

# THE RAVEN REVIEW

LITERARY MAGAZINE



VOLUME III, ISSUE III  
JULY 2022

# THE RAVEN REVIEW

Volume III, Issue III

July 2022

*Founding Editor:*

Rachel Strickland

*Cover Photo:*

Piotr Krzeslak via *Getty Images*

*The Raven Review* Literary Magazine

[www.theravenreview.org](http://www.theravenreview.org)

# Table of Contents

**Ali Ashhar**  
Palestine ..... 1

**Amanda Long**  
A Summer’s Spirit ..... 2

**Cedric Wentworth**  
Boulders ..... 5

**Danielle Page**  
Ritual..... 8

**Darlene Montonaro**  
Meeting in the Shadow ..... 9

**Doug Smith**  
Nelson’s Brother ..... 10

**Jason Potter**  
The Eternal..... 12

**Javeria Bashir**  
Gothic Witch..... 13

**Jess Roses**  
Deathless ..... 14

**Joan Mazza**  
Writing Naked..... 16

**John Grey**  
Establishing a Life ..... 18

**John L. Stanizzi**  
Scarcity ..... 20

**John Sweet**  
All Your Heroes Are Bastards ..... 21

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>John Tustin</b><br>Cat's Cradle .....                              | 22 |
| <b>Jordan Davidson</b><br>Nikolai Number Five .....                   | 23 |
| <b>Katlyn Minard</b><br>Cake .....                                    | 24 |
| <b>Kayla Vargas</b><br>To Remove a Bloodline (Fear of Breakdown)..... | 25 |
| <b>Mark Putzi</b><br>Hunting Pop .....                                | 26 |
| <b>Mary Davini</b><br>Thirst .....                                    | 29 |
| <b>Richard Krause</b><br>Bathing .....                                | 30 |
| <b>Ryan Tilley</b><br>The Incubus.....                                | 32 |
| <b>Sarah Weglarz</b><br>Underworld .....                              | 35 |
| <b>Terry Firkins</b><br>Long Good-Byes .....                          | 36 |
| <b>Victoria Mier</b><br>Four Offerings.....                           | 37 |

*Ali Ashhar*

**Palestine**

Endurance flows in their veins  
thicker than blood  
all these grenades, bullets and guns  
tired of slacking their never-ending courage  
etched on  
the walls of their heart  
is the cause—  
their history, their identity.  
Climates change, calendars change,  
but the spirit of Palestinians  
can never be changed  
out of the ugliest mirrors of pain  
this land reflects the most beautiful  
image of a warrior  
from the seeds of their blood  
this garden shall bloom forever  
as long as the date on this earth is written  
the glorious name of Palestine shall be taken.

*Amanda Long*

## **A Summer's Spirit**

He could feel her in the room with him.

Lifting his head from where he had the forehead pressed against the wooden table, his eyes blinked in a hazy daze.

It was late into a summer night, the darkness pressing against the glass of the windows, but the thick heat sweltered against his skin. Edwin had loosened his cravat hours before, yanking off his coat to toss it across the back of a chair.

It was the first summer without her. His wife, Hazel, had perished in the early morning of a winter's day. Her breath had misted in a cloud above her head, as the cold had settled into the room during those hours just before sunrise. Now, Edwin was sitting amongst the abhorring heat, feeling it slip between his long white shirt and skin, pooling between the fine hairs on his arms.

For those months since the cold melted into the dew and sunlight, he would swear he saw Hazel out of the corner of his eyes. It would be a flash—a dull color of her red hair, a swish of deep blue skirts behind the doorway. His friends told him to drink away the pain, to forget about his wife's untimely death. But he would find himself sobbing on the counters of the tavern, muttering how he wished it hadn't happened in such a way, how they were both too haunted for this world, and then she had died. She had been ripped from this world, her hair scattered across a pillowcase, pale nightgown switched with black lace in a casket.

When he told his friends the first night about witnessing a swish of her spirit, they told him he had been drinking too much. It seemed, to them, once he tore his way through alcohol to keep the nightmares away at night, to keep the quiet from swallowing him hole, that, in turn, it tore him apart. Haunted by one's dead wife? How appalling.

Edwin, however, knew better. He knew the touch of lavender Hazel would put beneath her ears on her neck. The scent would waft in the room moments after he thought he saw a flash of color. Her favorite teapot—one gifted from her mother as a wedding present, an antique from her grandmother—would turn in a circle, a flame would light beneath it. Sometimes, Edwin thought he would hear her chuckle in the shadows of their bedroom, as the door would creak open ever so slightly.

He blamed it on guilt. He had been there when she had taken her last breath, as her body had rippled and cried before death. Shock had broken him, gaping down at her body once her pale green eyes gazed up toward the ceiling, lips parted slightly. He grappled with the fact that Hazel had died in their bed, against his touch. She was too young, much too young, to die in such a godawful way.

Guilt. He understood it well. His friends attempted to soothe him, to appease his broken heart over the death of his wife. For the year before her untimely death, they had quarreled. Many in their circle hadn't known what their core issues were, but Hazel and Edwin knew—there were wayward looks, wayward talks with others. Jealousy snuck between the cracks of

their marriage, shredding the pieces of their adoration and love for one another. Edwin knew he was at fault for the fights, he knew it all stemmed from him.

Drinking made him forget. He loved Hazel with every breath he took when they had first met six years before their marriage. He wooed her on the streets, beneath the stars. He befriended her father to ask for her hand. They had married on a midsummer evening, the grass dying underneath their feet—an omen, he should have known. And yet, sometimes, love wasn't enough.

Rubbing his eyes, taking another swig of his drink, Edwin stared ahead into the room. It was lit by two candles, the orange glow minimal and hardly casting away any shadows. It was only enough he could walk through the room without crashing into the desk and chair. The fireplace was empty, as it had been too hot for a fire. This night was too hot, this room was too suffocating.

He sensed her in the room; he could taste her perfume, lingering on his tongue. The sweat from the heat and the alcohol dripped down his temples, slicking down his black hair, moistening his mustache. Running a hand through his hair, he glanced around the room. No matter the alcohol he had drowned down his throat, he couldn't make her go away, he couldn't stop thinking of Hazel and what had happened.

"I know you are here," he called out, slamming his palms against the desktop, his words a little slurred like his vision, and his throat ached. His eyes flicked quickly to the calendar at his left, and he muttered a groan. Their anniversary. How could he have forgotten?

