the stories my mother told about palace felines—the eyes of the goddess on the mortals. The goddess raises a paw to her lips and massages the backside of an ear.

“You are awakened in this world, Little One,” she purrs.

“Not for much longer, Sacred One,” I murmur. My thoughts are like mice. I cannot catch hold of them.

“No,” her voice a gentle hum. “Without a body, your Ka will fade to its own realm.”

She turns her head and with two quick darts of her tongue, smooths the fur on her shoulder before returning her eyes to me. The glitter of sun off her blackness leaves her nearly incandescent.

“Is this what you wish?” she asks.

“Death,” I struggle to focus on my words, to honor the Goddess with a worthy response, “is peace.”

Her eyes, sharp and knowing, probe my soul. “Yet your Ka has rested without peace.”



It is midday, but I see her through a thin veil as though at dusk. “Life has granted no accommodation,” I am fading quickly now. “For companionship...” Her gaze is steady. I hang onto that. “With the one my heart has chosen.”

She flicks her tail twice and lifts her nose to sniff the air. When she returns her gaze to me, she speaks. “I cannot join you with a human body. To do so would uproot another’s Ka.”

The Goddess’s wisdom is beyond my capacity to understand. She continues speaking, but I hear only fragments.

“... even though ... cannot .... this life ... man ... woman?”

The Goddess ceases speaking and her whiskers twitch once and are still. My consciousness erodes like bits of papyrus in a fire, like the love letters my mother burned before my eyes after my transgression was uncovered.

“It is our souls that belong together, Great One,” I whisper. “The bodies that contain them are of little consequence.”

A soft chirp draws my gaze to her. She stands, unfurls her tail.

“Meketaten.” Her tail twitches from side to side as she steps toward me.

A thrill surges through me at the sound of my name spoken by the Goddess.

“Go,” she speaks slowly. “Be.”

She steps into me, and my Ka cleaves to the feline's body, the heavy, weighty return to the physical realm. The Ka of the Goddess releases, leaving me. I gasp as my lungs fill with air, my inhale balancing the final exhale of my ancient life. I suck in air, coughing, gasping, until the rhythm of breathing regains its natural course within me. I glance up at the instant the spirit of the Goddess melts into a gust of wind. I twitch my whiskers and blink with gratitude against the brilliant sunshine.

Then, I run. The only guarantee a mortal has is that her end will—

A bicycle whizzes past, its draft tickling the ends of my whiskers.

I plop, panting. Stunned. I nearly squandered the Goddess's gift within moments of receiving it. My heart returns to a regular pace, and this time, I taste the air with my nostrils and survey the sidewalk on each side of the alley before I step out into this world.

The ground is warm against the soft pads of my feet, and I blink in the sunlight. My feline senses amplify the world from what I remember as a human. I can smell those blades of grass reaching through pavement and the canine urine drying on the side of the brick. I can hear a swish of fabric against fabric of an elder shuffling toward me. I approach Nifé's doorstep, and as

the elder and I pass each other, I stop to acknowledge her, as my mother always taught me. My tail curls left and right as I say, “Hail, wise one!”

But my voice does not reflect the words I hear in my head. Instead, I hear the scratchy, shrill mew of a feline.

The woman leaps from her rags. She sidesteps around me, and in doing so, trips over her own feet. I can hear the painful crackle of old bones as she falls to her knees.

“Madame, are you all right?” I ask. Again, I find my words muffled into a mewling sound. I give up speech and try scampering to her side. I stumble in my attempts at four-legged motion and stop short in front of her as she waves her hands in my face.

“Chat noir!” she whimpers. She holds her leg, moaning as she rocks over it. I raise my nose in her direction to smell for blood, but she waves a hand in my face and whimpers more insistently at me. I back away and sit on my haunches to watch as she totters onto her side, and gripping a light post, pulls herself up to standing. She never takes her eyes off me and mumbles: “Non—le chat noir. Oh mon dieu! Non!” When she has steadied herself, she gives me one more look before hobbling to the other side of the street.

This elder leaves me profoundly perplexed. I seem to incite fear, not the respect or awe I felt as a girl for the palace felines. I am not the exalted incarnation of the One Who Sees, but the repugnant wretch one would prefer not to see. Is this what Nifé will think, too? I shudder. I cannot bear to think of his face looking upon me with the same fear and disgust as the elder's.

I step back up to his door. In another moment, I will know.

“My love, I have returned!” I yowl.

In the distance, a canine begins barking. A pack of boys rounds the corner. They are young, and I wonder absent-mindedly where their mothers are before I return my attention to Nifé's door.

“Nifé, my darling! There is no further need of sadness! I am here!”

The pack grows nearer. They snicker and point to me. Ah, the young. They never fully appreciate the pangs of love.

“My love, hear me! Come! We can be—”

Something smacks my flank, and I stumble off the stoop. My face smashes into the sidewalk next to the glass shards of the bottle that sent me here. The boys are spinning around me. I hear their laughter as I wobble, attempting to strike balance between the ground and all four paws. The ruffians circle. One

reaches out and nudges my face with the toe of his shoe. I topple anew. They crumple over in laughter.

“Regarde le chat!” they jeer, gathering closer, jabbing each other. My chest throbs with rising panic.

I back against the wall. I hiss, showing them the full extent of my fangs. They hold their sides, whooping. One stoops and scoops a broken brick from the ground, cocking his brows and his arm to the cheers of his comrades. I duck when he throws, but the rebound off the wall wallops me anyway. I screech in surprise and pain, and a warm feeling radiates down my leg, as the sidewalk darkens with blood. A hand latches onto my tail and tugs. Waves of pain ripple up my spine from buttocks to brain, deafening their cackles. I howl in misery, hissing frantically.

I hear a thump, a grunt, and the hand releases my tail. At once, the laughter is gone. A broom flies through the air a second time.

“Allez-y!” a voice hollers. “Va-t-en!” The words move in tandem with the “thwack” of the broom. I huddle in the corner by the stoop and watch as Nifé drives the shouting, now irritated, boys down the sidewalk. The gang disappears around the corner, and my love shakes the broom in the air once more, yelling after them.

Finally he returns to me. He crouches until he is nearly at eye level, gaze moving over me quickly. I watch him, steadying my breath. Will he hurt me, too? He takes a deep breath and reaches one hand toward me. I shiver and duck my head, closing my eyes. His fingers curl over my head, touching me lightly, tenderly. He means no harm. I open my eyes and lift my head to him as his fingers move down my back, rippling delight in the opposite direction the pain had just traveled. A purr escapes me.

The sound softens his face. We lock eyes. He leans forward with both hands now, scooping me ever so gently into his arms. He carries me up the steps.

At last, together, we enter heaven.

Lenore Weiss

## Big Date

A giant's missus walks in the fields,  
steals hay bales to use for curlers,  
wraps her wiry locks around each one  
stuck with a branch for a bobby pin,  
blows them dry by grabbing a hot wind.

Of course she does this really late  
combs out her hair with a garden rake,  
throws her curlers down a laundry bin,  
when Mr. Giant knocks and stomps in,  
and the house shudders with their big date.

Johnathan Harper

## Basalisk

A slant of sunlight in the eye kept me from meeting his. The den of withered, burnt earth we used to share, a certainty that a touch of his breath could slay me if it ever drew near. We listened to the world haul its blue for a whole year. The coffee house trips and throat warbling open mics. Orbiting the beach and bookstore. The nightly interruptions from Richard, the stoop drunk who screamed, banged the door when locked out, confused the pair of us for brothers.

We were something more distinct but less seen. A spectrum of light hidden in a ray of white. His wife read our would-be astrology pairing, teased us both until my throat ran dry. Even with the ocean steps away, nothing beat down the versions of me twisting to stone. When the venom in the air grew too steeped, I headed north, leaving an open hand still trapped in his gaze.





Mule Trek | Emma Zurer

Jessica Drake-Thomas

Excerpt from  
*The Dauphine House Eulogies*

She would have followed Simone into death long ago, if not for Eli Parrish and his promises for revenge. In the interim, her complexion has gone from white to grey, as though noon had passed into twilight. Not much else about her had changed, thanks to Eli and his engineered body parts. The only real drawbacks were the sounds—whirring, clicking, ticking—and the rust, of course, and the green stains on her skin caused when only copper could be salvaged for parts. As she buckled on the two bastard swords’ belts, she thought of a tarot card flipping over—a heart with three swords piercing it—then another—a skeleton, holding a pennant emblazoned with a rose and riding a destrier towards a castle, then another, her life, mapped out and stretching on far longer than the veins that she cupped in her palms.

It was a day when the sun would have bothered Mariah—her skin would burn. The air crackled with heat. The cobblestones baked in filth, while high above men and women sat on their balconies, shaded from the sun yet outside of their stifling apartments, sipping sweet tea and mint juleps. She carried her basket, covering her face with a wide-brimmed black felt hat with a fresh magnolia bloom tucked into the band. The market was packed, as per usual, household servants out for the breakfast fruits and vegetables for the day's entrées. Mariah worked in a café at the time, run by a man called Dick Rickards. She had a remarkable aptitude for cooking—it hadn't been hard for her to get a job when her husband died.

*“Une pêche, ma’m selle?”* With tapered, delicate fingers, Simone expertly pared a sliver off of a white peach with a silver knife inlaid with mother-of-pearl, handing it to her. Mariah brought the fruit to her lips. Juice seeped luxuriously into Mariah's mouth, a burst of sunshine distilled in furred flesh. She bought all of them.

“Come back tomorrow. I will have more.” Simone wiped a rivulet of sweat off her forehead, and brushed against Mariah's hand gently as she handed her the change. Mariah smiled at the deliberateness of the touch. Of course she would be back. In answer to Dick's questioning glance at the extra crate of peaches

that was delivered later in the morning, she responded, “I got a good deal,” then made peach pies for the rest of the morning. They were sold out long before lunch was over.

Mariah had always frequented the market, but never chose favorites. She bought what looked best to her. But the only thing that now looked best to her was Simone. “My best customer!” she would always proclaim, offering Mariah a taste of the fresh apricots, or her new stock of powdered cayenne pepper. Raised in the bayou, and working at the market, Simone smelled of spices and fruit grown and ripened in the sun. She had copper-colored curls, full, round breasts and creamy skin that seemed to heat the skin of Mariah’s paper-white fingers. Where Simone was sweet and warm, Mariah was cold and sour. She had always felt as though a deep, dark abyss with edges of steel wool and broken glass and concertina wire hung inside of her, scraping away in a breeze. For two years Mariah had been married—Jack had died of the Yellow Fever on board a ship that he’d been working on. She had been happy when he left. She felt better when he was dead; less harassed and more put-together.

After months of smiles and samples of her wares, Mariah got up the nerve and made Simone a spice cake, moist and tangy with cinnamon, iced in a thick vanilla buttercream and garnished with sugared rose petals. She had worked on it into the early

hours of the morning in the dark, sparse kitchen of the boarding house that she lived in, a constant feeling of falling in her stomach, worry that it was all for nothing. When she handed Simone the cake, she said, “I work in the café on Conti. There is going to be a dance there tonight, if you want to go.” And she turned and glided away before waiting for an answer, retaining her appearance of cool apathy.

That night, Mariah stayed back in the kitchen, listening to the partiers and the music as pots bubbled and onions fried. She wiped a damp curl of hair out of her face and looked up. Simone was standing in the doorway. “You don’t have to bribe me with cake,” she said with a coy smile. “Although it didn’t hurt any.” She reached out a hand and Mariah took it, and followed her out into the café proper.

Simone grabbed Mariah by the waist, and they spun, the room was full, but they were alone, skirts swirling, arms entwining and un-entwining, hips sashaying to Jolee’s fiddle and Bobby Mack’s accordion permeating their world. Mariah went up to the bar, and Dick handed her two mugs of beer. “Glad to see you out of the kitchen, *chérie*.” He winked at her, and for the first time in a long time, Mariah grinned and returned to Simone, reeling with ecstasy.



When Mariah made love with Simone, it was gentle, careful. She was left feeling light, calm, and satiated instead of bruised and raging, as when she had been with men. Her husband, in particular, had been rough, leaving her sore and alone in the morning. Simone held her in her arms, brushing her lips with a sweet-tasting finger. “Come here, *ma fleur*.” She sung a Creole lullabye in Mariah’s ear with an unstudied voice, perfect in its imperfection, swirling and shaping a night already filled with the frothy hum of beer and stars.

Mariah had never cooked so well in her life—she made rich, meaty stews spiced with cayenne pepper, garlic, and cumin. Her breads came out with thick, buttery crusts and soft, fluffy insides. Her cakes were decadent, covered in jellied fruits and sugared rose petals. Dick’s café was packed with people from morning until almost midnight, and the musicians played until strings popped and voices grew hoarse.

One night, Mariah returned to the boarding house where she lived. Dick had sent her home earlier, saying, “I’ve been working you too hard. Go home to your lady.” Simone was lying on the bed in her room, reading a novel. She was dressed in white linen. “*Ma fleur!*” Mariah had been bringing home food from the café for her, and she had grown round and bright. She looked loved, and Mariah wondered at how she could make someone that way.

“Read to me, Simone.” Mariah said, kissing her perfect lips.

“No. Tonight, we go on an adventure.” Simone declared, pulling her back out into the night.

They walked through the heart of the Quarter. As they passed like ghosts through the crowded streets of the Quarter, a young man caught her eye. He was leaning against a building, and she knew that she had seen him before—a sailor on the same ship as Jack. She kissed Simone’s hand. Mariah grinned wolfishly as the man’s face twisted in anger.

They soon reached the cemetery of St. Rémy. The path was made of bricks, and bright grass grew between the cracks. The mausoleums loomed overhead, some simple, others intricate castles of the dead. Drawn in charcoal were many marks of three small x’s on the tombs, drawn by visitors to ask blessings from the dead. Before most of the mausoleums were offerings of candles, incense, and flowers for the dead. It was an old cemetery, but not yet a full one. There was light among the tombs. At the very center, a large gathering of people. Before a bonfire sat an old woman, her hair pulled back by a white scarf. She was wraith-thin, yet her bearing betrayed an enormous strength. She wore the symbols of resurrection on golden chains around her neck: the cross, the pentacle, the star, the blooming flower, and the crescent moon. Simone lead Mariah straight to

her. “Mama Minuit. I have brought *ma fleur*, Mariah.” The old woman looked up.

“Will you have your cards read, Mariah?”

Mariah nodded.

“Yes, Mama.” Mama Minuit shuffled the cards.

