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Alka Sandu

The Polar Liver

I needed my suicide to be grandiose to compensate for my mediocre life.

I would waste every break from my convenience store job researching ways to die or masturbating. Then, I would come home to no one but my cat, Hex. We would watch reruns of nineties movies with music from the neighboring bar and then sleep on my beer-stained couch that reeked of vinegar and piss. Things weren't working out for me.

So, I took a boat to St. Lawrence Island. On it, a few hunters wandered. I was worse: a poacher. I bore a shotgun and a butcher knife stolen from my father.

The wood cabin I booked for two days was ugly. The wintry wind was harsh against my cigarette-stained lungs. For my last meal, I devoured reindeer sausage and wild raspberries. I shat and stepped into the glacial wilderness. Hex would never see me again. I was going home, far away from this world.

After hours of dragging my body through the numbing coldness, I found a shore. A polar bear was wading through the thick snow. I shot it. It was as simple as that: I aimed my gun and killed it.

I stood over its corpse and slit through its skin. The white fur turned crimson. Blood splashed onto my rotten teeth. I ripped out its kidney; I knifed through the spleen. I sliced its stomach, and the flesh of a seal oozed out. I puked the reindeer sausage and blood. My scarlet vomit melted the snow.

I wiped my mouth and saw it: the precious liver.

It was fatty and disgusting. I took it out and bit it like it was a summer fig. It tasted akin to pork liver but fishier. It smelled of sulfur and rain. Piece by piece, I forced it down my throat.

I swallowed half of the liver; I held in my vomit and waited for hypervitaminosis A to kill me. I laid on the red snow with my arms on my stomach, expecting sudden vision loss or a seizure.

But nothing happened. The polar bear's carcass was rotting, with its organs spread around my head like a halo. As I was awaiting death, my limbs were frostbiting. I was dying from hypothermia, and it was boring. On one of the work breaks, I read that polar bear liver would kill me. Why would they lie? My organs were withering away. I sobbed. I forgot to leave Hex food.

And then I died. That was it. Crows came and ate my flesh. It wasn't grandiose. It was pathetic.

Andrew Gibeley

Dylan

You died the summer before only I started fifth grade,
when the seatbelt suffocated your compact frame, when
the car impacted the pickup truck—blunt force trauma—
with your babysitter at the wheel, still alive.

You really died in March, when suburban streets are
their slickest, maybe another wintry mix during those
school days when your life was invisible to me, just
five days before your tenth birthday.

But I learned about it in June, from my counselor who
could have been yours too, who knew, who had watched
you be buried and reported it to the rest of us around
camp, so that no one had to wonder.

I found your obituary online and memorized its details—
your holy communion, snowboarding, your single mom—
but all I saw was your spiked blond hair and baggy shorts,
that little smirk you made in group photos.

Sometimes now I wonder how well I truly knew you, how
many hours together we even spent, how many more
summers we would have been friends before you outgrew
me, or if my memories of you warrant a poem.

But then, why did I dream of you the night before every
first day? Why did I will you back to kickball and our
morning swim lessons and silly dance routines and that
red bench where we sang our own song?

Bonnie Wehle

Nocturne in Black

On those days when the sky
persists in remaining deep cobalt

and the clouds, charcoal gray,
ravens gather at dusk,

hunch in trees like soldiers
in overcoats, as if to guard

against the night. They weight
the branches, blot out the moon.

I nest into the dip in my mattress,
draw my duvet to my chin.

Ebony feathers pester
the shadowy clefts of my mind,

sweep at the darkness
longing for light.

Outside, a raven chorus
challenges the night,

croaks a dirge that hungers
to be a hymn.

Chima Christopher

This Thing Called Living

I grow weary of talking
Perhaps it's true what they say
Delicate flowers have their own language

Put your head to my chest my dear,
there is only music here
Ask questions of this orchestra
I do not promise you the truth
I promise you my heart

I cannot feel your fear,
A long time ago,
like Cain from the curse of his God
I ran

I found home by a river,
under the moon
lying next to a girl I loved

I'm dazed at the audacity of science
the things it dares to call inanimate
I long to be like the river

or the moon
Lifeless, yet eternal...