In front of him, the door pushed open a little. The light from the candles in the hall crept along the floorboards. He waited, his chest tightening, as he watched fingers, one by one, curl around the edge of the door. They were a ghostly blueish white, a pale comparison to the true skin tone, and a glittering ring glinted on the third finger.

The billowing of a skirt came next, a hazy purple. Then a figure came around the corner, the reddish hair a lighter orange in this form, but it was in fact his wife. Hazel; from the severe nose to the thin lips, the jutted chin. She was beautiful if one looked at her from a certain angle, but straight on, Hazel was too many angles and sharpness.

As he watched her enter the room, he gave her a wide smile. The alcohol and guilt had eaten away his terror of witnessing his dead wife walk into his office, though he couldn't quite believe she was there. Hazel, Hazel, Hazel. He rose to his feet, unsure if he would cry at her presence or try to hug her spirit.

The closer she came to his desk, the more memories flashed through his mind. The way she laughed. The whispers she told him late at night. The decorations of flowers in her hair on their wedding day. The long looks at his brother one dinner. The sight of her in bed with Edwin's little brother weeks prior to her death.

His heart twisted as she approached, stopping just before him. She stared at him, her eyes lacking sparkle, her face expressionless. He choked out, "Hazel, my dear."

He remembered the rage that had simmered in his blood every time he had looked at her, recalling the sight of her body entangled with his brother's. He remembered the rage as she had laid there, the life dimming from her eyes, just beneath his touch.

A growling snarl escaped from Hazel's spirit, and she shot over the desk, something like sharp fingers digging into his temples. Her eyes seemed to glow red, her lips twisted in utter fury. As he felt them shredding into his eyes, breaking open skin, he laughed and laughed and laughed.

She knew.

She knew.



*Cedric Wentworth*

## **Boulders**

Everything, it seemed, conspired to make the morning beautiful. A breeze prevented the sunshine from becoming too hot. Buds on the magnolia trees indicated the approach of giant white flowers. Birds—sparrows, thrushes, robins—scuttled amongst the dead leaves, searching for berries. Lizards pressed their blue bellies against rocks, absorbing warmth.

He noticed none of it. Neither his wife. The pair walked the trail in silence. She led. He followed. He slowed, allowing space to accumulate between them. His mind drifted from one wrong to another. He wanted out, as did his wife. She perhaps more than him. As far as she was concerned, the vows had been irrevocably broken, and it was his fault. The time had come to move on. She stopped to tie her shoe on a rock, saw a blue belly warming itself in the sun, failed to notice it completely. At this moment, for her, the landscape was invisible.

A gentle curve in the trail turned sharp around a formation of large boulders protruding out of the hillside. Once past the boulders, the trail grew steep, descending rapidly toward oak trees. A barbed wire fence slicing the hillside prevented the casual hiker from accessing the oak trees. A cow rested in the grass beside one of the oaks, taking advantage of shade provided by the tree's canopy.

Suzanne tied her shoe and disappeared round the rocks. Christopher slowed, waited. For a few moments, she was gone. He sighed, swallowed, stepped off the trail, sat down in the weeds. How could things turn so malignant? He had no clue. They simply had. It was beyond his control and there was nothing he could or wanted to do about it.

“Fuck me,” he said. “It’s over.”

Suzanne dropped down the trail. She reached the barbed wire fence and looked at the cow. Several hundred feet behind the animal was a galvanized metal tub similar in circumference to a bathtub, but with vertical sides. A horse had its head in the tub. The horse lifted its head and gazed vacantly at her, water trickling off its muzzle. It looked neither cheerful nor anxious. It was simply there, drinking. Its head disappeared beneath the rim of the tub. The cow's legs pushed out sideways in the dirt. Its mandible moved in a circular motion, grinding cud.

A man appeared. He stood next to the trunk of an oak tree, twenty paces from the masticating cow. He wore tan dungarees. At first Suzanne didn't see him. She stood there, making eye contact with the cow, and watching the horse's head reappear, more water flowing off its muzzle into the tub. The man stood still, taking in the sight of Suzanne watching the animals. He'd seen her before, more than a few times. He appreciated her vivacity. Suzanne had a certain something about her that made her very attractive, and it wasn't her appearance. He thought to himself: “Isn't it funny how someone can grow on you over time. At the beginning, I wouldn't have looked twice at the woman.”

Suzanne had a sudden urge to spread the strands of barbed wire apart and squeeze through to the other side. She'd done it before, once, however it ended badly when a bull came at

her and she was forced to retreat and squeeze back out in a hurry, tearing her shirt and scratching her shoulder enough to draw blood. She didn't see any bull, but he might be hiding somewhere, he might come galloping over the top of the hill. They move surprisingly fast when they want to.

The horse suddenly neighed, shook its head up and down, and jerked to the side. Then it resumed drinking. The man waved. Suzanne caught sight of him and waved back. He approached the fence. She gazed behind her at the boulder formation. No one was back there. The man leaned forward. She did too, for a brief moment, and kissed him. Then she quickly pulled away, again glancing up the trail. A pair of turkey vultures rode a thermal high above the rocks.

“Where is he?” the man asked.

Suzanne shrugged.

“Is he back there?”

She nodded.

“Should I go up there?”

She shrugged. The man pulled the rusted strands of barbed wire apart and slid sideways through the fence. He walked over the dirt to the trail, put his hands on his hips, stared at the boulders. Christopher had never seen him before, wouldn't think anything of seeing him. He glanced at Suzanne. She shrugged. She simply stood there in her white skirt as if to say it was out of her hands. She didn't know where Christopher was and that was that. If this man wanted to go up there and find him, he could do it. If he wanted to wait for Christopher down here, he could do that, too. Christopher was bound to catch up to her at some point, because she's the one who had the car keys, and they were miles from home.

The man returned to Suzanne. He gave her a swift peck on the lips. “I'll go up there,” he said.

“Ok,” she said. “But come back if you don't see him.”

The man chuckled. “Of course. Where would I go?”

“I don't want you going to the parking lot.”

“Why not?”

“There's people there.”

“You saw other cars?”

“No.”

“Who's there?”

“They may arrive.”

The man separated from Suzanne. “I'm going to the boulders and coming back. If I don't see him, I'm coming back.”

Suzanne sat in the dirt. She watched the masticating cow. Round and round in a circle went the animal's jawbone, chewing the half-digested grass. Every now and then a big pink tongue that looked almost sexual dropped out of its mouth. She watched the man take a small snub-nosed pistol out of his dungarees, slide the barrel to the side, look in the chamber, smack it

closed. He wandered up the trail with the gun in his pocket. Three minutes later, he disappeared around the rocks.