“Three card spread.” The old hands cut the deck, shuffled them, then peeled one off of the top: it was a heart, pierced by three blades. “Representing your Self, the Three of Swords. You will always confront loneliness, separation, and grief. This grief will protect you on your path.” She flipped over the next card and placed it in front of her to the right of the Three of Swords. This card had a picture of a man wrapped in a grey cloak, holding a lantern. “Your path is guided by the Hermit. This man will change the course of your life, perhaps even prolong it, although all of the answers will not come from him.” The final card that Mama Minuit drew was of a skeleton riding a destrier, bearing a pennant emblazoned with a rose. “Death. Your future holds death. But where there is death, there must also be also Life, represented by the rose banner. Do not forget that, Mariah.”

She looked at Mariah’s left palm, the one that had been cut when a filleting knife had slipped from her hands once. Mama Minuit shook her head. “The life line is severed.”



“Your aura is black, Mariah. All methods of fortune foretell Death. When you think it is the end, you must continue on, for the path of your lifetime is going to stretch farther than the expanse of your palms.” She released Mariah’s palm, which shook slightly. Mama Minuit smiled.

“Take care of my Simone. She is dear.” At the side of her, she heard Simone whisper, “*Black Mariah loves Sunny Simone.*”

When Mariah returned to the boarding house after work one night, police lined the hallway. They spoke to her, but she said nothing, suddenly breaking into a run to her room. The door was open, and there was a body, eviscerated on the bed in Mariah’s room, blood staining the walls, soaking the sheets. *It can’t be Simone*, she thought. *Please, no.* From where she stood, Mariah could see that Simone’s right arm lay severed on the floor by the bed, a crescent-shaped moon carved into the forearm. On the wall behind the bed, painted in blood, was splashed *Black Mariah loves Slutty Simone*. As she realized that Simone’s obsidian-dark eyes stared past her into eternity, Mariah sank to the floor and screamed. In her mind, she saw Mama Minuit. *Take care of my Simone.* Mama Minuit smiled. *She knew.*

Mariah found herself running to the cemetery. What she saw there was like nothing she had ever seen before. Mama Minuit

sat by her fire, white muslin clothing spattered in blood. Before her sat a basin of organs, Simone's, Mariah realized with rage. Men and women, dressed in similar clothing held up various dripping viscera like snakes, dancing around the fire, as though possessed. Their eyes rolled back into their heads.

"What have you done?" Mariah screamed at Mama Minuit. "What have you—"

"Simone was our savior as much as she was yours. I bore and gave life to her for this purpose. The root of all religion is sacrifice, all true believers washed clean by blood—" She shook her necklace, and all of its pendants clinked together violently. "And my religion is *pure*." She stood up on her fragile frame, lifting the basin of organs above her head.

"You're crazy! This is homicide." Mariah looked around her for some weapon, and grabbed a loose rock. As she tried to figure out what to do with it, the people dancing began to throw the viscera into the fire, and turned to her, surrounding her.

"We all die, Mariah. But no one wants to stay dead." As Mama Minuit began to chant, tipping the basin's contents into the fire, a man grabbed Mariah by the throat, lifting her. She looked into his eyes and found them empty—pits of obsidian. And then all began to hum and went dark.

In the middle of the night, she awoke in the street, in a puddle of filth. It smelled of booze, piss, and vomit. She could feel where the man had grabbed her, blood from the viscera he had held drying on her skin. She crept through the streets back to the boarding house, back to her room, where the police had taken Simone's poor, dear body and left only the bloody mattress and the gory message embellished on the wall. *Black Mariah*.

She drew the tattoo herself. It was in honor of her Creole rose, Simone. A final kiss upon her cheek. She used Simone's mother-of-pearl knife and mixed inks that ran with her blood and tears. The mirror above the sink was cloudy. This was the last time that Mariah would ever cry. The next day, she quit work at the café and went to work at the Dauphine House, where she had heard that they were hiring a cook. It was convenient. Evidently, their cook had died under mysterious circumstances. Mariah didn't care. She needed quiet to heal and plot her revenge.

Cold. She felt always cold, having known warmth. Eli Parrish saved her, prolonged her life. But to what end? Revenge? Salvation? She was a corn-husk doll fashioned by tiny fingers from a childhood, in a long-ago January. After buckling the belts

and donning her felt hat, Mariah pulled a small, silver and mother-of-pearl knife out of her top drawer and slid it into her pocket. Three blades. The Three of Swords, she realized. Mariah closed her eyes, feeling Simone's lips at her neck, whispering a Creole lullaby in her ear. The smell of fresh fruit and spice filled the air, and a familiar warmth permeated Mariah's skin. When she opened her eyes, the world was cold again.

Ivy Kleinbart

## Last Ghost

The first ghost slid in through the screen door just days after the burial. It must have been easy to enter unnoticed, so many people flowing in and out with steaming crockpots and sagging aluminum food trays, making up beds, gently encouraging my mother to consider our finances. He floated over the stone-patterned linoleum floor, and stood in the threshold of the prototypical suburban lime-green living room with its many plants stacked before the bay windows. His translucent hand waved that familiar cheerful windshield-wiper “hello.” The calamondin tree twitched in the corner. Fuzzy dust motes trailed in the hand’s wake.

Lying on the couch, gazing up at the empty hallway, I was the only one who saw him.

Afterwards, there were hundreds like that, all resembling my father in some way. But the last one—the one I want to tell you about—came to meet me in a new city, incognito. Dressed as a secret agent, with dark metal-rimmed sunglasses, Hawaiian shirt, and a thick fake mustache, he strode towards me through a crowded lobby with a gift in his hands. We embraced, but the reunion felt uneasy. I was tired of all the lies. He said he’d been undercover, working for the CIA. *All these years?* I thought. *But what about the fact you have no feet?* I looked at him then, felt how

contrived the whole scene was, and said, “You can’t keep coming back this way.”

Hints and whispers of ghosts still draw near: as blurred voices on the edge of sleep, peripheral flickers, gone when I look. Sometimes, I feel them watching me; sometimes I find myself watching for them.

It’s that last ghost that still haunts me—the one I tried to send away. I never did take that gift. Sometimes, when I miss him, I wonder what was in the box.

Jane Williams

## Betterhusband.com

As always the beginning is the hardest part. That first guilt-ridden line.

Dear Annie, it's not you it's me...

Dear Annie, I am deeply sorry...

Then for momentary relief from the angst—

Dear Annie, a funny thing happened to me on the way home from SimCity.

The tip of the first finger of his right hand hovers over the “send” button.

He's been here before—how many times? The torturous ritual of confessing. The hovering. Then at the last moment retracting his finger, as he does now, deleting the email and as a final precaution the browsing data eluding to his other life, the one where he gets to be his best intended self.

Maybe tonight he'll try to talk with her. Begin with a peace offering of roses, like the old days. Face to face. Hold her hand even. He could tell her he's rethought that offline Mediterranean

cruise she's been talking about. Then with a little help from the stars and the ocean he'll begin to ease himself back into her world, find the right way to explain the lure of Betterhusband.com and she'll forgive him. And somehow they'll grow closer because of it. Maybe she'll even feel a little flattered when she finds out the other woman is an exact replica of herself. Meticulously, lovingly detailed, right down to the dimple on her left buttock. The mole behind her right ear.

When he tells the story in the chat room everyone is supportive as always. His email box is flooded with sympathy icons. Annie was wrong about Facebook friends. They do care. They are sensitive enough not to ask, for instance, how many hours, how many days it was before he noticed his wife's absence. Before he discovered the Dear John letter in the form of a small scroll of rose-scented notepaper slipped like a serviette through the O of her abandoned wedding ring.



Lewis J. Beilman III

## The World of Wolves

A she-wolf had four cubs, three who were like her and one who was not. The normal cubs had mottled gray fur, long snouts, and thick necks. The other cub wore no fur—except on his head—had a thin neck, and crouched when he moved about the cave where they lived. He also had no tail.

The she-wolf fed them all, often returning early in the evening with the bloody leg of some unfortunate beast in her mouth. When she dropped the leg on the cave floor, the three normal cubs pounced upon it, tearing the flesh from the limb. The other remained aloof and would only eat when the mother scattered the normal ones, gathered a hunk in her fangs, and delivered it at his feet.

As the cubs grew larger and stronger, the she-wolf began to train them for the hunt. She brought them outside where they chased one another through the woods. The odd cub, however, could not keep up with the normal ones. They were swifter and more agile than he. Still, his mother urged him on, nudging his

rear with her nose to send him forward. When the sunlight faded through the trees, she returned them to the safety of the cave and ventured outside to gather their evening meal.

While they waited for their mother to return, the play continued. The cubs nipped at the scruffs of one another's necks, rolled upon the floor, and yapped with delight. Only the odd one, who found this play frustrating, slunk away into a recess in the cave's wall.

One day, weeks later, when the cubs were learning to hunt, the odd one wandered away from the others. The normal ones were chasing a jackrabbit and hadn't noticed he was gone. Even the she-wolf had been too distracted to see he had left.

The odd cub knew he was too slow to catch the jackrabbits and squirrels the normal cubs chased. He could see his body did not resemble theirs. They had strong hind legs that allowed them to burst through the forest after prey. His hind legs were long and spindly and ill-suited for the hunt.

Despondent, the odd cub meandered towards the cave. The deer path he followed climbed between tall pines up a steep bank. Above him, a red-tailed hawk circled and screeched before plummeting into a nearby clearing. From a distance, the lonely howl of the she-wolf called to him. He turned his head towards her voice but did not return her call.

Moments later, the she-wolf and the normal cubs loped along the path after the odd cub. The darkest of the cubs carried a jackrabbit in his mouth and pranced towards him, head erect. The she-wolf, however, had little of the darkest cub's contentedness. She charged at the odd cub, knocked him to the ground, and bared her teeth.

The odd cub understood he had put himself in danger by wandering away from the pack. He lowered his head.

Later, at the cave, when the odd one received his portion of the jackrabbit from the she-wolf, two of the normal cubs knocked the meat from him. They stood between him and his food and growled. Their ears stood on end.

Despite her earlier anger, the she-wolf intervened. She and the darkest cub, who was also the strongest, barked to show their displeasure with the two aggressors. The two weaker cubs rolled on their backs and whimpered. The darkest cub took the meat and carried it to the odd cub. The odd cub licked the darkest cub's muzzle.

For several weeks, little changed. The she-wolf continued to train her cubs for the hunt. As the air grew colder and prey grew scarcer, the wolves hunted farther from the cave. Eventually, they reached the edge of the forest. Skirting the trees, they spotted a flock of sheep grazing upon a grassy meadow. The

she-wolf sniffed the air and scanned the horizon. Once she had determined no beasts other than the sheep were near, she charged the flock. The three normal cubs raced behind her. From behind a fallen aspen, the odd cub watched the chase unfold.

One sheep in the flock realized her danger too late. While the rest of the sheep ran from the wolves across a hillock, she hesitated. By the time she had started running, she found herself several lengths behind the others.

The wolves closed the gap quickly. With the bleating of the sheep echoing across the meadow, the she-wolf thrust herself at the neck of the laggard. The three cubs, in turn, tore at her belly and legs. Soon, the noises from the fleeing flock faded into the distance, and the life of the captured sheep bled into the grass.

The odd cub joined the others to feed upon the carcass. They ate their fill before returning to their cave. That night, huddling together for warmth, the she-wolf and her cubs slept with sated bellies.

The next day the wolves revisited the site of the kill. The flock was gone, but the carcass of the laggard remained. Carrion birds had scraped much of the meat from its bones, and several ravens scattered when the she-wolf and her cubs approached the remnants.

As the wolves ate, the odd cub heard an unfamiliar thrum. The other cubs lifted their heads and searched the sky. The she-wolf, too, looked up from the dead sheep. Barking a warning, she withdrew from the carcass. With their ears pressed flat against their heads, the wolves raced to the safety of the woods.

In a thicket near the meadow, the odd cub lingered. On the horizon, a strange bird approached. The bird—much larger than any he had seen—flew without wings. It hovered over the dead sheep, whirring like an enormous hummingbird. Beneath it, the grass moved like bristles of fur parted by a steady wind. After floating over the carcass for several seconds, it spun in the opposite direction, accelerated, and disappeared between two hills.

That night, in the cave, the she-wolf paced for hours. The normal cubs tucked their tails between their legs and whimpered. The odd cub had never seen them so distracted. Eventually, his eyes closed—but, after he woke from a sleep full of nervous dreams, he found the she-wolf still pacing. He whined, but she paid him no attention.

The following day, as the sun began to set, the she-wolf led the cubs once more on the hunt. This time, however, they ventured more tentatively towards the wood's edge. The she-wolf trod with her back hunched, sniffing the ground in front of

her. She paused at each cross-path, moving her head from side to side and examining the crossings for strange scents.

At the thicket by the meadow, the wolves halted. Near where the sheep had fallen, a strange animal lurked. Its eyes glowed in the twilight and its belly rumbled. While the she-wolf and her cubs watched, creatures emerged from the flanks of the animal. These creatures looked nothing like the larger animal. They stood on spindly hind legs and gestured with their fore legs. They had fur on their heads—and no tails. From their flat faces came unfamiliar sounds.

After a few minutes, the creatures reentered the larger animal, which—with its eyes still aglow—crept towards the forest.

The she-wolf reacted to the animal's approach. Eschewing the deer path, she led the cubs through the woods. They leapt over stones, downed tree limbs, and a brook to reach the cave. They remained there for the evening—even the gurgling of the cubs' bellies could not spur the she-wolf to venture into the darkening night.

The images of the creatures haunted the odd cub. Having seen his face's reflection before in a pool near the cave, he knew his face looked more like those of the creatures than those of the other cubs. To see if he could stand as the creatures stood, he rose from a crouch and balanced on his hind legs. He let a foot

fall forward, tottered, and righted himself. He moved towards the she-wolf.

Startled, the she-wolf rushed the odd cub, knocking him to the floor. She pinned him, bared her fangs, and growled. After she released him, he rolled into a ball. He was more afraid than he had ever been.

Like she had done the previous night, the she-wolf paced the cave, her claws clacking a steady rhythm on the stone floor. The odd cub woke several times from wild dreams. In the morning, he felt as if he had not slept at all.

Outside, the sun peeked over the pines. The odd cub moved towards the light at the cave's opening. The she-wolf stood there, her frame taut. Her eyes studied the path that led to the woods. The mountain air blew cold, swirling against the rocky entrance to their home.

The odd cub pressed against the she-wolf. Her fur warmed his skin. He felt her heartbeat thudding. She sniffed the air, surveyed the tree line, and withdrew into the cave. Waking the others, she prodded them to hide. The wolves crowded together in the cave's recess.