This thing called living
I do not know how to do it

Chris Klassen

Vandalism

When Reverend Anderson arrived at church at eight o'clock on Sunday morning, as per routine, to do the final edits for his sermon, he noticed three dark spots on the large wooden front door. It was his duty to unlock the church, to open up for his parishioners. They would start arriving by nine-fifteen. He approached the dark spots. It was gum. Three dark blue balled-up pieces of gum, stuck to the door just above the brass handle. He stood motionless for a moment, staring. Yesterday, at the end of the day, when he left the church, there was no gum, that he knew. He would have noticed.

Unlocking the door, he walked to the kitchen, got a knife and a paper towel, came back, and scraped the gum off into the towel, folding it in quarters and placing it in his pocket. It only took a few seconds. He secured the door, so it was wide open, an invitation to his parishioners to feel welcome, to feel that the church was as much theirs as his, then re-entered, walked to the kitchen, and dropped the knife in the sink and the folded towel in the garbage. He then proceeded to his office to begin his preparations for the morning service. At the pulpit, throughout his entire sermon, even though it was presented impeccably, professionally, with heart and genuine emotion, for he really did have the utmost love and concern for his congregation, he wondered why anyone would stick three pieces of gum on a church door.

On Tuesday, the Board of Deacons met. Reverend Anderson chaired the meeting. "Our finances are good," he said to the five officials sitting at the table with him. "Contributions are up, donations to our capital improvements are up, our street teams are helping the city's poor every night and our foreign missionaries are reporting great successes. I haven't heard of any serious occurrences, thanks to God."

"This is great news," Deacon Edwards replied, with the other deacons nodding. He took a sip of water from a church logo-emblazoned coffee cup. "Thanks to God."

"One issue, though," the Reverend continued. "When I arrived at church on Sunday morning, there were three pieces of balled-up dark blue gum stuck to the front door. I scraped them off. But it's bothering me. Why would someone stick pieces of gum on a church door? What could it possibly mean? I don't understand."

"It's probably just kids," Deacon Little replied. "It probably doesn't mean anything." The other deacons nodded.

"But maybe it's a statement," Reverend Anderson said. "Maybe it's a criticism."

"I think you're making too much of this, Reverend," Deacon Edwards suggested. "Don't worry about it. It's kids. It's teenagers having some fun. Being rebellious. Let's just be content that our church is doing well, we're providing a great service to the community, and we're serving God. That's what matters."

“Thank you, Deacon,” the Reverend said. “You’re right, I’m sure. And that’s a great way to conclude our meeting. Thank you, everyone. Deacon Smalley, can you please do the final prayer.”

“My pleasure, Reverend. Dear Lord, thank you for your blessings and thank you for your love. Please watch over us and assist us in the tasks we do for your benefit. Let us remain humble and always have you in our minds. This I pray. Amen.”

The deacons rose and left the room, saying “Amen” in agreeable response. Reverend Anderson remained on his own at the table for a few more minutes, contemplating.

Over the next few days, the Reverend prepared for Sunday’s sermon, completed his other tasks well, visited a few parishioners, and felt moderately content. His topic for Sunday, the parable of the farmer sowing grain in his fields, never ceased to engross him. He loved finding wisdom in allegory, meaning behind simple words. And he loved being the messenger for the meaning and doing his best to enlighten and enrich his congregation. This was what mattered. His work and study, thanks to God, were going well until Friday morning when he arrived at church, walked up the stone path to the front door, and saw nine dark spots just above the brass handle.

With throat tightening and stomach tensing, he muttered to himself, “Oh no.” Again, he unlocked the door, got the knife and a paper towel from the kitchen, and returned to scrape off the nine pieces of balled-up dark blue gum. It only took a moment, but the duration was not the significance. “Why, God?” he questioned.