Suzanne waited. Feet away from where she sat, she noticed a hole in the ground. Fire ants went in and out of the hole. They marched in a column through the sticks and pebbles and dead grasses toward the fence. Some ants broke off from the column, exploring other areas. A few of the red insects meandered toward her ankles. “Jesus, those things are huge,” she said, lifting herself off the ground. They could sneak under her skirt. That wouldn’t be pleasant.

A shot rang out. She glanced up at the boulders. “I’m sorry,” she murmured.

After waiting for five minutes, Suzanne grew impatient and started walking back. Halfway up the hill, she saw a man standing on top of the rocks. She froze. The man dropped back down the other side, out of sight. He heard her scream. “She didn’t see that coming,” he said to himself.

Suzanne ran up the hill, her skirt billowing. On the other side, the man trudged the path toward the parking lot. He ducked under the magnolia trees near the trailhead. Above his head, glossy purple leaves shuddered in the breeze, reminding him that the morning felt good. He would wait for her at the car. He would wait for her as long as she wanted him to wait.

Suzanne was trembling. Christopher must have known all along. But how? Where could he possibly have seen him?

Fire ants, excited by the smell of blood, crisscrossed the soil by her feet.

At the trailhead, Christopher stopped to catch his breath. The sun had risen, grown hotter. He gazed at the landscape. For the first time, he noticed the buzzards. They used a thermal escaping up the hill to glide effortlessly in circles above the boulders. Suzanne was a long way off. From such a distance, he had difficulty discerning what she was doing. It seemed she was looking at him while kneeling in the dry grass by the foot of the boulder. He turned his back on the trail and continued to the parking lot.

*Danielle Page*

**Ritual**

Antler bone boring into earth  
Carving out some semblance  
Of a miracle, a belief that  
Their etching elevates  
A plant's potency—

For the lame girl whom  
The village loves, her legs  
As brittle as the bones of  
The elders, they put faith  
Into the properties of  
Handmade tools—

Antlers, shed and reborn,  
Regenerate the life of  
Those once considered lost  
Roots torn from the ground,  
Leaves carefully plucked,  
Mashed to paste or  
Transformed to tincture—

She sips and breathes  
A sigh of relief,  
A sign of hope—

Crushed like the root,  
They swallow grief.  
Antler to earth,  
The dirt flies,  
Season of Sickness  
Reborn.

*Darlene Montonaro*

## **Meeting in the Shadow**

*Assume the exact opposite of what you consciously desire;  
in this way you will re-own the parts of yourself you have rejected.*

What if the silence you seek  
is not holy silence, but the frosted escape  
of your mother, who could go for days  
without speaking, her cold eyes  
accusing, the house refrigerated.  
Laying the table with clenched jaw  
and stone teeth, the bowl of pasta fagioli,  
which you hate, spooned and souring  
on your tongue.

And what if that place you go to  
after you light candles and get swallowed  
into the dark is not refuge, but the same place  
you escaped to then—hungry, shivered,  
seeking warmth as you huddled in the coats  
and boots, closeted behind closed eyes?

And what if the antidote you administer  
to every broken and ruined part of you  
is the wrong medicine, what if every  
thing you have told yourself you wanted  
was not what you wanted at all? What if  
the dark wings you have hidden  
are the ones meant to help you fly?

*Doug Smith*

## **Nelson's Brother**

Two women and two men huddled outside of room 224, their faces and body language revealing their engagement in a topic of grave concern. A nursing assistant in green scrubs briskly pushed a cart of medical supplies down the corridor, going from east to west. A nurse in blue scrubs carrying a clipboard rushed down the corridor, going from west to east. Overhead, a voice broadcasted the immediate need for a doctor in room 252.

Inside the open door of room 229, a bed-bound man peered out at anyone who walked or rushed past his room. The man had the appearance of a Holocaust victim peering out of a barbed wire fence, hungry to be anyplace other than where he was at that moment. The man's roommate was hidden behind a pulled curtain, apparently trying to escape his current circumstances through the turned-up volume of a television game show.

The door to room 231 was closed. Several ominous signs on the door indicated that no one should, or would want to, enter the room that was not a medical professional. The signs gave the impression of a crime-scene tape roping off the path of any possible interloper.

Inside room 233, behind the closed door, Nelson lay in his bed. His intense pain came in waves, each wave of pain more intense than the last wave. Everyone in the room knew that Nelson's pains were going to culminate in his death, which they all felt could be very soon. His wife hovered over the bed leaning on the railing on one side of Nelson, his sister hovered over the other side of the bed leaning on the other railing. In the floor space remaining in the room, Nelson's brother paced back and forth. I, Nelson's best friend, sat in a chair by the room's door examining everyone else in the room.

As the waves of Nelson's pain got intense, both his wife and his sister would lean in further and try to physically comfort him. They would stroke his hair. They would massage his shoulders. They would hold his hand. They would rub his feet. Nelson's brother, on the other hand, would remain pacing, hunched over, occasionally looking at his brother lying in the bed, but usually looking at the room's floor and anything on it: the wheels on the bed, the wheels on the bed table, the base of the room's lamp, his shoes, my shoes, his sister's shoes, his sister-in-law's shoes.

Nelson's eyes were directed up towards the ceiling. He never looked at any of the occupants of the room, all his energy seemingly focused on the ceiling or internally. When his eyes were closed, his head remained in the same position—aimed upwards. Whether his eyes were open or closed, his facial muscles twitched with each wave of pain.

I looked again at Nelson's brother. He was a big man, like me and like Nelson. Beer drinkers all of us; our stomachs testifying to such. Nelson's brother's stomach testified to it the most. Green Bay Packers' fans all of us, Nelson's brother being the loudest and most vocal fan.

What was causing Nelson's brother to do all his pacing? Did he want to run out of the room? Did he want to stay in the room and do something but didn't know what to do? Did he

want to say something to his brother but didn't know what to say? Maybe he wanted to touch his brother in a loving way, like his sister and sister-in-law, but had never touched his brother out of love. The biggest physical show of affection I ever witnessed between the two was when I saw Nelson's brother give Nelson a friendly punch in the arm.

How could I test my suspicion? Did I need to say something? Did I need to do something? Something had to be said. Something had to be done. I somehow felt something needed to change, and I needed to be the one to do it.