Calling from the shadows, the she-wolf urged the odd cub to join them. He remained at the opening, staring at the path.

Soon, the sounds of voices emanated from the woods. The odd cub recognized the voices as those of the creatures he had seen the evening before. When the creatures emerged into a nearby clearing, the odd cub reentered the cave. The sounds of the creatures grew closer and closer.

The odd cub looked over his shoulder at the she-wolf and the normal cubs. The cubs whimpered, and his mother's eyes glowed yellow in the recess of the cave.

The odd cub knew the creatures would shortly find him and the other wolves. Rising from the cave floor, he stood erect. He staggered through the opening and entered the clearing. In front of him, the creatures hunched over the spot where the deer path shifted from dirt to rock. They did not see his approach.

As the odd cub came upon the creatures, he loosed a howl that pierced the spaces he had roamed throughout his life. The creatures—startled by the cry—jumped to their feet and pointed strange sticks at him.

When the creatures saw the odd cub there—alone and standing as they stood—they dropped their sticks to the ground.

“Jesus,” one of the creatures said.

The odd cub waited patiently for the creatures to take him from the world of wolves. As he stood there, naked, in the cold



air, his howl reverberated, echoing in distant rings throughout the wilderness.

José Angel Araguz

## Moth Season

Inspector Moth walked from one end of the brightness to the other. Still, the pane remained. He had crashed into it not knowing why. He paced, tapping at the glass now and then, boxing with his reflection, the colors he was made of pushing back. The whole world, he thought, can see that I am stuck.

\*

Behind neon signs and their blinking letters. In the corner of the ceiling where a hook hangs down and a cobweb shags. In the corner of the floor with dried leaves and the pollen from the cottonwoods. Under the sink where the stiff bodies of roaches are unfortunate and in the way. Behind the newspapers stacked outside where even he lost track of himself amidst the gray and the words—Inspector Moth looked everywhere for a clue.

\*

This time of night he couldn't go outside, it wasn't safe. So many looked like him. And the heat. He almost lost himself. What was he doing against the screen door, shaking the sides of his trench coat again? What was he feeling, rolling skittering on the sidewalk, his newspaper wings unfolding and folding? Who was he that he couldn't solve this case, couldn't even remember it, could only watch himself and watch himself and watch himself?

\*

Inspector Moth knew there was something he had to do. He ruffled through the pockets of his trench coat, flung the damn thing around trying to get it off. The coat would not leave his body. He took a few steps around the office. His trench coat billowed around him. There was something he had to do.

\*

Inspector Moth's list of suspects: the screen door, the branches letting leaves fall, a tangle of stray hairs, all colors of confetti, feathers, lost buttons holding nothing together, lost earrings looking dangerous and guilty, wood grain surfaces where even he could hide, tomorrow, light.

\*

She walked into his life like the flick of a light switch, from darkness to bright. She was something he had not factored in, something he had to adjust to. First, his eyes. He had grown used to being alone, to silence like a second self holding its tongue. Now there was her. Her hair the color of sunlight on paint. Her voice that cracked into him like the wind knocking into and through a cicada shell, words of grit, gust, shame: *What is that dirty butterfly doing here?*

\*

Inspector Moth's list of things he has mistaken for the moon: aspirin tablets (like two moons split before a glass of water), headlights (which did the unthinkable and flew toward him), a desk lamp (where a man sat writing down what the moon had to

say), table tops in an empty restaurant (a room made of moons), the crown of an old man waiting on a corner at night (the moon shaking as he lost his step), an empty parking lot where the streetlamps had given out (the face of a still lake), manhole covers on an empty street (the footprints of the moon), empty dryers (moons whose faces opened and he climbed inside).

\*

Flag, stop mocking my wings. Store sign on your chains, stop mocking my wings. Red dress hanging off a chair, stop mocking my wings. Empty sleeves on a clothesline, stop mocking my wings. Curtains closing and opening in the wind, stop mocking my wings. Pages flurred in the book on the table, stop mocking my wings. Leaves behind me in the night, stop mocking my wings. Water down there in the stream, stop mocking my wings. Clouds moving, always moving, stop mocking my wings.



Blue Ridge Mountain | Michal Mitak Mahgerefteh

Ben Gunsberg

## Self-Portrait as a Mole at the End of the World

I say “hawk” when asked by our children  
what animal I would be, except on days  
I fear the end is near, news of chlorine gas,  
missile tests, drone attacks. Those days  
I choose a mole because something soft

and harmless should survive a holocaust,  
even if it means shrinking to one-fiftieth my size  
and hiding underground until clouds drain  
their poison and the great fires hiccup smoke  
and the champion virus dulls its sword.

When sweetening roots signal a safer world,  
I’ll surface, break through bone mounds  
to sniff out grace. Nearly blind, I will not see  
our crumbling, ant-lacquered street, blue,  
luminous dragonflies haloing the porch.

I’ll follow you, though you are dust, pink feet  
padding home, where I’ll rake my harmless claws  
upon the mat and cast my small shadow on the bathroom  
floor—the cold, white tiles still intact, shower cap  
hanging like a dry mushroom on the brass knob.

I'll recall, with my genius snout, Sunday morning  
long ago, lavender soap, comb pulled behind  
your ear, parting hair for which I hunt,  
the old world still wet in my mind, like a robe  
that draped your shoulders once.

Alejandro Escudé

## A Hurricane of Feathers

Edgar, the birdwatcher, stood at the start of the hiking path that snaked along the bottom of the canyon and raised his binoculars. He had seen the shape of the bird fly over him, but it was still just a misshapen mass, a broken asterisk, as he peered through the lenses. This was the glory of birding. Most thought it was the act of identifying the birds that made the hobby pleasurable, but the pleasure was really in what came before, when the shape of the flying animal lingered in that divine space between recognition and mystery. It was like falling in love. One didn't know. Then, one suddenly knew, and something happened in between. A creation? A death?

Edgar knew. He pushed his black fedora tighter over his head, the hat he always wore while birding, and he thought about his two screaming young children back at home, the original impetus for coming out to the mountain trails to look for birds. But birding soon meant much more to Edgar. It wasn't just a hobby to relieve a fatigued father, or merely a



temporary escape from his responsibilities. It became a way to comprehend the universe and to seize it. He was a modern Adam, discovering the names of each bird as he reclaimed the sacred garden of the Earth. And like clockwork, every Saturday, Edgar rushed out to breathe the fresh mountain air, to take in the shape of the birds.

Edgar watched the osprey, the first of the raptors he would see that day. It flapped its impossibly large wings over the canyon. He pointed his binoculars and caught sight of the entire immense Eagle-like bird. *Must be one of the closest living relatives to a pteranodon*, Edgar thought. This raptor, this particular osprey, was outstanding. He watched the giant black and grey fish-hunting bird until it veered over a stand of sycamores, and then disappeared.

Next, Edgar trained his binoculars on the pond to his left and enjoyed the sight of a huddled group of American widgeons. He loved the neon green eye-patches on the ducks, the white and black contrast on the males.

Edgar especially loved spotting a bird he couldn't identify: a furtive glimpse between the shadows of bushes, and then, and then nothing. Only the flutter of a few leaves. But he'd caught the bird in his mind. Edgar unloaded his backpack and broke out *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. He thumbed through it and found the

marsh wren, but he wasn't near a marsh—then, there, the house wren precisely matched what he'd seen. He had spotted what was for him a new bird, as if the species had never existed before Edgar identified it. A House Wren.



Like some kind of superhero, Edgar suddenly reached out and seized the speedy wren with one hand. He could not understand how he had done it. Wrens are some of the fastest birds known to man. They don't fly, they zip between the trees and brush, swift as hummingbirds. In the two years Edgar had been birding, he'd only photographed a wren three times. Now he was holding the small creature tightly in his hand, as if by magic. He could feel it breathing in his palm, like a pint-sized feathery lung. The sky darkened a bit. Edgar looked up momentarily, consumed by the temporary loss of the sun, and—without a thought—crammed the body of the house wren into his mouth and swallowed the little bird whole. He could feel the scratches of the wren's little sharp feet as it slid down his esophagus, finally coming to rest in his stomach. Edgar smiled.



John was a weekend birder and he would sometimes bump into Edgar along the same trails. On this particular weekend, John was excited because he'd seen a varied thrush listed on the rare bird alert, an online messaging system letting birders know when a unique species was visiting the area. John was in his late fifties. A set of small binoculars dangled from his neck and he carried a spotting scope on a tripod, giving him the air of a staff-wielding prophet tromping through holy land.

Working all week at the city bus headquarters was tough on John. He worked hard managing the mechanics and the engineers who kept the buses running, but Saturdays, during the mornings at least, he came out to the trails to do what he really loved.

John made the turn where he would usually enjoy the image of the white-crowned sparrows singing their songs atop the branches, and he suddenly caught sight of a fellow birder. From a short distance, he saw Edgar sitting below a sycamore tree. John knew it had to be Edgar from his telltale black fedora and felt the rush one senses at the sudden recognition of a fellow enthusiast and friend.

He picked up his pace to speak to Edgar, to find out if he had seen the varied thrush that had most likely inspired every birder in the city to snatch their binoculars, cameras and scopes

and head in their direction. *Soon, John thought, every damn Tom Dick and Harry with a camera was going to come out to the very spot he and Edgar occupied at the present moment.*

“Edgar!” said John.

No response. John left the trail toward where he could make out Edgar’s form and then continued to work his way through the dry bushes, snapping a few small limbs as he walked.

“Edgar, is that you buddy?”

No response. John could see the edge of Edgar’s hiking boots now, his black hat. Then, as he approached, he began to see scattered feathers everywhere, a trail of feathers leading up to the man sitting against the trunk of the sycamore.

“Edgar? The feathers...what the...”

He made a final little leap around some more bushes and stood facing Edgar.

“I can’t breathe,” Edgar muttered in a sickly tone, his face pale and bloated, his stomach distended. A thin stream of blood draining from his nose.

“What did you do?” said John, backing up slightly at the ghastly sight of this now large man sitting against the trunk of a tree with feathers of various sizes and colors laying spread over his chest and lap.

In one hand, Edgar held the half-eaten corpse of a snowy egret. The head completely gone, but the pure white torso lying lifeless along with the wiry black legs. Some of the feathers lay in blood-spots. Smears of blood ran along Edgar's bare legs and arms.

"I ate them. I ate them all," said Edgar, languidly shaking his head. "But it was not the answer."

"The answer!" said John, still backing away, nearly tripping over a small boulder, but lingering, lingering for an explanation to the gruesome sight he had stumbled upon.

"The birds aren't the answer," Edgar said, dreamily, warily.

"The answer to what? What the hell are you saying? I'm calling an ambulance, OK?"

"I'm not one of them. You're not one of them. God is not in the birds. I thought God was in the birds."

John began to settle down enough to formulate a plan of action, but he could still feel his heart racing, and his mouth had gone completely dry. He could tell Edgar was dying, so John had to act. He ran back out toward the main trail while trying to fetch his cell phone from his cargo shorts. He dropped the phone just as he heard in the growing distance between himself and the dying man: "Don't you see! The birds, the birds are not with us!"

John then heard Edgar begin to sob. But the sound, the sound of the man sobbing, was unlike anything he had ever heard before. It was the sob of a giant, not a normal man. A thunderous cry. The cry of a man who had eaten a third of the species listed in *The Sibley Guide to Birds*.



Back on the trail, John snatched his phone up from the ground, dusted off the dirt and frantically dialed for help. He began to fear for his own life. *What if Edgar was able follow him? What if he were found with Edgar and blamed somehow for his death?*

As he waited for the ringing to stop and for the sound of a human voice, he heard another distinct sound all around him, a cry that would normally warm his birder's heart and cause him to eagerly scan the sky with his binoculars. But not this time, this time the cry only frightened him. It was the unmistakable piercing screech of a red-tailed hawk. Then John heard another screech and another.

John felt a sudden rush of wind, the feel of tightly packed feathers and thin bones against the left side of his body. A red-tailed hawk had landed closely beside him, as unafraid as one of those domesticated birds used for presentations with kids at the

zoo. The hawk stood on the trail and carefully, calmly, placed one clawed foot on his shoe, like a small child gently requesting his attention. John looked at the hawk, quizzically, and then immediately felt the sharp impact of the weight of three or four more hawks landing on his back. John's cheek hit the ground with the force of sucker punch—he felt his body being turned abruptly around, then, with a tremendous gasp of air, he had no choice but to absorb the terrifying fact that he was now being dragged along the dirt trail by what appeared to be a huge russet wave of rolling feathers, a hurricane of feathers, hundreds and hundreds of wing bones striking him on all sides. Tearing into a clearing in the fields, John saw that the eyes were upon him.

Bill Freedman

## The Visitor, A Modern Fable

One in every two, almost, will suffer her,  
Pollution of the air and body summon her,  
but she needs no call.

Demonic Goldilocks, she visits uninvited,  
knows the way through bolted doors and windows,  
feeds and fattens on the fare and never sleeps,  
but with fierce eye open, naps.

It is enough to own a cottage in the woods.  
Or town or city.  
To let the porridge cool.  
And walk.

Soon, hungry for their porridge,  
body's temperature by now,  
the strolling bears return.  
The little girl with the swollen belly  
does not flee.  
She shows them in the mirror  
the purchased deed.

They will live, the bears  
and growing golden girl,  
in this crowded home together.



Not always happily.  
Not forever.  
Managing with this new arrangement  
for a while.



Bright Pane | Emma Zurer

Sara Seyfarth

## The Lies Trees Tell

Alex crashed into a tree and the tree swallowed her. Considering the whole of it couldn't have taken more than ten seconds, she remembered it with astonishing clarity. The flash of two floating orbs, eerily bright in the darkness, and the accompanying drop of her stomach as the large body came into view in her headlights. A buck, as it turned out. The pull of the steering wheel against her arms as she forced it left, all while her brain screamed not to! not to! But instinct had been too strong. Then the crunch and the shattering and the odd sensation of buckling that happened to her head when it hit the windshield.

When the tree opened to suck her in, her body twisted, bones splintering to accommodate the cyclone outside the driver's-side window yanking her free of the binding seatbelt. Bark scratched her limbs and leaves slapped at her face. Still, before everything went black, she managed to grab the edge of the hole for a glimpse of warped metal, bloody glass, and a void where her

body should have been. All of that she remembered and knew to be true.

Oh, when she told her mother, she'd get an earful about "daydreams" and "fantasy." But she knew what she knew.