Walking to his office, he passed both Deacon Little and Deacon Edwards. They greeted him kindly and were surprised and troubled when he passed by silently, without acknowledgement, entered his office and closed the door. He moved Sunday’s sermon notes to the top left corner of his desk and took some blank paper out of a drawer and started writing aggressively.

“Brothers and sisters,” the Reverend began on Sunday morning, standing behind his pulpit in front of his loyal congregation, “I was originally going to speak today on the parable of the farmer sowing his grain in his fields, but circumstance has dictated that I change direction. Twice now, over the past two weeks, there has been an incident. An incident of vandalism on our church. I don’t understand it and it concerns me and makes me feel ill and I feel ill now. And so, this morning, I’m going to be very brief because I don’t feel well. I’m only going to say that forgiveness is Godly and, if any one of you is responsible or knows who is responsible, I trust you will tell me. It will be confidential, and I will forgive.” He stopped speaking briefly, then added, “This evening’s service is cancelled. Please do not come.” The Reverend stepped away from the pulpit leaving his congregation confused. After a few minutes, they realized that he was not coming back, and they slowly began to rise from the pews and walk out.

Later in the afternoon, Reverend Anderson contacted the deacons. Meeting at five o’clock, he told them. It’s not optional.

“Tomorrow morning,” he began the meeting bluntly without a greeting, “I’m contacting a security company. I want twenty-four-hour security every day for a week.” His words were slightly alcohol scented.

“This is because of the gum?” Deacon Smalley asked, trying not to sound judgmental.

“Yes it’s because of the gum,” the Reverend snapped back. “It’s happened twice now, and the second time was worse than the first.”

“With all due respect, Reverend,” Deacon Edwards said, “isn’t this a bit of an overreaction? We’ve had vandalism before. Remember a couple years ago when someone threw a rock through the stained-glass window. And before that, when we had graffiti spray painted on our back wall. It’s just kids. It’s teenagers. I don’t understand why this occurrence is obsessing you. I think that, if we just leave it alone, if we trust in God, who knows and sees all and loves us, whoever is doing it will get bored and go away. As long as we don’t react, don’t give them the attention they want, the situation will take care of itself. It’s just a bit of gum.”

“No, no, no,” Reverend Anderson contradicted harshly. “This is different. There’s a message in this. It’s sinister and devious. There’s more to it than just kids acting out. This is a statement. It’s too clever to be nothing. I feel it.”

“God’s ways are sometimes mysterious,” Deacon Smalley said. “We don’t have to understand them, but we have to have faith. In Psalm 23, for example, when David discusses the Valley of Death and—”

“Don’t preach to me, Deacon,” the Reverend interrupted, condescended.

“How are you going to pay for the security?” Deacon Edwards asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll take some money from our capital account.”

“That’s against church regulations. You know any shift in funds already allocated to a project has to be approved unanimously by a Board vote.”

“I don’t care,” the Reverend said. “I’m doing it. This meeting is adjourned.” He stood up to leave.

“Are we not having a closing prayer?” Deacon Smalley asked.

“No, we’re not. I said the meeting is adjourned.” Reverend Anderson walked out of the room brusquely, down the hall, and into his office. He slammed the door shut. The deacons left, uneasy in spirit, muttering to themselves in concern.

For the next two hours, the Reverend remained shuttered in his office. He tried to begin next week’s sermon, but thoughts and worries flooded through him, and nothing was clear.

“Dear God,” he said out loud, “please give me peace. Please allow me to trust in you. I know you know all. Let me have faith.” He stood, heart and head pounding, slightly dizzy, agitated.

Leaving the church, locking up, he retched violently, then stared at the front door in disbelief and shock and started counting the pieces of balled-up dark blue gum stuck above the brass handle. There were twenty-seven of them, maybe more, but definitely at least twenty-seven. They blended together into a mass. It looked like a large patch of mold, fungus. He turned

away and walked to his car, not bothering to scrape the gum off the door, vomiting one more time.