I stood up.

Nelson's brother looked at me. Then Nelson's wife looked at me. Then Nelson's sister.

I casually walked over to the room's bathroom. I took a washcloth and put it under the faucet as cold water poured over it. I then wrung out most of the water and walked out of the bathroom carrying the wet washcloth. Everyone's eyes except Nelson's were on me. Nelson's eyes were still directed towards the ceiling.

I went over to the hospital bed. I asked Nelson's sister to move aside. All eyes were on me, even Nelson's this time, even Nelson's brother's—who had stopped pacing, seemingly puzzled about what I was doing.

As each wave of pain came, I took the wet washcloth and gently tapped Nelson's forehead. I did that for three waves of the pain. I then held the washcloth out towards Nelson's brother and gave a look that I was hoping conveyed that it was now his turn. Nelson was now looking at his brother. They were looking at one another.

Nelson's brother grabbed the washcloth, touched his brother's forehead just briefly, then fell on his brother and held him as tight as he could.

*Jason Potter*

## **The Eternal**

I can only expect the deferment of death for a moment.  
Then I shall return and spit out blood, and through the breaking  
Of a vein the sounds of a human voice will be stopped.  
The parts of a woman's body do breathe out signs,  
And none else is real. I would not long remain here,  
Where every man has an evil name and dogs do  
Often move almost on a straight line.  
Yet smoke and burning will be sufficient.

I exercise the right of private judgement, and put  
The body into unnatural shape and simulate disorder.  
I shall breathe the same way as she,  
And move no longer to aversion.  
The innumerable vermin that suck blood  
Will burn in the common air,  
And I shall not remain here to be seen or abused.  
And suppose the devil assume to himself a real body,  
To be procreate of my body, and all well made before the end.  
Pulses beat, and I take nothing from the air but what is eternal.



*Javeria Bashir*

**Gothic Witch**

I dwell in agony, behind the curtains  
I paint my soul with miscellaneous incense

My intoxicated mind dares to dream  
On the shoulder of the stars, my lonesome screams

In cold arms of the gothic castle  
Dampened my toes and the tarn startled

Losing game over the frozen tears  
She died in blaze, bled in diamonds

*Jess Roses*

## **Deathless**

there is no church  
that can grant me sanctuary  
from myself.  
there is no chapel  
where confession could make any difference  
my sin  
is living.  
there is no cross  
that could cast these demons from me;  
i have to believe  
i carry them  
for a reason.  
and yea though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death  
my own psalms are with me  
scribbled on my palms, smudged  
from the way i pray  
with fists curled hard and tight. i do not comfort me  
but i  
keep walking;  
time ties knots inside  
to count the years--no comfort here  
but enough rage  
to keep me fed for centuries.  
the shadow of death curls in on himself  
and like an oil slick swirls into a raven  
landing on my shoulder soft as ash. death makes fast friends  
of those  
who deign to sing in the dark  
and keep their rage alive, stoking it like fire.  
death teaches his friends:  
to curl in on ourselves and become other things,  
death teaches us  
to unfurl wings,  
teaches  
us

to be deathless—

like a raven

like a story

like a dream.

*Joan Mazza*

## **Writing Naked**

Twenty-five degrees this morning,  
but I'm taking everything off—  
the public mask of congeniality,  
pandemic mask, the plastic smile  
I don for strangers, hoping I don't  
set off a crazy person because I'm  
a liberal Yankee. To write what's real

I have to be bare, without layers  
of the local norms, or cultural  
restraints of what laundry I'm  
allowed to air in public. I've shed  
rules about telling family secrets,  
or even voicing them within the family.  
I'm not speaking in generalities,

won't engage vague euphemisms  
like *down there* or *hand trouble*  
when what I mean is clitoris  
and labia or violence at home that  
leaves black and blue marks. I'm  
painting the whole picture, writing  
the scene as I remember it,

dialogue as best I can recall.

If I've paraphrased, that doesn't  
make it fake or false. I was there  
and I remember. Don't steer me  
toward forgiveness. Don't ask what  
I was wearing, like my former  
shrink. I was eight years old.

My father was forty-one. When  
I read aloud what I've written  
in a small safe group, I smash walls,  
decades of silence, of pretending

all is well. How are you?  
I'm not fine, but I'm writing  
brave and true.

*John Grey*

## **Establishing a Life**

Her morning  
fits inside a demitasse cup.  
It's a black liquid impervious to light.

She's a young wife  
and a middle-aged divorcee  
meeting in the middle.

Her current boyfriend,  
a real-estate salesman,  
is in the past.

She takes the bus to work.  
Weird guys are drawn to a vulnerability  
she doesn't know she has.

She treated herself  
to a vacation last year,  
a week in the sun.  
She spoke with no one  
that she didn't have to.

Not even the guy  
who spoke Spanish  
in her left ear.

She's starting to believe  
that her life is the only kind  
there is.  
It's busy enough to be  
only partly lonely.  
And there are reliefs that come unexpectedly.  
Especially in an unshared bed.

She reads.  
She embraces docility.

She doesn't regret the children  
she never had.

She sees the future  
as some kind of car  
that pulls up at her front door.  
She slips inside.  
It inches slowly forward  
but there's no one at the wheel.

She has jewels but never wears them.  
Her dress sense knows her age  
as well as she does.

She has friends.  
Some are married.  
When they invite her over for supper,  
the fourth chair remains empty.

There is a guy in the office she likes  
but only to talk to.  
Nothing will come of it.  
He's six foot, one eighty pounds  
and fifty on his next birthday.  
Her world doesn't have that kind of room.

*John L. Stanizzi*

**Scarcity**

The pacific hiss of morning rain,  
sun held down under clouds and fog,  
and the rooms of the house soften with dusky shadows.

May it rain all day long, and never brighten, not even for a moment.  
May the plants lift their faces,  
streaked with dusty rainwater,  
and like children running around the yard,  
catch the drops in their open, smiling mouths



*John Sweet*

## **All Your Heroes Are Bastards**

and can we maybe not  
die for a change,  
and can we maybe stay pure?

can the drugs actually work  
for a change? and this is what it  
sounds like he says or this is what she  
hears and then the baby is gone

then the days start to grow colder

no sound in the first frostbit light of morning  
but the song of your lover crying

no houses but the ones that  
burned down when you were a child

neighborhood kid with a bucketful of  
gas-soaked rags and his father's zippo and it  
feels so fucking good to laugh

stack up the bodies like firewood

sing your favorite or maybe  
something by the stones,  
                    '71, '72,  
something grimy and despairing and  
*why the hell did we even stay here?* is what  
he asks her and what is it she  
says in response?

where is it she runs to  
when he turns away?

there is nothing more pure than  
the fine art of disappearing

*John Tustin*  
**Cat's Cradle**

Time is  
Rust-colored water  
Rushing roughly over  
The worn stones  
Of my heart.