When she opened her eyes inside the tree, a string of incoherent and inventive curses only her brother would appreciate flooded from her mouth. Then she thought of Aunt Bev. Aunt Bev had arrived from the Old Country with rambling stories and crazy sayings, and she'd never been afraid to share them. Everyone had always counseled Alex to dismiss them, and so she had. But now, as she looked around at the mud-packed earth and the dense thicket surrounding her, Aunt Bev's tobacco-roughened voice filled her mind.

They'd been at her father's wake, so the memory smacked Alex with brutal force. It had only been two years since the accident, and it still snuck up on her. *He* still snuck up on her. The way he tousled her hair before tucking her in. How he sat with her into the wee hours of the night to work out a math problem she just couldn't get right.

She took a breath, remembering the way the pungent smell of the tuna noodle casserole their neighbor Marge Dawson had baked for them had mixed with the peculiar spiced earth smell of Aunt Bev's perfume. "If a tree ever swallows you, always go up,

Alexandra,” Aunt Bev had said to her when they’d stepped onto the porch for some air. The cold November wind had pulled some gray hairs from the low bun she always wore, and Alex couldn’t take her eyes from the way they whipped back and forth in the light of the setting sun. “Are you listening, Alex? That’s the most important thing to remember. Up.”

By then, Alex had learned that participating in the story was the best way to get Aunt Bev to stop talking. Otherwise, she’d push and push until someone acknowledged she was right. So Alex had countered with the only logical thing she could think of. “Why would a tree swallow me?”

Aunt Bev’s small eyes had widened in shock. “What do you think they eat?”

“Water? Nutrients and stuff from the soil?”

“Pfft.” Aunt Bev had leaned in close, so her nose nearly touched Alex’s, and poked her in the chest with a bony hand. “That’s what they want us to believe. Trees lie, Alexandra. They manipulate. Don’t ever forget.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Your father didn’t make it out, but you can.” Aunt Bev had nodded. “It’s possible. You remember that.”

“Daddy—”

“You remember, Alexandra!”



Alex had started to cry. She hadn't meant to, but the conversation had turned from one of Aunt Bev's charmingly silly Old World folktales to scary. And her dad was dead, and she didn't want to deal with this.

"I'm sorry, Alexandra." Aunt Bev had pulled her into a bony embrace. Alex had stiffened. She loved her aunt, but hugging her had always felt like touching a skeleton. "People give up is the thing, but there are stories. People *have* escaped."

"You know them?" Alex had asked.

Then her mother had come onto the porch with puffy red eyes, so Aunt Bev had not answered.

Now, in the tree, Alex inhaled the hot, moist air. It tasted tangy and smelled like wet leaves, but with an undercurrent of rot. The sound of trickling water caught her attention and, with only a few steps and a well-placed shove through one of the thickets, she found a stream. Surely she was dreaming. She'd taken a hard knock to the head and was having a very realistic coma-dream brought on by Aunt Bev's stories. Trees simply did not have rivers inside them.

*Trees lie, Alexandra.*

"Hello."

Alex whirled toward the small voice and saw an equally small girl. The red plastic umbrella the girl held open above her head

would have smacked Alex if she hadn't stepped back, but then her foot slid out from under her and she was on the ground, with pain radiating through her tailbone and up her spine. The girl bent at the waist to peer down at her.

"Where did you come from?" Alex asked. The girl's overalls were tucked into bright yellow galoshes. Two blond pigtails hung past her ears.

"There is no 'from,'" the girl said.

Alex stood unsteadily. "I mean, what are you doing here? Where are your parents?"

The girl cocked her head. "I do not understand your query."

"I—"

"Come. I'll show you to your post."

"Wait." Alex cringed. If she'd had doubts about being awake before, the throbbing in her back pushed them aside. "How did I get here? Where's the door?"

"Come. I'll show you to your post."

Alex limped to catch up. Maybe her "post" was near a door. Either way, she wasn't losing sight of the only person in this weird place. "Hang on," she said. The girl wasn't running, but the only hint of her now was a sliver of red bouncing in and out of the foliage. Alex was losing her, then rustling nearby distracted her, and the sliver was gone.

The riverbank had grown steep. Alex turned back, and a cliff had formed behind her as she'd walked. Ahead was a traversable rocky path, level with the stream, but if she went back, she'd have to climb a rock face. *Always go up, Alexandra*, her Aunt had said.

Indecisiveness took hold. She was not a rock climber. She'd tried it once on a fiasco of a first date that had ended in epic humiliation and a trip to the emergency room. As a method of saving her own life, it was not at the top of her list.

Now whimpering noises were coming from the same area as the rustling was before. That was it; Alex would investigate. Since the girl with the umbrella was gone, maybe the maker of the noise could help, or at least give her information. She pushed through the brush, wishing for a machete or something to cut it away and then froze.

It was a woman. Sort of.

"He-hello?" Alex said.

"Do not understand," it said. "Query."

It—she—grew out of the ground. Or into it? Alex might have thought she was buried waist-deep, except that everything about her was wrong. Her torso was off-kilter, and one of her arms stretched behind her and plunged into the mud. Leaves



sprouted off of its bark-like surface. The tendrils shooting off her head looked more like vines than hair.

She eyed Alex. “Understand,” she said.

“What are you? What happened to you?” Fear snaked its way deep into Alex’s core. She’d been focused so much on how to get out of here that it hadn’t occurred to her to consider what would happen if she couldn’t.

“Absorbed.” Its mouth crooked up into an approximation of a smile.

Alex ran. She stumbled, then scrambled up the nearest embankment. *Up*. Aunt Bev’s voice echoed through the brush, off the running stream, on the cool breeze that brushed over the sweat pouring down the back of Alex’s neck. She knew it was only in her head, but the hoarse accent pounded every time a sharp rock jabbed her hand. *Up*.

Her mother must be frantic. Alex had been out of the house for over a year, but since her father died, Alex always called after a long car trip. Or maybe they’d already found the accident. Maybe the cops were knocking on the door right now and Adam was grumbling about having to pause Call of Duty to answer the freakin’ door.

She paused in her climb and closed her eyes against the image. She would not think of her brother right now. Would not

think of adding to her family's grief. Or her own. She would move.

*Up.*

The climb was treacherous, and dirt shifted from under her feet every few steps, making her wobble and grab at the nearest branch or plant sticking out of the soil. But the roots didn't sink deep into the steep hill, so the likelihood of it holding was questionable. More often than not, she ended up sliding down, sometimes further than she'd managed to climb.

By the time she reached a flat enough space to rest, her muscles burned with fatigue. She collapsed and rolled away from the edge of the cliff, breathing heavily.

"Made yourself quite a climb."

Alex managed not to scream, but she almost rolled off the side. The man whose voice had nearly sent her over the edge was sitting on a log close enough to touch her. His white hair almost reached his knees, and his face was a mass of wrinkles, but his eyes didn't betray as much age as his body seemed to.

"Who are you?" Alex asked, impressed with the calmness of her voice as well as her ability to speak at all considering the climb she just made.

"Richard Louis Edmunton III. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Would you care for some tea?"

“I’m—Tea?”

“Oh, how rude of me.” He stood and began to shuffle between the log and the brush behind it, appearing now and again with furniture and dishes and finally a steaming pot of tea. “Please,” he said. “Sit.” He motioned to a chair he’d placed on the other side of a table he’d set next to the log.

Alex stared at him, then decided to go with it. He wasn’t any stranger than the girl with the umbrella or the half-buried woman, and he seemed to have more sense. Maybe she could get some answers about how to get out of here. She smiled and took the chair. “Thank you.”

He poured and offered her an unchipped cup, keeping a chipped one for himself. It rattled on the saucer. She was parched and didn’t want to be rude—she wanted information, after all—but she was afraid to drink anything that came from this place. “No, thanks. I, um...” She looked around.

He chuckled. “You have nothing to worry about, child. Its sole purpose is to refresh you for your journey.” He leaned forward and she was struck by the suddenly shrewd look in his eyes. “You’re already dead anyway. You may as well enjoy some tea.”

She took a sip to appease him. “I’m not dead.”

He sat back and smiled, again the kindly old man. “Of course you are, dear. We all of us are.”

“That’s ridiculous. We’re here, talking. I can see you.” She leaned across the table and pushed him. “I can touch you.”

“I mean out *there*, Miss. Where you’re trying to go. You’re dead out there. There’s nothing to go back to.”

Alex swallowed, letting the idea of that—the weight of it—sink in. “That can’t be true. And how do you know where I’m going anyway?”

“Everyone who passes by is looking for the same, and I’ve been here to see many pass. I have no reason to think you’re different.”

Alex’s pulse throbbed against the delicate skin of her throat. She swallowed back her anticipation, trying not to sound too eager. “How long have you been here? You must know where there’s a door!”

He snorted. “I don’t think time much matters here. Or geography for that matter.”

Alex slumped.

“But...”

She perked up, although a glimmer in his eyes sent warning shivers up the back of her neck and into her hairline. *Trees lie, Alexandra*. She had not forgotten.

“I’ve heard rumors of a door, but down there.” He pointed off the cliff. “You’re going the wrong way.”

She nodded and forced her mouth into a smile, not wanting to show her disbelief. Maybe she could at least find out what happened to people here. “If you know how to get out, why haven’t you ever tried to leave?”

“Oh, I’m doing very well. Treated me fine here. Got my tea, got a view. Room with a view.” He cackled, and Alex recoiled.

“But you managed to keep control of everything. Your memories? And who you are? You’re not like the woman I saw down at the bottom.”

He cocked his head. The cup shook so much that she understood why it was chipped and wondered how it even held liquid. With his other hand, he picked up a stick and jabbed her in the stomach. “Can’t say as I know.”

She grabbed for purchase, but there was nothing but air.

Her body slammed into the ground with such force that everything went black. When she woke up, she was sure not one bone could possibly be whole. Her insides roared. The idea of motion was both hilarious and terrifying. So she lay there for what felt like hours, staring at the greenery above her. It spiraled up, a dizzying circle of greens and browns around a column of soft light.

*Up.*

How could she be alive? She wasn't a climber by even the lowest standard, but she'd made it far enough that the fall should have killed her. Unless...Dread slithered up her spine. Unless Edmunton was right.

She forced herself to her knees, then to her feet. This place would not beat her. She would not leave her family with another empty car. Another empty casket.

She started the climb again.

This time when she reached a ledge, she peered over the edge before making any moves. She squinted at every shadow, gauging the possibility that it might be another Edmunton, there to shove her off again. Once, she heard a faint noise from behind the shrubbery. It sounded like her mother's voice. Exhausted as she was, she remembered. *Trees lie*. She ignored her curiosity and fatigue and drove forward.

A crack of sunlight broke through the cover. She was close. She pushed through the aches in her body and shoved her hand through the crack, then yanked her torso through. The cool breeze and rich scent of hay made her dizzy with joy and exhaustion. But her body could go no further. Her eyes drifted closed there, half in and half out of the tree.

Twilight was falling when Alex opened her eyes again, and though it felt impossible, she pulled herself fully out of the tree and crawled away from it. Tall grass scratched at her forearms, and her fingers dug into the dirt. This was real; she had made it.

The car was missing, though. She tottered around on wobbly legs. Tire tracks led from the road to the tree, but there was no sign of the demolished Taurus. She squinted into the setting sun, confused, but all of that faded when she saw a shadow coming toward her. Her heart pounded and her cheeks hurt from the width of her smile. She waved, wanting to run toward her savior, but her exhaustion forced her to endure the agony of waiting for him to come out of the glare of the sun.

But when the figure materialized, instead of only the clear outline of a person, a dome also hovered above his head and moved as the shadow-person moved.

Not possible.

*Trees lie, Alexandra.*

Alex surveyed the area again. She kept an eye on the figure, but he seemed in no rush to reach her. The tree was right, and the road. The field was the same. It was all the same. A sob worked its way through her chest, but she held it in. This was *right*. She was home.

A passerby was just carrying an umbrella. That was all. She couldn't be afraid of umbrellas for the rest of her life. She held her ground and waited.

Alex heard the girl's yellow galoshes squelching before she could see her face. She wondered what made them squeak like that. The grass in the field was dry. Then her legs gave out.

When the girl finally arrived, she cocked her head, as if she expected Alex to speak, but Alex had nothing to say. The girl nodded then, and smiled. "Come," she said. "I'll show you to your post."



Katharyn Howd Machan

## Another Look at the Fairy Tale

I entertained while you were gone.  
Mr. Fox came. Mr. Fox came.  
Booze and cards and fa-de-la:  
I wore my lace and sprayed perfume  
in all my corners, hip hooray.  
Candles! Corkscrews! Music bright  
as the center of the Devil's eye:  
Mr. Fox and I touched hard  
with whip and blade and handcuffs tight  
as all the promises you made  
forever on our wedding night.

Joyce Goldenstern

## Cat Boy: Tale of the Temple

after “The Boy Who Drew Cats,” a Japanese folktale

Her fingers ached wanting to sew a circle around her youngest son. She and her husband toiled each and every day, brows sweating as they tilled the earth and pitched the hay. Her husband did not understand their youngest son who walked like a cat: He understood only the sons and daughters willing to work, the ones who spoke of pork bellies and swung their arms as they strode.

She wanted to sew a circle around him; she wanted to stuff him back into her womb. Oh, the wrath of his father and the scorn of his siblings whose chores he did not share or attend to. Mareo—that was his name, her youngest son—drew circles on paper and the circles billowed into cats with whiskers and pointed ears and tails that circled the circles of their bodies, cats with moon-haunted eyes. Mareo sat in a corner and drew cats. That is what he did. He could not help himself. Small and weak,

but clever and lithe, he drew cats and cats and cats. But no one knew why.

“How can he make his way in the world? How will he survive?” fretted the father. The mother said, “He is not strong. Yet he moves as gracefully as a cat. He draws cats and dances the cat dance. Perhaps, he is clever enough to be a priest. Perhaps his gifts are spiritual.” So the mother followed the path, carefully marked on a map, to the temple. Little Mareo trailed behind practicing the steps of the cat dance, elbows and knees akimbo. When they arrived at the temple, the kind priest, sitting on a high-backed chair, beckoned little Mareo to stand beside him and then questioned him, and Mareo answered the questioning cleverly. The priest said, Yes. Mareo was a clever boy and could learn to be a priest. Still the mother ached and wanted to sew a circle around her son to protect him. Before she left, she whispered a secret in Mareo’s ear, but Mareo, though he was clever, did not understand its meaning.

He did well enough at first. The priest praised his clever observations and his obedience. The priest approved his prayers and his recitations. But Mareo could not help himself. He longed to draw cats. He longed to draw cats where they should not have been drawn at all: on heavy wooden doors, on the great pillars that held up the temple beams, on the sacred silk screens of the

temple. One day during study time in the great hall of the temple, Mareo drew the cats that he longed to draw. He drew cats whose eyes smoldered with slow burning fire. When the priest walked into the great dark hall of the temple that night, he felt thousands of eyes glowing in the dark.

It had been wrong to draw cats in the temple: on the heavy wooden doors, on the great pillars that held up the temple beams, on the sacred silk screens of the temple. The cats served no religious purpose. They mocked what was holy. Or so the priest told him. Mareo could no longer study to be a priest. He could no longer stay in the temple. “Goodbye,” the kind priest whispered. Then the priest imparted good counsel: “Do not sleep in large spaces, curl up in small ones.” These words of advice echoed the ones his mother had whispered in his ear upon her departure. Mareo wandered away from the temple without map or destination, elbows and knees akimbo, hoping, perhaps, to find another temple that might take him in.

And so just before dark, he entered a city whose temple, brightly lit, stood atop a hill, beckoning him to its doors. As he entered those heavy doors, he saw that the great temple hall was empty, deserted. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Suddenly Mareo longed to draw cats on heavy wooden doors, on the great pillars that held up the temple beams, on the sacred silk screens

of the temple. And so, having remembered to bring his pencils in his pencil box, he did just that. He drew cats.

As Mareo finished his task, the temple darkened, and the bright light that had beckoned him now glowed faintly from thousands of smoldering cat eyes. Tired from his work, the boy yawned and longed to stretch out to sleep on the floor in the great temple hall. But he remembered the words of the priest, which echoed the warning of his mother, “Do not sleep in large spaces, curl up in small ones.”

He found a dark closet, dark as a mother’s womb, a place to curl up and fall asleep. And so he said his prayers, curled up, and fell asleep. But about midnight a horrible racket awakened him. He heard the hissing of wild animals, the gnawing and gnashing of their teeth. Mareo curled himself up even more, curled up into a tight ball to contain himself and tucked his elbows into his knees and cupped his ears with his palms so he could hear the comforting murmur of the sea but not the cacophony that surrounded him. He did not peek out from the chinks in the closet but squeezed his eyes tightly for many hours, until the din subsided in the early dawn.

As he slowly opened the door of the closet, Mareo took in horrific destruction: broken glass, pools of blood, matted bits of torn fur and flesh. As he stood in the midst, he followed with his

eyes a smear of bloody cat prints that led to a silk screen, where he had drawn cats the night before, but now circles of wet blood lined the lips of those cats whose once placid fur now crackled on arched spines and on whose claws clumps of bloody grizzle hung. In the middle of the temple floor lay a dead rat, larger and heavier than the sows his siblings tended on his parents' farm. The people of that village had lived for many months in mortal terror of the giant rodent, and the priests had deserted the temple because of it.

And so what to say of this tale? ...that we must learn to trust our talents? ...or that we must listen to the wise words of our mothers and priests? ...that we must follow our bliss? ...that we must bow before the power of art? I, for one, cannot completely believe in such lessons nor choose the right one, and yet I marvel at irony and symmetry and am haunted by images. Mareo was an unusual boy, a boy of dark compulsions, who had to draw cats and who could not live with his family on the pig farm—a boy now of the cat clan, unwitting hero of this unlikely tale.





Natural Image on Stone | Richard LeBlond

Angelic Rodgers

## When We Were Witches

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, the few female role models that I encountered in fiction and film were outsiders—Amazons and witches. Whether it was Diana Prince twirling around to become Wonder Woman when she wasn't batting her eyelashes at Steve Trevor, or Samantha Stevens of *Bewitched* saving the day while serving up dinner to her husband Darrin's boss, these women were careful not to take the credit and not to step outside of their accepted roles, at least not within sight of others.

While I have no children of my own, I do have grand nephews and nieces. I know that my grand-niece Natalia is living in a far different world than that of my childhood and young adulthood, and for that I am grateful. For Natalia, the world is one where by the time she goes on dates, all fifty states will likely have legalized same-sex marriage. While the gender pay gap is still not shut, things are far more equitable now that more women are becoming professionals. For instance, my wife's



medical school class group was pretty evenly divided between males and females. It's comforting to know that female medical doctors are no longer going to be the minority. Had I known we'd make such progress, I probably would have made some different choices. But at the time, I didn't know that such choices really existed.

"Make room for me... make... room... for... me!" I was saying. I woke up with my hands on my husband's hip as he lay on his side. I was pushing him, and it was like pushing a boulder up a hill. We were both confused and dazed from sleep. I'd never slept on that side of the bed before, and once he woke up enough to realize what was happening, he sort of laughed and scooted over.

"Okay," he said. "If you want to sleep on this side, get in here."

I was in my early twenties and newly married. As I neared my first college graduation at an age older than my mother or sisters had been when they were married, I just sort of thought that getting married was what was supposed to happen. So, we got married. Growing up in the South, I had no concept of women who were gay. Even though I dated plenty of guys in high school who turned out to be gay, the whole idea of gayness was no

more real to me than that of Jack Tripper on *Three's Company*. Even Paul Lynde of *Hollywood Squares* and Charles Nelson Reilly of *Match Game* were merely snarky funny guys.

So, we both just laughed it off when I woke up asking for “room for me.” I realize now that in marrying a man, I was trying to play out the plots in books and TV shows that everyone else saw as the norm, but that to me were far more speculative than reflective of my family life growing up in many ways.

As a kid, I read a lot of stories in which females were in charge or in same-sex environments. I realize now that Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* certainly resonated much differently with me than it must have with my two older sisters. Whereas I was perfectly happy that Jo didn’t wind up with Laurie (and rather pissed off that she wound up marrying at all), I suspect that my two sisters were relieved when she married and let her hair grow back. The *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* series was also a favorite for all of us, but I was far more interested in Nancy’s butch friend, George, than in the romance between Nancy and Ned. While not technically labeled “speculative fiction,” my early reading list certainly had spots of speculation and fabulation that I hung on to for dear life. It went beyond anything I could imagine that Nancy Drew was left to her own devices to solve

crimes and drive around in that fancy convertible with her girlfriends. It could happen, I'm sure, but for me as a kid reading in the seventies and eighties, their lives were just as fantastic and out of reach as being Buffy the Vampire Slayer was to the girls who came after me.

Before Nancy Drew and George held my attention with their spunk and moxie, I met Dorothy Gale of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, first through the screen adaptation and later through the book. Like most girls in the twentieth century, I loved Dorothy, and I wished for my own ruby slippers. I longed to *be* her, or at least be her sister. Dorothy was the first strong female I saw on the screen; she wasn't in search of a man, nor did she need a prince to sweep in and save her by "awakening" her. On the contrary, it was Dorothy who saved all the male figures in the story and it was the witches who were powerful, at least until Dorothy came along. After all, all Dorothy had to do was dump water or a farmhouse on a bad witch to get rid of her, and the good witches were simply there to tell her she had the answers from the start.

In her collection *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Margaret Atwood puts forth a definition of speculative fiction: "For me," she writes, "'speculative fiction' means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon

travel and such-things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books." The *Oz* books fit that idea of a space on earth where possible alternatives actually take place. Obviously, there are no talking tin men, scarecrows, or lions in the real world, but as the book and movie showed, those were likely Dorothy's dream versions of male figures in her life. And the wizard, the Great and Powerful Oz, used technology, not magic. If Dorothy could change her life by simply envisioning her world in a new way, surely I could as well.

I related to Dorothy in a lot of ways. We lived on a farm in Arkansas, and, as a result, my nearest sister and I helped our mother with the daily chores that were in no way gender-specific. When we were very young, Dad was mentally absent for a long time as a result of the Vietnam War, which would claim his life some forty-five years later through Agent Orange-related lymphoma. In my youth, though, no indication of that monster beneath the surface was visible—only the detached, foul-mouthed beer drinker who was always loving to his kids when he wasn't calling us "shithead." He would give big bear hugs, crushing me in his arms, but I hated to say "ouch" for fear he'd let me go and Mom would give him the look. More importantly,

he told all three of his girls that there was nothing we couldn't do. And for all of his rough edges, he respected our mother deeply and trusted her with all of our well being.

In those early years, he was a farrier and horse trainer, so we led an odd gypsy existence every weekend, going to the race track where our mother helped out at the concession stand, leaving my sister Renee and I to entertain ourselves. We loved movies like *Escape to Witch Mountain*, reveling in the idea that kids could have so much power. Renee convinced me she was a witch one day when she told me a girl we were watching was going to fall down, and she did. Our witchhood was confirmed by a swollen taste bud I showed her, which she assured me was proof. When we weren't playing witches, we'd pretend my Barbie dolls were Amazons from the same island that Wonder Woman came from.

Later, once Dad had put himself back together enough that he could work for someone else, he'd be gone on night shifts on nearby oil rigs. Eventually he was gone for a month at a time, working overseas in places I still have yet to visit—first Brazil and then the Sudan. So my mom, sister, and I had a veritable “herland” (a term borrowed from Charlotte Perkins Gilman) at home. Perhaps that is why I sought out stories that helped me see the possibilities when women ran things.

One of my favorite stories by Gilman, “If I Were a Man” (1914), is a simple story of a woman who wakes up one day in her husband’s body. Gilman assures us that, “If ever there was a true woman it was Mollie Mathewson, yet she was wishing heart and soul she was a man.” Suddenly, Mollie has pockets in her clothes and doesn’t have to carry a purse. The seats on the train fit her, her feet just meeting the floor, not dangling above. I remember thinking how far we’d come as women from the turn of the century; even though our mother made us dresses sometimes, we mainly preferred jeans and western shirts with pearl buttons for fancy wear, and t-shirts with those same jeans on normal days. Renee even went through a phase when she refused to wear shorts. She took her role as the man of the family when Dad was absent pretty seriously, that one.

As the youngest of three girls, my position in the sisterhood was an odd one; I wasn’t even really supposed to be alive. I was born extremely prematurely—due in February and born the previous November. Our mother lost another premature child about a year after I was born, and I was always her buddy while Renee was more Dad’s. As a result, we tended to mirror their temperaments, and I was the most likely to be found in the kitchen with Mom or asking her to teach me to sew. We have an older sister—she’s twelve years older than I am—who didn’t

quite make it to medical school after getting pregnant and marrying her first husband. She blamed Dad for pressuring her into going into pre-med. Renee felt the pressure to be his stand in. I, on the other hand, didn't really have the same pressures. I changed my major to English from pre-med within weeks of starting college. I found refuge in other people's lives and alternate realities found in the pages of books.

The last four years before I left for college, it was mainly Mom and I, Renee having followed her high school sweetheart, a Navy man, to Hawaii to marry, and Dad off in Louisiana attempting to get a new oil company off the ground. At first, the alternate realities in books didn't seem foreign to me; but then I went to college in Conway, Arkansas, and the longer I was outside of the female-centric bubble that was our family farm, the more I started to crave speculative fiction. I responded to the hetero-normative world by shadowing what my mother and sisters had done. I had married and felt I was expected to start having kids. And as I studied works like Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which were grounded in stark reality, I had to find an antidote to that world that I found stifling and smothering.

So began my foray into early feminist texts and speculative fiction. I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis about American regionalists like Mary Wilkins Freeman, who wrote about tiny rebellions like that of Sarah Penn, who, in “The Revolt of Mother” (1890), takes over her husband’s new barn as the house that he promised to build her years before. I fantasized about growing old with my sister in the way of the two old sisters who watch out for each other in Freeman’s “A Mistaken Charity” (1887), living in an isolated cabin far from the rest of the world. The antidote was strong enough that I was able to tolerate getting married to a guy, although that reality would prove to be too foreign to me to sustain.

Shortly after the “make room for me” incident, I started having panic attacks. I would wake up unable to breathe, choking, sure I was dying. I found myself hyperventilating when I felt boxed in—in traffic or simply in my living room, feeling the walls closing in on me. One afternoon, my then husband and I were about to watch a movie and I had a full-blown panic attack in the middle of the living room. While the nighttime episodes were pretty routine at this point, this was the first time one happened in broad daylight.

“I can’t breathe...I feel like I can’t get air in my lungs,” I said. I was wringing my hands, pacing, unable to sit still long enough



to calm down. I started to hyperventilate and my fingers and nose were going numb.

He just sighed. “Are we going to have to take you to see somebody?” he asked. “I’m seriously worried there’s something wrong with you.”

I wasn’t ready to see someone about it—I would later seek counseling, but at that point in my life I subconsciously knew that it was too dangerous to really talk to someone about it all. I couldn’t face it yet. Instead, I picked up my pen and started writing again.

As a teenager, I’d written a lot of poetry and the odd short story. I knew, even when I started college, that I didn’t really want to be a doctor. I wanted to be a writer. I’d become an English major mainly in hopes of supporting myself while I wrote on the side. So once I’d found my academic voice and could manage to keep up with my coursework while also writing fiction, I started a novel that was initially rooted in a recurring dream in which I was facing a clock that was counting down. Instead of counting down minutes, though, the clock was spinning backwards by year, until the year of my birth. I would watch the clock, panic-stricken, knowing that as it wound backwards in time, I would cease to exist. The dream persisted, and I started writing about it as a way to figure it out.

The novel focused on a female protagonist who was trying to come to terms with her mother's life choices and their relationship. My own relationship with my mother has always been a close one, but there was also always a running undercurrent of tension, especially as I grew up and realized that many choices she made were different from ones I would have made. Staying with my father despite the normal awful things married people do to each other, for instance. It didn't take a therapist to figure out that the dream was about unsettled questions about my own existence, had she made other choices. But she crafted her own way through life, weathering the tornadoes and standing her ground. She didn't need to go to Oz to figure herself out; she already knew who she was.

So the novel, which never was finished, became a working out of her life if she'd made other choices. In that speculative space I wrestled with my own identity through the lens of my fictional mother. Many years later, after I stuffed the half-finished manuscript in a drawer, I was able to understand that her choices didn't have to be my choices, that I did exist, and that it was up to me to ensure I thrived. I dropped a house on the evil witch inside who kept telling me that I couldn't be who I really was. I'd been wearing the ruby slippers all along.

And, in the midst of all of my angst about choosing a less traditional path—by going for a doctorate, contemplating divorce, and moving off by myself to Alabama, far from home—I found Gilman’s *Herland*.