Time is  
Lust-cushioned thoughts  
Diminishing  
To thoughts of comfort  
Or nothing.

Time is  
Love-encrusted rings  
That fall from fingers  
Thinned by envious deceptions  
And lost in drains.

Time is  
A broken branch  
Hanging precariously  
Off of a larger limb  
During a hurricane.

Time is  
An ever narrowing  
Cordoning of string  
Eventually revealing  
No cat in the cradle.

*Jordan Davidson*

**Nikolai Number Five**

and if they say this is Hell staying i know  
they've never lost themselves in the ceiling

at night tracing the cracks slowly collecting  
condensation and they've never counted to slow

their hearts or prayed to God to bring  
them pain to separate feeling and bliss

as He puts on a record slow and sweet and lies  
back in our bed, His arms around me although

i ache from a thousand different pains each  
more tender than the last when His fingers

paint me, no, they bring me forth from existence  
only when i lie with Him do i break the

darkened plane between the fold of a mother's  
legs and in her ruptures do i coalesce into

a thousand star shaped points brought out against  
the bitter loam loving singed skin because with

Him for once my outlined shadow settles into my  
skin and oh do i exist for once without blurred edges,

i am something to Him. only he lays claim to me.  
so in the quiet music when he forgets his fault--

lines i remember even birth requires blood,  
and to be seen the stars must burn—

And without him, i resume fading, unfinished.

*Katlyn Minard*

## **Cake**

On my 33rd birthday, I couldn't ask my parents for what I really wanted, which was a poison cake.

Specifically, a *molten lava* cake—the kind of dessert wealthy women always order at upscale chain restaurants and black-tie banquets. A palm-sized disc of dark, dense cocoa, encircled in a glossy white ramekin, laced with lethality. Death by chocolate.

I wanted to sink my fork into it and watch the coffee-black crumbs break away like bits of cursed earth. I wanted the lava to seep from the center and flood the ramekin like a little black lagoon. I wanted to lift the fork to my lips and let the deep espresso smell waft into my nostrils. Perhaps my parents would've asked me if I liked it, and as I chewed, I would've said "*Mmm*" — the same way I did at my dad's doomed second wedding, 20 years ago, when I was a scrawny, sunburnt 13-year-old in a floppy flower-girl hat, tasting that chocolate wedding cake I'd fantasized about for months and then gagging when I discovered it was thick with liquor. Potent with potion. Illicit elixir.

I was just a kid back then, unaccustomed to bitterness. I had not yet seen a man pawn a wedding ring. Or spied on a woman as she spiked her morning coffee. Pretended not to smell the brandy on her breath. I had not yet watched a rock-solid marriage disintegrate into sand. Now everything's different. Now I'm grown, and I know the truth—that bitterness is all this banquet has to offer.

In the end I asked for a carrot cake. The first bite I took—dry orange fluff smothered in cloying cream cheese frosting—I could barely choke down. So, I pretended, instead, that I was eating my lava cake. Letting the cocoa cling to the roof of my mouth. Holding the molten center on my tongue like sugar. Savoring the syrupy-slow drip down my throat. How fine it would feel to let that poison go to work. To say "*Mmm,*" and really mean it. To smile slyly at my parents and see them smile back—all of us in on the secret, all of us pretending we don't smell the illicit elixir inside.

*Kayla Vargas*

**To Remove a Bloodline (Fear of Breakdown)**

How trauma makes the future warp with the past, meddled with the present, gets everything jumbled up.

Maybe healing is holding the possibility, perhaps, that your weary world ended a long time ago—not over and over and over again.

You remain here.

Resurrected rather than rejected.

Risen as holy redemption.

There is nothing you haven't already endured, survived, incurred, devised

Nothing left to shatter your life

Into a million minute pieces

All that is left is to re-learn what peace is.

Phoenix from ashes, when presentpast clashes—

Where you started isn't where you are going;

It is where you have been.

You are not sin.

Evil has a face and it looks nothing like you.

*Mark Putzi*

## **Hunting Pop**

We assume he's in the city. He wouldn't want to be driving drunk too much, although he has several places on the outskirts, peppering the borders. One place we know has a long unpainted roof with cars driving under it. What's called a cocktail lounge attached to a hotel where truckers stay with their escorts, the kind of people he likes and spends his time with. We've never actually found him there, but Mom says she's been there with him and "he seemed to like it." She remembers him talking with the bartender and then she struggles to try to figure out what the bartender's name was. I'm guessing she assumes it's the same bartender all the time, but I don't see why it would be. That's because, when I think of a "cocktail lounge," I see a place that's open past hours, that's serving drinks too at 6 am to the truckers and escorts, Pops kind of people. He fits in places like that.

I'm wondering why she's so insistent on him coming home. It's always frustrating. He's home every two three days or so and waiting for him is a pain in the ass because Mom's constantly acting worried, calls herself a "worry wart," whatever that is, and takes it out on anybody near her. Once she clocked me in the ear, the one that gets infected all the time, hit me so hard my earlobe stuck to the side of my head, and I had to like peel it off. It felt raw and I ran to the bathroom to look at it, and it was red and blistered. It would come and go that, what they called eczema, but when she clocked me, it was bad, climbed all the way up to the top of my ear, and I kind of wondered why it didn't just spread all over me. And then I thought, it must be the shadow, you know, like from my ear. It must like not being in the light. I had something there. Always, in the parts of you that you don't show because the darkness, makes it warm there and moist, something it likes. Like when I go down in the basement, just to be by myself, and I can't hear them down there because of the furnace, when it starts up and makes that whirring noise and then POW, it lights, I think and then it makes a louder whirring. And I can be by myself down there. I don't have to worry about them, my brothers and sisters. They all have their places too, the places they like to go.

Mom always takes me in the car. I don't understand why it always has to be me, because Azalia's older by one year and I have two brothers, Ansell and Abel. But I don't tell her she should take one of them. They wouldn't know exactly how to do it. I've done it before. I'm the one she sends in. I know how to ask business like, make it an obligation, make it feel like there's some responsibility to it, not be all pathetic and weepy, not make it seem like there's a need. It's just there's a matter of work tomorrow for him. We're reminding him. He shouldn't lose another job, or he won't have money for the bar. He needs to come home and get some rest.

But when we go out like this, we almost never find him. The bartenders, they've gotten to be friends with him, and they throw us off, say he's here, he's there. He hasn't been here. Haven't seen him all week. Then they laugh. Everybody laughs in the bar and even me. Even I understand. I'm the one who's out of place here. The truckers, they're fine where they are, the

escorts, the old couple sitting in the corner, the delivery boy, the dog barking in the back room behind the bar. You've been told it's the kitchen, but there's no one ever cooking there, and you don't smell food. And the bars got like hundreds of bottles lined up against a mirror in the back so that doubles the size of them. It's dark except for there, right there, with the lights lining the top of the mirror, sparkling through the bottles, shining up the whole back of the bar, and the bartender stands in front silhouetted there so it's hard to see his expression when he tells you he hasn't seen him, not today, then makes a suggestion, "He might be at SoAndSo's. I hear there's a party."

We run over to SoAndSo's, mom crying now driving, and you wonder how safe that is. But you can't pull the seat belt out because the car's too old and rickety, and hitting a pothole the whole thing shakes, and rocks, Pop says it needs a new suspension. You've seen ads on TV. Monroe shocks and struts, and you wonder specifically, "Does it need a shock or a strut or maybe both?" Or maybe it would still rock like a rowboat no matter how many things you replaced. It's an old car, after all, and you wonder what people must feel like when they drive around in a new car. Once when Pop took you through the car wash and you got to ride through and watch the rags dragging back and forth and the spray soap and the rinse and then the blower, you remember Pop paid and hanging from a little peg board at the counter you saw air fresheners and one of them said, "New Car Smell." So, you took it down from the peg board and sniffed it so you could know how a new car smelled, and then you wondered why would anyone want to smell like that? So, you grab one in the shape of a tree that says "Evergreen" and that one smells better. And you grab one in the shape of a deer with antlers that says "Buckskin" and that one smells better, and Pop grabs all three out of your hands and says we're not buying those, and you tell him you were just smelling them. Then Pop paid and off you went, and the car was bright and clean and still wet in some places, the old car, with a new wax shine. And you'd drive down the street, and it was summertime, not like wintertime, you drive two blocks through a puddle and have to wash the car all over again. Of course, you make it fun most of the time washing the car with the hose and spraying each other, you and your siblings, and the bucket of soap and water, and sponges and little towels called schamee's. You wonder how a little towel ever got a name like that. And you think it can't be true, because schamee has the word sham in it, so it must be a lie, whoever it was who told you what it was called. They were lying to you. They did it because they knew you didn't know what they were really called. But at some point, you just don't react anymore when someone lies to you. You know they're lying, and you just can't say so because you don't know what the truth is.

At SoAndSo's, Mom wants you to check inside for him. And you can hear outside, the party, laughter, and music. It's not anything you want to be doing, walking in there, spoiling everybody's good time. But maybe you can hide yourself. You're not really dressed for the occasion. It's wintertime. You have your heavy coat on, so you pull the hood up and cover your face as much as you can, but the bouncer at the door stops you, says you're too young to go in, and you tell him you're just looking for your Pop, but he won't let you. So, when you tell Mom, she's pissed and gets out, has a word with the bouncer, and then the both of you go inside, you

and Mom, because the bouncer says it's ok for you if Mom comes with you. And then the party. Mom walks right through the middle of the dance floor with you behind, both hooded in our coats, right up to the bar in back and asks the bartender about she names him and says he's her husband. And the bartender, toweling off a glass, says he hasn't seen him and suggests another place where he might be. So, you walk just as deliberately back through the dancing couples and not listening to the noise and out the door and into the car. And Mom's leaning up with her forehead on the steering wheel crying.

After you get home, you get undressed and into bed, but maybe half an hour later, she wakes you and tells you she wants to talk to you in the living room. Your two brothers are still sleeping. Both of them are younger, so you know why she won't take them, why it's your responsibility. There's a light on in the living room over the couch, and you can see she's been reading the Bible, it's turned open to a page with a bookmark stuffed into the spine between pages, a red bookmark that looks like it's made of silk or something. She asks you to sit across from her in the lounge chair. She faces you with a very calm look. Mom tells you you're the man of the house now, and wondering what that means, you say ok. She says she wants you to promise you'll never treat a woman the way Pop treats her. And you promise right away. Then she makes you promise a couple more times about a couple more things.

You go back to bed, and she tells you she'll be up reading a little while longer. You know better than to ask about Pop, where he might be, when she thinks he might be home. You understand she can't answer a question she don't know the answer to.

Regardless of his behavior, she took him back. Not even an ashtray filled with lipstick-stained cigarette butts could convince her. They'd, every one of them, been extinguished in exactly the same way, crushed and twisted, splitting each filter directly in two, leaving each at an angle between 5 and 40 degrees, all like little boomerangs. The priest insisted on an annulment, but she wouldn't have it, didn't want each of her children ending up a bastard. And, in divorce, the priest told her, she'd be excommunicated. She accepted her position as a sacrificial vow, embracing her choice of husband, setting a place at the family table for both his excursions and himself. In this way, Pop never disappointed her, made her understand she would always be subservient to his whims, no matter their stupidity.

We listened to them scream at each other. We powwowed, discussed our positions relative to their influence. We vowed to separate ourselves from them as early on as we could muster. But only one of us—one sister and the youngest—proved to be true to her word. The remainder crawled back to them, then, suffering as a family, welcomed our guest as a slew of fine enablers, each of us crushed and extinguished between her ghostly fingers. We felt her kiss depositing a red stain on us all, our hair lit on fire, and each burned like Joan D'Arc, caught in our blood ties, and forever stained. And did we, each of us, conclude it was inevitable, this suffering or some other? Did we each, on a daily basis, accept ourselves and heal? Did we know more so than a happy family what became of original sin? We only imagined, and carried with us who we were, bastards anyway.



*Mary Davini*

## **Thirst**

*It's all the extra lime, you said,  
The secret to a great gin and tonic.*

And you brought us heavy, glistening glasses, already  
wet with condensation at leaving  
the air conditioning for the hot, breezy balcony.

They dripped over our fingers  
and left wide, wet rings on the arms of our chairs.