In the pages of *Herland* (1915) I found a world of women who were totally self-sufficient, even down to the reproductive process. Just like back at home, these women were capable and smart. That one story led me to other texts from the nineteenth century by women who envisioned worlds where women were in power. I’d spend years working with those earlier texts, including the possible inspiration for Gilman’s work, Mary Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (1889).

While works from the nineteenth century were interesting to me, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) was a revelation. Here was a novel that was contemporary and that was about the world I was living in. With the harsh realities of racism, classism, and sexism juxtaposed to a world where gender is fluid and ever changing, the text helped me begin to question the world outside my personal “herland.” Here was a story in the modern age—the age when women could vote, when we had pockets, when Gloria Steinem existed. We were roaring, but not loud enough, it seemed. The fact that I had married out of some stupid expectation that it was just what women did proved that

to me. I encountered Piercy's novel during graduate school, when I was still married but no longer living with the husband I had tried to push aside to make room for the "me" that was coming out. I suddenly had room to explore and decide my life on my terms in my own female space.

And explore I did; I started to read everything I could get my hands on that helped me make sense of the identity I was forming. Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) fell into my hands just as I was coming to terms with my sexuality, and also with what gender really means to me. Whereas I had found androgynous Luciente of *Woman on the Edge of Time* fascinating, the idea of gender neutrality didn't really stick with me; I knew the normal binary wasn't working for me, but neither was the absence of gender. I was constantly faced with scrutiny from students who felt uncomfortable with my gender-neutral style of dress. When they weren't asking me about why I didn't have kids, they might make some comment about how short my hair was, which in the deep south was seen as an affront to femininity. Over a holiday break, I called my answering machine to find someone had left an obscene message about my breasts. It was clear to me that my attempts to be androgynous and to hide my femininity were not working, but the answering machine message only made me more determined not to

conform to the hyper-feminine norms of Alabama. Russ' various female protagonists from different planes of existence and of varying degrees of femininity and butchness helped me navigate it all and to reject gender as imposed on me.

Eventually my husband and I divorced, but not until we'd both already fallen in love with people of the same sex. I came out with a vengeance and he retreated back not only into the closet, but further into the Southern Baptist church. Last I heard, he'd gone to seminary after living with his mother and finding the church again. While he retreated into familiar patterns, I chose to follow characters like those in *The Female Man*; for a time, my different versions of myself circled around each other, taunting and testing each other until I finally came through the other side, realizing that all the parts of me are valuable and important. Whereas in those early days I rebelled directly against the feminine ideal that my students seemed to expect, I now am far more fluid in my gender representation and don't feel the need to dress to rebel.

Speculative fiction made it possible for me to see beyond the expected and accepted, and to realize that reality can be what I choose to make it. In my early stages of coming out, while I was working on my PhD dissertation, I became interested in lesbian

separatist utopias. While the gender fluidity of texts like *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Female Man* was attractive, I returned to *Herland* and also read Suzy McKee Charnas' *Motherlines* (1976). Both of those texts are far more overtly political and direct. Whereas Piercy and Russ turned to different planes of existence and intersecting time periods, Gilman and Charnas insisted on leaving all of their characters on Earth to carve out their own places on the planet in direct rebellion against male authority. And they were very much women. While they could reproduce without men, they didn't become gender neutral; their femaleness was simply raw and unadorned.

My dissertation project started as a comparative work of outwardly utopian texts by both men and women. But as I started my initial binge reading and research, I realized how boring and really pointless that exercise was, and instead started looking to fiction by nineteenth-century women that seemed to be speculative and utopian in tone. What resulted was a manuscript that ended with Gilman, but that stretched back to her aunt, that paragon of domesticity, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

The typical interpretation of texts by women like Stowe, Alcott, Freeman, and Sarah Orne Jewett is that for the most part they support and reify traditional women's roles. However, when we look at texts like Jewett's *Deephaven* (1877), Stowe's *The Pearl*

*of Orr's Island* (1861), and Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* (1901), what we find is that these women often wrote about alternative communities—ones that existed right in front of others, not on different planes or separate from civilization. These strong female protagonists lived in the middle of it all and still rose above it to create strong non-traditional family bonds among women who cared for each other and worked to ensure each other's happiness, even as they inhabited the same physical world as their male counterparts.

A decade or more later, I now wonder about the future of speculative fiction for women. Our world fits us in better ways than it ever has before. Hopefully, we've moved past a time where we have to neutralize all gender. My grand-niece, Natalia, will not watch *The Wizard of Oz* with the same set of eyes that I did; she's surrounded by women in her family who get the job done. She also has heroines like Hermione Granger and Katniss Everdeen to show her that, just as her great-grandfather taught her mother and aunts, girls really can do and be whatever they want, even if they aren't Amazons or witches.

Rebekah Rempel

## Red Riding Hood Speaks

Even before my encounter with the wolf, I wasn't as little  
as they thought. I was old enough to know  
desire, the way it bounds through the blood  
like a rabbit beneath the shadow of an owl. I knew  
its grip. Despite what I told Mother  
I was never afraid to leave the path.

After the wolf, the woodcutter's son tried to take me  
again, where the moss was soft and the wings of sparrows  
flickered like eyelids among the branches.  
He was even more insistent, thinking me  
a damsel needing rescue, no doubt excited by  
his father's boasts of bravery. His lies.

But the brush of his hair, rough  
callused hands, teeth grazing my lips, his hot breath  
made the same maggot-curl of nausea rise in my throat  
as when I opened Grandmother's door that day  
to meet the wolf's rot, hunger  
in his gaze, deception my only chance—  
*Why Grandmother what yellow eyes you have—*

and I shoved him away. How surprised he must've been  
by my strength, my swiftness as I fled  
through the trees, cloak a crimson river behind me.



I know I'll never find a man now  
gentle enough to touch me. And I can't bear  
the thought of giving birth—not after Grandmother  
slid from the wolf's engorged belly, warm and glistening  
with his blood, her carving knife  
tight in my grip.

You see, the woodcutter arrived too late. I won't forget  
his shock, mouth opening and closing like a trout's.  
But he said he wanted to spare my parents  
the truth, for who would take  
their daughter's hand in marriage if everyone knew?  
What lady is capable of such butchery?

It doesn't hurt that he became the village hero,  
cheered in the streets, toasted with mugs of ale at the tavern.

Meanwhile, Grandmother won't speak  
and I still wake from dreams  
swinging that blade, darkness gushing over me, screams  
coursing from my mouth. Fatigue has tread  
shadowed paths around my eyes.

Mother and Father worry, whisper long into the night,  
but they don't understand. They haven't stared death  
in the face, moved close, felt it breathe  
upon them, kept their voices steady  
when they said, *Yellow as the sunflowers I picked for you  
along the way. Let me find a knife to trim the stems.*

They don't look to the sky and see  
a fang in the sliver of moon—or when it's full,  
the rolling white of an eye.

Alexa Doran

## Wendy Darling Adopts the Slogan “Do or Die”

On one side I could fly. As in take off. As in fuck the fetid roots. Sky surging against my underside for miles. Peter, another live coal sputtered from earth, sifts air at my side or. Or. I can continue to canter no further than the clock, glossed over and tick

ticking, familiar, sober, knowing there is certain stock in belonging to my mother, not a man who thinks age can dissolve like sugar cubes in soda pop. Still I stand a serial believer in answers that come in god bursts, that float in, magisterial and undeniable,

reckless in the face of fractions and dirt. So go on—flank me with your diagrams. Graph my desire; stencil it in stubborn red lines. As if there were an axis, two spent and lovely sides, propped like pillows, ready to absorb every curve, every decline. Not Peter,

his face pressed in my apron, his breath on my thighs, the soft clutch, clutch of his tongue—it begs like long division dearies, divine to me the cost, what are two souls spit like so much starfunk through the ether, if my footprint is the cost?



Forgetting Nonsense | Nicholas Perry





German Lullaby | Nicholas Perry

Katherine Murray

## Why Don't You

Hans and Gretta hold hands in the woods. Two solitary figures among the charred trees, their forms rising over the deadfall, they are diverging vectors—two incompatible lines that intersect at this unhappy point. Gretta is the beating of wings; the screech of a bird as it tears for the sky, singed but determined to live. Hans is the last rattling breath of a body about to turn into a corpse; the oak that was too badly burned to survive, that's fading away in slow motion.

Turn the page, and they've moved farther on. New deadfall, new dead trees; they're still holding hands. Gretta grew up in this forest. Hans allows her to lead him because it pleases her; because, if he follows, he won't be alone when he dies. Someone will witness his end, see how badly the flames have destroyed him. One night, when he lies next to Gretta and doesn't wake up, she'll feel awful about it and cry, and that is worth something to Hans.

The season is getting colder. Gretta's breath moves like ghosts through the air. She is not unaware that Hans is dragging his feet; every day, he gets harder to move. She leaves a trail of breadcrumbs, coaxing him farther along. To Hans, this is a charade; the world is woods, and woods, and woods; there's no getting out. He wants to tell Gretta that this is the case. He wants to say, "Please, let's stop walking, and rest here, so it can be finished." He wants to say, "I once believed I was happy."

Flashback to the joy of Hans' life. He lives in a gingerbread house with his mother and father, plays sports with his friends, goes fishing and hunting, has frogs in his pockets, belongs. When he is fifteen years old, he kisses a girl with braids in her hair and feels ecstatic all day. Sometimes at odd moments, he traces his lips, pleased with himself and his daring. There are more girls, more adventures, more feelings of tumbling delight; a party at his best friend's house where he drinks and falls down; tries to seem cool and suave. Sweaty palms, bright eyes—he is handsome. Clean-cut. Catholic without feeling strongly about it. A gentle, conservative girl, also clean-cut, also with braids, smiles at him and his heart beats like wings; his eyes go soft; he screws up his courage, says something funny—these are the feats he has won. There are christenings, and weddings—his own, where he flexes his toes in too-tight new shoes, standing under an arch on

the grass, and the girl—the same girl—smiles at him; white dress with a veil, a minister, cake, two hundred guests, and some music. He's grinning; ecstatic; this is the happiest day of his life. His son is born. He and his wife both work steady jobs. He ventures outdoors on the weekends; admires the sky, goes hiking, has no expectation that life could be other than this. They buy a dining room table that holds many guests. They host a party, and he's told not to help in the kitchen, so he sits on the stoop with his friends; laughs; learns a rude word for tattoos. He teaches his son how to ride a bike, wearing a ratty old sweatshirt, as twilight's about to set in. When he succeeds, he feels a tug at his heart, as though this is one of many days to come where his son will outgrow him and peddle away. There are school concerts, promotions—a flirty coworker he doesn't tell his wife about. He parks his shoes on the shoe tree when he gets home; parks his butt on the couch; waits for the sound of his family—of life in the house—long after his family is gone.

In the woods, now, with Gretta, Hans thinks that life was just fattening him up for the kill. He was given a false sense of well-being, allowed to gorge himself on sweets, never suspecting—never having any opportunity to suspect—the horror that lies at the end. The trip inside the inferno that's left him burned enough to die and somehow not yet dead. He doesn't know



what Gretta hopes to find, but he knows that any fragile happiness of hers will be a lie—that reaching for candy just sets you up to get cooked.

Snow falls to the ground, dusting the ashes like sugar. Hans and Gretta leave greasy, dark footprints behind as they go. Hans actively pulls back against her, but never abandons the hike. Part of him wants to be wrong—wants to see Gretta drag him back out of the woods—but he doesn't dare hope for that future. Instead he complains—grows impatient with her patient walking—turns into an uglier version of Hans. He lags farther behind, jerks on her arm—never stopping, never letting go, wanting her to be the one who does it—twisting her fingers inside his grip, tripping and dragging her down—Gretta doesn't let go; she keeps holding on—he falls to his knees on the ground, in the muck from the ash and the snow, and gets dirty and wet while she drags him and, Gretta, why don't you just let him go? Why don't you just leave him there, and try to get out on your own?

Gretta grew up in this forest. She lived in a cottage—a shack—with a woman who held her inside of her womb for nine months and expelled her, screaming, into a dark, cruel world. And Gretta kept house for that woman, and tended her needs, and her moods, and suffered her insults and hate. Flashback to

Gretta, sweeping the stairs with the bristles of a broom that was broken in half when the old woman used it to beat her. Gretta, foraging out in the woods, humming to herself, safe because she is alone. Gretta, carrying water from the well. Gretta opening the windows to a burst of spring air. Gretta, the day the old woman was going to eat the dog—choking him with a belt, the old woman’s foot on his back—Gretta jumps on them, says, “Stop it! You’re going to kill him!”—gets knocked to the floor; gets hit with the belt; the dog runs away. This is the love that Gretta has known—from the cataract eyes of an old, lean dog, who thumped his tail on the floor when she’d pet him. Even as a child, in that house, with a witch, Gretta’s heart knew that she would escape, and she looked at that dog and she thought, “I’m taking you with me, when I run away. I’m going to rescue us both.” Gretta, putting the washing out. Gretta, picking the callouses on her hands, wondering when she’ll become the old woman—gnarled and broken, waiting to die. Gretta, with the sunlight on her face. Gretta, peering through the woods, in all directions, trying to find the way out. Gretta, a worthless ingrate of a daughter; Gretta, a selfish little bitch; Gretta’s been stealing the food again, hasn’t she? Gretta’s been hoarding the food, getting fat; Gretta, greedy and spiteful and ugly; Gretta, always out for herself; Gretta, now, don’t you go getting ideas; Gretta,

get back here or I swear to God—Gretta, who shoves the old woman right in; Gretta who leaves her to scream in the fire.

At night, sometimes, when she lies beside Hans, Gretta thinks of her dog and she cries. Hans never asks what she's crying about—he thinks that he knows her reply. He thinks she's crying because she dragged him, all day, through the snow while he moaned. He thinks, "I didn't ask you to do that," and rolls to the side, and counts all of the wonders he's lost before falling asleep.

If they could see themselves this way—frozen in time, and silent, lurching through each stilted moment on every fresh page—would the lives that they lead then be different? If they had a book full of pictures, and nothing to guide them in reading except for the lives they had lived—if Gretta were turning these pages, if Gretta were seeing herself in the lines and the space of a stranger, would she understand, as I do, that she is a life raft for Hans? That, for Gretta, the world can only get better, while for Hans it can't be any worse? That Hans will hold onto her hand until she lets go, or he dies, but he won't help her out of the woods?

Or would Gretta remember the sight of that dog, bounding away toward freedom, skirting the open front door—would she feel the tug on Hans' heart strings when his son finally mastered

the bike—would she be so unwilling to leave him behind that she'd simply keep holding his hand, even knowing that she was alone? Would understanding the futility of trying to pull Hans along ever cause her to give up the battle?

Gretta has no picture books to show her her own life story. In the morning, she's holding Hans' hand—she will not be the one to let go. They trudge through the charred-out remains of their lives, all alone, tilting away from each other, extending this moment of comfort before they diverge. The snow keeps on falling, faster and faster, until all the pages turn white.

Madeleine Wattenberg

## Ariel in the Bar Parking Lot at 4am

Head perched on the guardrail,  
she floundered, face and fin up,  
torso and tail slurred over the parking  
spot. Glass shards and discarded scales  
mingled—sharp objects unacquainted.  
The turquoise tail shivered, drooped  
as rain made chasms in her shell  
encrusted hair. She smelled of tequila,  
brackish backwater, lime.

One breast retained its starfish,  
while the other had been bared  
hours ago when the starfish slipped  
into a half-empty glass of LIT.

Iridescent in alcohol, she glinted  
like castoff neon light.

She wanted to touch a boy's legs,  
to cup the kneecap in a webbed palm,  
to feel it bend, to tell him  
the currents change constantly.

Passersby didn't stop; they saw only  
a washed up girl far from home,  
a sequined shawl flapping in the wind.

Brooke Larson

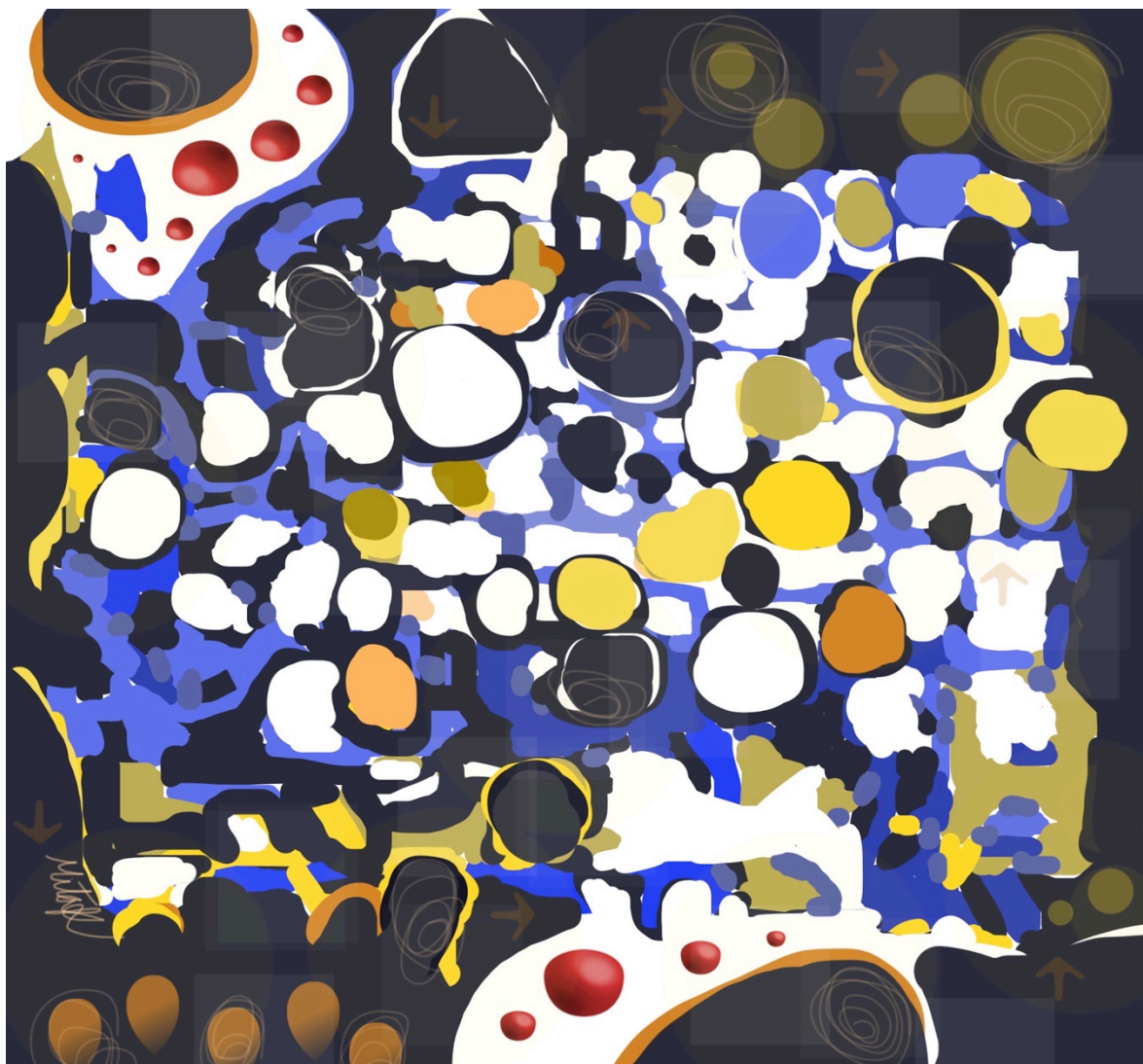
## Grumpy

Before the female come there was the stone.  
Female all wicked wiles, pale, land-lost.  
We was ground-deep, down where old things bear out,  
stood in wood frames round our earthbound forms.  
Seven: no witchy number, but wholeness,  
But now there tales it all started with she.  
Below it all be where we at, pick-axe  
In hand, to wall, to back, to forth, we go  
Hai-ho, nothin' shines nohow till you strike.  
No magic in diamonds, just hardened time  
And time ain't no mirror showin' what's real,  
It gather in dark and you work it out  
Piece by bitty piece, and call it precious.  
No blushin' no way when she kissin' on  
My apple dumplin' head and've had it  
Ribboned, smellin' me up with that perfoom.  
Bah! before the female was petrichor:  
Stone and oil and rain sendin' smell all up  
From dirt, and our unwarshed hands, caked and cracked,  
Following the lines of the dwarfing earth.

Aleph Altman-Mills

## Queen Midas

I snapped my fingers, easily turned  
bruises into jewelry. Dipped my worries  
in a cauldron of molten gold.  
They called him a God but they called me a witch,  
wanted to burn me into gold dust.  
I pinched their cheeks  
and turned them into suits of armor.  
Gradually, I'm starting to turn into gold  
myself, but that's okay—  
I've always wanted to be treasured.  
Someday, I will be a statue.  
For now, my heart is a  
hard, cold nugget of gold.  
My smile is a locket's chain.  
I don't know who wrapped it  
around my neck.



Floating Shells | Michal Mitak Mahgerefteh



Carrie Repking

## Breaking Orbit

*It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again.*

—John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*

By the time Stella and her husband Jack parked above La Merida beach, the morning's marine layer had burned off and the tide was coming in. Their arrival had been delayed by a disagreement about whether or not to wear wet suits and how much beach paraphernalia to bring. Now they hiked down a steep dirt trail from the parking lot to the shore. Stella had skipped down this path from the age of eight until she left California at twenty, but her legs at fifty were no longer steady or strong. She crab-walked sideways, skimming the ground with her fingers and palms for balance at the sheerest spots. She'd lost the wet-suit debate and sweated and chafed under a black rubber Speedo that felt like a full-body girdle.

Jack, oblivious to her difficulty, strode fifteen feet ahead in his wet suit and webbed swim gloves. He carried towels, goggles,

swim fins, face masks, and a yellow inflatable rubber raft. He reached the sand long before she did. Stella took her time. She had learned long ago not to expect him to wait for her.

With her last step from the path to the beach, all hesitation and discomfort fell away.

*Home.*

She gazed up and down the long stretch of sand, and her eyes filled with tears from an onset of old memories. She had spent endless hours of her childhood and teens exploring the tide pools on La Merida's southern side. Occasionally, on a dare or just to be reckless, she had tried to bodysurf the big waves that broke near the center of the beach. They were a combination of currents, forming deep from both the south and north to merge into towering curls topped with froth that broke on the shoreline and smashed swimmers into the sand. Bodysurfing here was called "bod-whomping" by the locals. Back then, after being raked across the sand and spit out onto the shore with her bikini in disarray, she would sit and watch as others took their chances.

Today was their last day of vacation before they returned to Wichita to their genetic-research jobs. Stella wasn't ready to leave yet; she'd been gone for thirty years. Her family had moved to Kansas when she was twenty. Life changed and sped up with

college, starting a career, marrying Jack and, sadly, caring for her parents when they became ill and eventually died.

Stella shuddered at the thought of going back to staring into microscopes and breaking DNA codes in a sterile, fluorescent-lit lab. Her initial exhilaration at working in a rapidly growing field that would benefit mankind had mutated to fear about the results: genetically altered food, people attempting to clone their cats, and 'The Bionic Man' becoming a reality. Too much, too fast, not reversible. She felt that not only had she contributed to destroying nature, but lost her wonder of it in the process.

Jack returned to her side as she stood reminiscing. After he'd reached the sand and dumped all the gear in a scattered pile, he'd walked to the north end of the beach and back in ten minutes. "Let's get into the water. There are gnats and flies crawling on that thick seaweed with the big bulbs."

"Bull kelp," Stella said.

"Yeah—it smells like a bull."

"To me it smells like ocean: fish, iodine, brine. Part of my childhood."

Not responding to her words, Jack sat down on the sand and pulled on his black swim fins.

Stella sighed. She longed to share with him how she loved the little brown and white sandpiper birds, with their stick legs that

ran back and forth on the shoreline, picking at debris the waves had deposited. Or show him the little holes that bubbled open after a wave receded—made by burrowing sand crabs that could be caught by hand when digging fast. She and Jack could have held the crabs for a second, and felt the tickle of their legs before releasing them. But Jack only wanted to battle waves.

“Are you going in with me?” he asked.

“No, I’ll stick with exploring the tide pools.” Stella shaded her eyes with one hand and squinted at the tidewater ledge to the south. Sunlight reflected from the scattered shallow pools. A blue glow emanated from the one farthest away.

“Jack, check out that weird light out there.” She touched his arm. “What do you think it is?”

Jack glanced at where she was looking. “Just a reflection, modified by the mist in the air. I don’t see why you want to squat out there looking into pools when you could be out there with me. Why wear the wet suit if you’re not swimming?”

“To end our argument and get here before the tide came in too much. And swimming in the surf is too tiring for me—you know how weak my muscles get.”

Jack argued, “I don’t agree with your doctors. I think it would be better to try to strengthen your muscles by exercising more.”

“You’re not a neurologist, Jack. I’ll follow my specialist’s orders.”

“Do whatever you want.” Jack took a step toward the big surf.

“Be careful out there. The waves break on the beach and it hurts.” Stella touched his shoulder, but she didn’t know if he could feel it through his wet suit.

“I know what I’m doing.” He didn’t keep the front edges of his swim fins uplifted as he walked away, so they dug holes in the sand, making him struggle to keep his balance.

Sarah turned and trudged over to the rocks, got a toehold on one low boulder, and scrambled to the shelf above. Catching her breath, she gazed down at Jack in his wet suit, rubber flippers, eye goggles, and zinc oxide-covered nose striding into the waves. How could he fully experience the ocean with all of that on?

She tiptoed barefoot around shallow water-filled crevices, avoiding barnacles and slimy algae patches. The algae held minuscule sea life that she tried not to crush. She gripped with her toes to keep her balance on slippery flat areas. Sweat beaded on her upper lip despite a strong breeze blowing mist. She unzipped the top half of her wet suit to let in cool air. Her nipples rose in response. Her legs were tiring, but with a few

more steps she reached the radiant blue pool at the end of the rock shelf.

The pool was larger than any she'd seen before—at least five feet in depth and diameter. Its water changed from robin's egg blue to cobalt as Stella looked down. She crouched to bring her face closer to the water's surface. The azure glow came from four starfish clustered among purple sea urchins and brown sea grass at the bottom. She stared at the sea stars—members of the echinoderm phylum, terms she remembered from a grad school biology class. Starfish had evolved into all kinds of sizes and colors, but she'd never seen any like these. They were a translucent bluish white with slender undulating arms. They were emitting light. A wave broke at the edge of the rocks, causing drops of water to shatter the reflection.

Still too warm, Stella stood up and unzipped the rest of the wet suit. She shrugged it back, so the front of her torso was bare except for the three triangles of her bikini. She lowered herself flat on her stomach onto the cool, wet rocks around the pool. She waited for the water to calm as she peered down, with the tip of her nose touching the surface.

The sea stars shone brighter as she gazed at them.

Narrowing her eyes, she saw that each had odd central markings like happy emoticons: sapphire asterisk eyes, indigo

period noses, and cerulean sideways-parenthesis mouths. She lifted her face from the pool to wipe her eyes while her scientific mind argued with what she'd seen: Sea stars had eyespots on the ends of their arms, not on their central-disc area; their mouths were on the opposite side. The nose dot might be the madreporite, an opening to suck in water, but...

She must have imagined the faces. She looked down again and saw the parenthetical mark on the largest, central starfish open into a wide arc while one glowing arm beckoned in her direction. She scrambled back from the edge, breathing fast, with her mind stuttering. Was she hallucinating? Or was this some new organism?

She scanned the shore and surf. Jack's fins flipped in the air as he took a body-whomp from an enormous swell. Waiting for him to surface, she inhaled a deep, shuddering gasp of briny salt air. Jack's head emerged from the foam. He'd lost his goggles. He shook hair from his eyes and knocked on his skull to clear his ears. Stella dropped the arm she had upraised to signal him. Sadness flooded her. He wouldn't believe her or be amazed by what she'd seen. He'd rationalize the odd creatures away with some explanation made up on the spot to quell any unrest he felt at their appearance. Poor Jack.

Another surge crashed and this time cold water sprayed across Stella's face and chest. She'd lost track of time watching the pool, and the tide was rising fast. Seawater would soon cover most of the ledge. She couldn't resist a compulsion to gaze at the sea creatures one more time before the pool was inundated with the tide.

Crouching again, she ran her hand through the water. Bathtub-warm. It would soothe her aching body. She *had* to go in. The wet suit suction-popped as she stood and stripped it off. Taking a risk, like she'd done all those years ago when bodysurfing, she slipped into the pool feet-first and sank. The salty liquid embraced her, awakening an old memory of floating—balmy, nourished, enclosed—safe. She flipped to face the starfish below. Sea grass stroked her cheeks and tangled with her hair. The starfish radiated aqua blue; all four of them beamed at her. Their luminescent arms extended out in greeting. Irresistible. Her hands came forward to touch. Soft and silky—their little arms encircled and tickled her fingers. She smiled back at them, feeling no need to rise to the surface for air, no need to rush away from the oncoming tide. Not able to stop herself, she pursed her mouth next to the biggest one for a kiss.