We three, in a perfect pocket of shade and quiet laughter  
sipped our cocktails and spoke the wisdom  
of summer afternoons.

I assured myself it wouldn't end –  
there were eons of balconies ahead –  
many more moments to be family and friends.

But I held a lime and cried for you today.

Wept over the extra *you* we'll never have.

I hurled it at the nothing where you should be  
and watched the sticky juice  
run streaks down the wall.

Then, with a carefully measured king shot  
of goodbyes I never wanted to say  
I raised a glass to you  
and all the ghosts  
still living in my heart.

*Richard Krause*

## **Bathing**

At eighty-four, she still had it. At least, that is what the doctor told her sister, a nurse ten-years-younger who had been married three times. The eighty-four-year-old had never married and now was in the nursing home hiding under her bed every night the nuns came in to give her a bath. She screamed “bloody murder” each time she was touched, and really “put on a show,” her sister was told.

Even when Margaret lived with her sister she didn’t want to be touched. In all that time she only allowed her back to be scrubbed from behind the shower curtain.

“And I never saw her undress, come to think of it,” her sister mused.

Despite that she was engaging, a little girl almost, with thick curls even at eighty, until that is, she was placed in the nursing home with the nuns. It was about the time her sister got tired of dragging her out to view the sunsets up in Shrewsbury or forcing her to read the *Wall Street Journal* aloud at the kitchen table, to keep her mind alert, she said, while she cooked. She got tired too of making her walk straight, until finally her sister’s spine got so bent, she walked permanently stooped at the waist. Her sister also grew tired of the same stories she told visitors again and again about Charlie. So, she placed her in the home and sold the house and moved into an apartment by herself in town.

Margaret didn’t communicate after that, and to her sister’s surprise she picked the smallest room when she could have had a larger one. She preserved an eerie silence broken only by reports of the piercing screams when they took her out from under the bed to her bath. It took two of the strongest nuns, so large were they that you couldn’t tell if they were not men in disguise. Each had one arm, and sometimes a third went behind supporting the old woman as they virtually carried her down the hall to fulfill the regulations that had to be kept by all. Each resident had to have a bath at least once every other night. All the residents peeked timidly out of their rooms when they heard the old lady being carried by the grim-faced nuns, their jaws firmly set, their ivory crucifixes bouncing on their dark habits, their trembling beads at their waist reminding people of their order, and of an almost tribal ceremony, a ritual that had not taken place in over seventy years.

Riding a horse hadn’t done it, swimming or vigorous exercises had not done it, and a man certainly never had. Margaret saw to that. She embarrassed her younger sister who took her along on dates in the way she would all of a sudden rise up and smack the man. Almost out of the blue with her pocketbook. More than once she made such a scene at restaurants that she just got up and left the table if the man so much as tried to be openly friendly. She didn’t have the grace of her sister who took the man’s hand just like her mother had taught her and patted it gently once or twice, and said with a smile, “Now be a nice boy,” and returned the hand to him. No, Margaret stormed off. And for years, she went with Charlie who graduated from Yale and wanted to marry her. He had a law practice in New York City, but she would have nothing to do

with him outside of dating. Even though she often met his family in New Haven in the summers, that too came to nothing.

And so, all the time it was building up, it must have been, sixty, seventy years, thickening in secret. The doctor who had examined her confirmed in astonishment that it hadn't been lost. Neither in the back seat of a car, or in any marriage bed. No, that would be left to the day when the whole nursing home would witness what was never performed by horse, or man, or the bawdy reach of a salty wave. What a proper woman can close off like the most efficient suction in the world. Guarded by only a will that had the remarkable resolve to last seventy years. Perhaps it grew from her father being a Greek Orthodox priest, even though that made the younger sister elope at seventeen and get married, only for the sex, she later confided. It must have been something lasting in her. Something that endures. Something untouchable. A curtaining of mind that no random, adolescent movement could ever perforate, no accident.

But at eighty-four her resolve thinned, like the brittleness of her bones, with her abandonment to the nursing home in Vermont. Her blood, too, was probably thinned by the medications, and the religion come back to haunt her, to manhandle her under the guise of nuns just doing their duty. Women on each arm, dragging her with the thin craning necks of the residents sticking out of their rooms. Extra silent. Knowing something similar could happen to them. That regulations are regulations. Did her piercing screams do it, or the legs she threw out to stop herself, the short jerks and starts, the pulling and pushing, the humiliation, the sense of helplessness, did that make for the tiny drops of blood on the floor that barely anyone noticed, until they had to be wiped up? Proving that it was more than her pride that was lost having been forced to take a bath.

*Ryan Tilley*

## **The Incubus**

It's time I had a time alone.  
The spirit comes to call at night.  
An Arab man would cast a stone.  
My dog begins to bark with fright.

He never says a word, this beast,  
But lust may speak through stares and touch.  
The ghost, in wrong like wicked priest,  
Returns. He must atone for much.

I feel the weight upon my chest  
As presence pushes purpled past.  
I toss and turn all night, no rest.  
From front or back, he's cheetah fast.

And now, I feel the crush of air  
As bed begins to slowly tilt.  
The phantom finger brush of hair  
Becomes a burden bearing guilt.

My husband's whispers trickle down  
Like melting ice. The water drops  
Can weather rock. A tug on gown  
And sense of peace and purpose stops.

The madness starts again; my arms  
Are pinned like captured butterfly.  
My body still as cold reforms  
The sound of silence breaks with sigh.

I see depression form in bed.  
The sudden sag substantiates  
My spouse's superstitious head.  
My poet husband contemplates

The curse. A shaman knows the art

Of healing man and alters fates.  
But does this demon have a heart?  
Sadistic spirit masturbates.

His kiss with taste of ash repels.  
His tongue is forked and serpentine.  
He had a dream of wedding bells.  
I didn't become his valentine.

On sheets, the sweat collects and blends  
With sickly sweet lethargic hemp.  
I told him drugs are losers' friends.  
He's power-mad, once was a wimp.

He only comes at night like bat,  
Eclipsing all that lies in path.  
He has a thirst like jungle cat.  
He kills my hope in aftermath.

I dare address the thing by name.  
I think he will recall our days  
In school before the drugs and shame  
Of diabolic dark displays.

Immortal wisdom, paradox  
Of death. His soul is stuck in time.  
He had a dream of ring in box,  
But placed a witch's spell in rhyme.