A zap of tingling pleasure coursed through her veins, erasing all thought and pain. Her body telescoped down to starfish size



while her muscles and bones relaxed into gelatin. Joyful transmitted energy pulsed through her condensed shape. She blazed with life. The salt water tasted better than wine.

Waves crashed into the pool, causing a riot of froth and motion. The wet suit and bikini floated to shore. The other sea stars grounded Stella and helped her anchor onto the rocks with the hundreds of tiny tube-like fingers attached to her arms. Stella gurgled through her upper mouth at the show around her. Her lower mouth was for eating. How great to have two! And seven eyes—one eyespot on each arm and two above her madreporite nose. She sucked in too much water through this porthole; her new body's water hydraulic system gushed through her tube feet and blew her off the rocks across six inches of sand. Her new family's arms pulled her safely back to them. The soft feet on their arms reassured her that all was well. They felt like her mother's brush stroking her hair in childhood.

After the tide rushed past closer to shore, the water above the pool moved with the swells. Back and forth. Soothing, lulling. So quiet under the surface. Just the muffled sounds of surf. Time slowed down. There was no rush, no urgency. Stella's shell skin, delicate as porcelain, dulled along with the other sea stars to steel blue as the temperature lowered from the influx of cold ocean water.

The pool had seemed large from above. Now it was vast. Stella's smaller mass equaled the creatures around her. They appeared huge at first, but as she morphed further into her new form, their size became normal. Not afraid, she looked around in awe. Striped fish darted, nibbling at dislodged algae. Sunlight, split into prisms through the water, played along skyscraper-high rock walls, revealing hermit crabs, snails, and splayed-open, undulating sea anemones. A sea cucumber with black warts and spines wiggled along the pool's sandy bottom. This was another member of the echinoderm family, a cousin who, like the sea urchins, meant her no harm.

Far up on the surface, a yellow raft cast a shadow across the pool, making the sea life below retreat into dark hollows. A huge distorted face with snaky floating hair and magnified eyes peered down at them over the side of the raft. Its nose was pulled upward into a pig snout under a face mask. Stella didn't smile or beckon to it like the other starfish had done for her. All the tide-pool dwellers kept still. This immense creature, frightened by nature's mysteries, was liable to cause harm. The face disappeared and a paddle knifed into the water. The raft swept away.

Relief brought merriment, causing a multitude of bubbles to rise to the surface and burst in the air. Stella gazed upward

through the water to the infinite blue sky above and felt at one with all the suns, and stars, and supernovas shining there.

# Bios

**Aleph Altman-Mills** is an autistic writer who collects shiny acorns and unshiny rejection slips. She likes to buy books other people have already written on. Since she has run out of bookshelf, she stores them under her piano. She has been published in *The Legendary*, *Words Dance*, *Oddball Magazine* and *Germ Magazine*. She blogs and posts poetry snippets at [really-fucking-confused.tumblr.com](http://really-fucking-confused.tumblr.com). She thinks people are awesome, almost as awesome as cats, especially people who will pretend to be cats with her. She can be found reading poetry by Audre Lorde or spinning in circles because it helps her think.

**Jose Angel Araguz**, author of three chapbooks, including *Corpus Christi Octaves* (Flutter Press), is a CantoMundo fellow. He has had poems recently in *RHINO*, *Borderlands*, *Profane Journal* and *Pilgrimage*. He is presently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati. He runs the poetry blog, *The Friday Influence*.

**Lewis J. Beilman III** lives in New Haven, Connecticut, with his family and two cats. He writes short stories in his spare time. His stories have appeared in *Balloons Literary Journal*, *Reed Magazine*, *The Middle Gray*, *Blood Lotus*, *Gravel Magazine*, *Straylight Online*, *Red Fez*, and *Larks Fiction Magazine*. In 2009, he won first prize in the Fred R. Shaw Poetry Contest.

**Diana Smith Bolton** is the founding editor of *District Lit*. Her work has recently appeared in *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Lines + Stars*, *Punchnel's*, and other publications. She lives in northern Virginia and is active in the DC poetry scene.

**Alexa Doran** is a poet in the UNCW MFA Poetry program. She has recently been featured or is forthcoming in *Ekphrasis*, *Petrichor Review*, *So to Speak*, *Thin Air*, *Educe*, and *CALYX* literary magazines. Her poems were finalists in the 2014 Third Coast Poetry Contest, the 2014 Puerto Del Sol Contest and the 2014 Fairy Tale Review Contest.

**Jessica Drake-Thomas** has an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. Her work has appeared in *The Stockholm Review*, *Words Apart*, and *East Coast Ink*.

**Alejandro Escudé's** first full-length collection of poems, *My Earthbound Eye*, won the Sacrament Poetry Center Prize and was published in September 2013. He holds a Master's degree in creative writing from UC Davis and teaches high school English. Originally from Argentina, Alejandro lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children. You may find more information about Alejandro Escudé and his work at [alejandroescude.com](http://alejandroescude.com).

**Bill Freedman** is a retired English literature prof., currently teaching part time and serving on the board of governors at the Sakhnin College for Teacher Education in the Arab town of Sakhnin, Israel. In addition to books and essays on literary criticism and theory and an oral history of baseball fans, he has published three books of poems with Ginninderra Press in Australia and poetry in *APR*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Quarterly*, *The International Quarterly*, *Dalhousie Review*, *The Nation*, *The California Quarterly* and elsewhere. Recent acceptances at *Cider Press Review* and *Rattle*.

**Joyce Goldenstern**, a Chicago resident, has been adapting folktales and writing fiction and warily "living by fiction" for many years. A full collection of her stories will be published by ELJ Publications in fall 2015.

**Ben Gunsberg** is a professor of English at Utah State University. His poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *The South Carolina Review* and other journals. His poetry manuscript, *Cut Time*, won the University of Michigan's Hopwood Award for Poetry Writing. He lives in Logan, Utah, at the foot of the Bear River Mountains.

**Johnathan Harper** now lives, maybe dies, in Syracuse, New York. He edits the magazine *The Birds We Piled Loosely*. John is goat horn and moose fur climbing up the walls of the poet's stomach. You can find more work in the *The Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *The Queer South*, *Small Por[t]ions*, *Gambling the Aisle*, *Your Impossible Voice*, etc. His chapbook, *The Monster on the Mountain*, is forthcoming from Paper Nautilus this spring.

**Ivy Kleinbart** teaches academic writing and creative nonfiction at Syracuse University and co-leads the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, a creative writing group for military veterans in the community. She received an MFA in creative writing in 2007 and an MA in English in 2009 from Syracuse University. Her poems have appeared in NoTellMotel, Bateau, and Stone Canoe.

As a girl, **Brooke Larson** was taken on a six-week walkabout through the Arizona desert; she has been a willing captive of succulent wilderness ever since. For a number of seasons she has taught primitive survival skills as a wilderness guide in the Sonoran Desert, where she gets her mind daily and minutely blown by rugged wonder. Brooke is drawn to deserts all over. Her travels and writings seek to explore the fertile intersection of ecology, language arts, and peacebuilding. She is a recent and grateful graduate of Columbia University's MFA in Creative Writing.

**Richard LeBlond** is a biologist living in North Carolina. Since his retirement from that state's Natural Heritage Program in 2007, he has been writing about life experiences, travel to Europe and North Africa in the early 1970s, and more recent adventures in eastern Canada and the US West. His essays have appeared in or been accepted by Montreal Review, South85 blog, Cirque, Weber—The Contemporary West, Kudzu House, and Carbon Culture Review. Photography has also become an important addition, and his photographs have appeared in Critical Pass Review and Brain of Forgetting.

**Katharyn Howd Machan**, Professor of Writing at Ithaca College, holds degrees from the College of Saint Rose, the University of Iowa, and Northwestern University. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines; in anthologies/textbooks such as *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2013*, *Early Ripening: American Women's Poetry Now*, *Literature, Sound and Sense*, *Writing Poems*; and in 32 collections, most recently *H* (Gribble Press, 2014) and *Wild Grapes: Poems of Fox* (Finishing Line Press, 2014). Former director of the Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, Inc., in 2012 she edited *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* (Split Oak Press).

**Michal Mitak Mahgerefteh** is an award-winning poet and artist from Virginia. Her digital iPad paintings have been published in print and eZines and included in art exhibits in Virginia galleries and art centers. Michal is

editor and publisher of Poetica Magazine and author of four poetry collections.

**J.G. McClure** is an MFA candidate at the University of California – Irvine. His poems appear in Gettysburg Review, Green Mountains Review, Fourteen Hills, and The Southern Poetry Anthology, among others. His reviews appear in various journals including Colorado Review, 32 Poems, and Rain Taxi. He is the Craft Essay Editor and Assistant Poetry Editor of Cleaver, and is at work on his first collection. See more at [jgmccclure.weebly.com](http://jgmccclure.weebly.com).

Deborah Hawkins, penned **Debra McKellan**, began writing after a blank book project in elementary school and never stopped, fashioning stories based on her favorite TV shows and movies before creating more original works. She studied at the University of the Arts and Florida State University before settling down and graduating from Temple University. She now resides in her hometown of Dover, DE, and hopes to snag an agent for her bigger projects in the near future. Debra can be found blogging at The Write Mage on Blogger.

**Katherine Murray** studied creative writing at St. Mary's University and the University of New Brunswick, where she also served as co-Managing Editor of Qwerty magazine. A fan of storytelling in all its forms, she also writes about pop culture on the internet. Currently, she lives and works in Toronto.

**Nicholas Perry** is an artist based out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A devoted abstractionist, his work is physical documentation of his experiences of memory. These experiences of memory are the sensations he felt during the event. His drawings present an unknown space to the viewers, removing imagery from the real world and providing vulnerability for a true contemplative act. To present a narrative for his work, he gives his pieces poetic titles; but he also uses the titling process to label these less concrete memories so they never are to be lost with the progress of time.

**Rebekah Rempel** studied creative writing at the University of Victoria. Her poems have appeared in the anthologies *Force Field: 77 Women Poets of British Columbia* (Mother Tongue Publishing) and *Unfurled: Collected Poetry from Northern BC Women* (Caitlin Press), as well as the journals Lake and Room. Her poems are also forthcoming in Prairie Fire and online at One

Throne Magazine. She contributed to the Written in Stone Project that displays poetry in a park in Dawson Creek, BC. She lives in Pouce Coupe, BC.

**Carrie Repking** is native Californian who lives in San Diego County. Her great love of reading lead to her owning and running an independent bookstore for seven years. Carrie has a BA in fine art from UC Santa Barbara and has been a practicing artist since college. Her artistic background helps her to write colorful, imaginative fiction. This past year she has been pleased to be published three times in literary e-zines, the latest being this Speculative Fiction issue of Cactus Heart Press. She enjoys dreams, the ocean, exploring tide pools and nature, all of which is reflected in her writing.

**Johanna Robinson's** paintings consist of allegorical subject matter that hints at the cosmic mystery of the human experience. Robinson is an artist from NY who relocated to Portland, OR, in 2010 in order to create a lifestyle for herself where she could devote a greater deal of time to reading, researching, and most importantly, artmaking. She graduated with a BFA from The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in affiliation with Tufts University in 2007. Since graduating, Robinson has been a workshop instructor with Grumbacher Paint, completed an artist's residency at the Vermont Studio Center, and shown work nationally. To view more of her work, please visit: [www.johannarobinson.com](http://www.johannarobinson.com)

**Angelic Rodgers** holds a PhD in American Literature from the University of Southern Mississippi and often describes herself as a recovering academic. She currently resides in Kansas City where she teaches online and writes both fiction and creative nonfiction. Previous articles by Angelic appeared in *The Journal of South Texas English Studies* and the *Yeats-Eliot Review*. When she's not at her desk, she's likely pestering a dog, drinking coffee, or experimenting in the kitchen. She is also at work on the third book in her *Olivia Chronicles* series. Her website is [www.angelicrodgers.com](http://www.angelicrodgers.com)

**Fabio Sassi** makes his acrylics using both positive and negative homemade stencils. Sometimes he starts from the title that can be a word game or a weird assonance. Often he browses his stencil patterns trying to match them to create by chance an unusual or surreal composition. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy and in his portfolio.



**Sara Seyfarth** writes romance, literary, YA, fantasy, and sometimes a mashup of all of them. You can visit her at [saraseyfarth.com](http://saraseyfarth.com) or on Twitter (@saraseyfarth).

**Trevor Tingle** left high school prematurely. After several years sailing tall ships he now lives with his wife and children in New Orleans and drives crew boats on the Mississippi River. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and published by Jersey Devil Press, Driftwood Press, Prime Numbers Magazine, and A Narrow Fellow, among many others.

**Madeleine Wattenberg** is currently earning her MA in Poetry at the University of Cincinnati, where she also teaches English composition. She received her BA in English and Philosophy from Centre College in Danville, KY. Her poems are fueled by an interest in fabulist depictions of women and mass quantities of cherry coke.

**Lenore Weiss** grew up in New York City and currently lives in California after a two-year stint in Louisiana. Lenore's collections include chapbooks and two poetry collections: *Cutting Down the Last Tree on Easter Island* (West End Press, 2012) and *Two Places* (Aldrich Press, 2014). She serves as the copy editor of Blue Lyra Review. Her work has been widely published in print and online. Find her blog at [www.lenoreweiss.com](http://www.lenoreweiss.com).

**Jane Williams** is an Australian writer and poet based in Tasmania.

**Kelly Zientek's** work has previously appeared in The Broken Plate and online in Bewildering Stories in both a weekly edition and a quarterly editor's choice edition. She has reported, volunteered, studied, and taught in Alaska, New Jersey, France, Ohio, and California. She now lives in North Carolina with her husband and two cats, where she writes fiction by morning light.

**Emma Zurer** is a Brooklyn-bred artist, performer and educator. She helps to promote the acceptance of clowns and the legacy of Klaus Nomi. Her collages have been exhibited in New York at the SculptureCenter and CULTUREfix Gallery. Emma has performed with the artist collective Cheryl in nightclubs around New York, including the Museum of Modern Art. She has recently joined the engagement team at the Abrons Arts Center where she also teaches a movement class for children. You can view more of Emma's collage work at [veryimportantpapers.tumblr.com](http://veryimportantpapers.tumblr.com).

# Acknowledgments

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An Impromptu Performance, Oil on vellum, 18 x 24  
| Johanna Robinson