The woman warned of consequence.  
He ignored crone and paid her fee.  
The heart will pass by weak defense.  
A lady's love is never free.

The question asked is what's the cost  
Of action. Price and value rise.  
He looked in mirror, fingers crossed.  
He knew the truth concealed by lies.

We part at death is wedding vow,

But separation happens soon  
As pair destroys the here and now  
Like Gypsy quickly reading rune.

The future looms like hurricane  
In Gulf as storm decides which path  
To take. The present, full of pain,  
Destroyed by temper-swelling wrath.

My husband lights the way, the floor  
Through window sealed by candlelight  
And prayer from holy book, but more  
Than hope and man of second sight

Should battle foe who hides in air.  
The house is circumscribed by salt  
And cleansed by sage. He strips me bare  
In dreams declaring lack of fault.

The ghost is startled; smoke alarm  
Staccato beeps with burning sage.  
He once was handsome, full of charm,  
But death has given ugly rage.

*Sarah Weglarz*

**Underworld**

Soften your heart  
for the beggar  
We only run  
through the forest  
To get to the neon lights  
We only tear our teeth  
through chests  
to get to the heart  
Pulsing thing  
Small, precious thing  
My love lies on the floor  
A jar of spilled tacks  
The maw  
of some beast  
that waits for me  
We dance  
under moonlight  
We dance for one another  
Ribbons of sweat  
tears  
crimson  
We hold the flesh  
that keeps us entwined  
We're ready to burst  
My little Persephone  
Pomegranate  
Six seeds

*Terry Firkins*

**Long Good-Byes**

Monday on Michigan Avenue  
in front of the Art Institute of Chicago  
by the greening bronze lion to the north  
collared in a big, red-bowed wreath  
capped with snow for the holidays  
the sun tipping the Planetarium  
at 4:37 Central Standard I waved  
as you walked west on Adams and  
stood there waving years before  
you disappeared from sight.



*Victoria Mier*

## **Four Offerings**

I.

I held the dove's wings—white as snow, like the children's stories go—flat against her sides. She stopped struggling. Her amber eyes darted this way and that, breast heaving against my damp palms.

I had been scared at first, too.

Her tiny feet curled like daffodils un-blooming, winding tighter into yellow buds. For a moment, it felt like she had stopped breathing. I looked down to see she was staring up at me, her eyes searching mine. Something about her gaze was familiar.

I could find another dove. The merchant outside had at least twenty in one cage alone.

I tore my eyes from the dove's. She held my gaze as I spread her wings. I looked away. When the priestess sliced through the sinew and muscle of the dove's left wing, the bird made no sound.

II.

When my father was young, he met a man on the train platform. The man wore an old-fashioned three-piece suit. The sun was just beginning to set.

The man asked my father for a cigarette. He pronounced it “cig-ah-rette,” stressing the last syllable instead of the first two. My father obliged, but when he offered a light, the man continued to stare at the cigarette. He rolled it between the fingers of his left hand once, twice, three times, before tucking it into his pocket.

“Not even going to smoke it?” My father asked.

“No,” the man answered.

My father fell silent, moving a step or two away from the man. The platform remained empty. He couldn't see any trains in the distance. His gaze eventually drifted back toward the man.

“Aren't you cold?” My father wanted to know. My father was like that.

“No,” the man answered, his eyes trained down the tracks. He took an old pocket watch from the

folds of his tweed blazer. He rolled it between the fingers of his left hand once, twice, three times, before tucking it into his pocket.

As my father watched, the train station began to change. The bricks became new, raw red in the low light. The benches became old-style rod iron, crisp and black. The colors of the sunset turned sepia.

With a start, my father realized there was a train pulling into the platform, though he never heard the engine. The man in tweed approached the door.

“Do not follow,” the man warned.

“Who are you?” My father remembers asking.

The man stood in the doorway, pulling the cigarette back out of his pocket, rolling it between his fingers. He lingered for a moment, but did not answer, and then disappeared into the darkness of the rickety train, its sides heaving like an exhausted animal.

For so many years, my father remembered the man, the train platform, the sepia-colored sunset. All my life, he paused when we said the Apostle’s Creed in church, right before the “I believe” lines. It was just a small pause—one, two, three.

### III.

An ad in the classifieds section of the Midwestern city’s newspaper read: “For sale: Beautiful King James Standard Bible set. Well-loved, but ready for a new home. No room on my bookshelf.”

During the service, the preacher held the rolled-up newspaper high and raised his voice to ask how someone could not have room for God. He had never tried worshiping anything else.

### IV.

“Reality is like fabric,” he explained, grinding his cigarette into the dirty rug. “It’s thinner in some places. Places like this, actually.”

He had found her on some internet forum. They had paid by the hour. No one stayed longer than they had to. A tiny, battered statue of the Virgin Mary sat on the end table, next to the newspaper. The top story read, “FOURTH LOCAL MAN MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD.”

“All the people coming and going,” he added, like she didn’t understand.

She cleared her throat.

“Let’s get started,” she said.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Yeah, okay.”

He pulled the candles and the deck of cards and the other necessary items from his bag.

“Light them,” she said, taking the cards from him. She began to shuffle. He noticed how lithe her hands were—two pale serpents speaking a language he didn’t understand.

He had never wanted anything so badly.

“How much are we going to do tonight?” he asked.

“Be patient,” she murmured.

Someone knocked at the door. Housekeeping. The noise distracted him, his vision blurring as he looked at the woman seated on the floor in front of him. He didn’t remember letting her in. He didn’t remember coming here at all.

“Come back later, please,” the woman called.

He remembered a story his mother once told, when everyone in the house had fallen ill—he had just been an infant then, and caught the fever, too—and she was sure at least one of them would die, with the doctor ninety miles away. His mother had gone outside, desperate for air that wasn’t thick with phlegm.

She swears she saw the cloven hoof marks of the devil in the dirt outside their porch, circling the house. She called the pastor instead of the doctor. The pastor came, and when he did, he flung his arms wide, vestments battered by the wind, and cast the evil out, or so he said. There was holy water involved, his mother remembers, the pages of the Bible quivering like a fish struggling to breathe on land, and shouted prayers. They were all healthier within the day.

“I was raised Christian, you know,” he said to the woman, his gaze cast down at the thin carpet, searching. When he didn’t find what he was looking for, he looked back up at her. The walls seemed to fade away until he could only see her face filling his vision. Her eyes were black and wide, nostrils tight and pinched.

He lit the candles and prayed she would swallow him whole.