At home, he went to bed, skipping dinner, skipping prayers. He didn't feel like being awake or talking to God. His sleep, though, was fitful and disjointed and polluted with dreams of frustration. He was presented with puzzles that he couldn't solve and directions he couldn't follow and languages he couldn't understand. He dreamt that he had to drive a very sick friend to the hospital but couldn't find his clothes. Then, when he finally found his clothes, he couldn't find his keys, and when he found his keys, he couldn't start his car. Several times, he woke himself up with a scream, sweating and cold at the same time. "My God," he said to himself. He climbed out of bed and walked over to the table for his Bible. He picked it up, held it for several seconds in his shaking hands, staring, then dropped it onto the table, unopened, and went back to bed. He felt dishonest and fraudulent. He knew sleep was an impossibility.

When the phone rang at five o'clock in the morning, Reverend Anderson was sitting up in bed, propped against a couple pillows, in the dark, doing nothing, breathing. He brought the receiver to his ear. "Hello. Yes, it is the Reverend." Then a string of words from a voice he didn't know. He listened until it was appropriate to say, "I see." He hung up, got out of bed emotionlessly, numb, and dressed himself hastily in a gray tracksuit. How he looked didn't matter.

Driving to the church through empty streets, he ignored traffic lights and stop signs and speed limits. Why stop for no one, he thought. Why drive slow at this hour. Who cares if it's against the law.

Reverend Anderson arrived at the church and parked as close to it as he could. The fire trucks and emergency vehicles made getting any closer impossible. He turned off the car engine and watched the firefighters scramble in the wreckage. They were doing their best, he knew, thanks to God. The church, illuminated by spotlights, was a black hot smoldering smoking pile of rubble, without structure or form, no longer a symbol of charity and goodness and glory. It had been erased. "I told you," the Reverend said to no one.

Claire Scott

No Haloes Here

No haloes here
no straight shot to heaven
not since I stole peppermint gum
not since I ate the Easter eggs
I was supposed to sell to the neighbors
to raise money for Saint John's
where I pasted Jesus pictures on Sundays
where I stole Debra's favorite fountain pen

But I only ate the small ones, I swear
the ones that cost two cents
I think I'm dating myself here
how long has it been since
a chocolate egg cost two cents
maybe I should revise it to fifty cents
so no one will know I am closing in on eighty
and forget where I left my slippers

And who Silas is in this tedious novel
I started over again last night
I think the father of Cynthia
or perhaps her wayward husband
I toss the book aside
this business of turning eighty
barely wobbling around the block
barely swinging on the porch swing

But who cares, I can swing with my stash
of bottles hidden in the basement
behind the bicycles covered in cobwebs
the Chutes and Ladders, the soccer cleats
so my children don't lecture me
on neurons blinkered by bourbon
and here I am still chewing packs
of peppermint gum spotted at Safeway

Actually pretty happy
on my frayed couch, FaceTiming
with five grandkids, figuring out how
to make supper with two bruised bananas
and an expired can of corned beef
fingering the two small peppermint patties
that I found in my old lady purse
no haloes in sight

David Larsen

Liability Insurance

Dane Nielsen never saw the deer, not until its body rumbled across the hood of his Civic. The thud of the car slamming into the animal, the blur of the creature's gray carcass crashing into the Honda's windshield, and the out-of-control swerve of the wheels, were all one, not in any way separate events in Dane's retelling of the incident. And that was exactly how it had been: an outside-the-limits-of-time flash. A terrifying flicker in an otherwise satisfying film.

His fretful wife, Casandra, trembled as she listened to his recounting of his harrowing early-morning episode. She was of a nervous sort under the calmest of circumstance. Her husband's story only brought the worrisomely precarious nature of life into her already anxious mind. She couldn't believe what she was hearing: her husband could have been killed on I-10, between Junction and Ozona, a stretch of four-lane where cars and semis hurtled through scrub oak and brush at eighty-miles-an-hour—devil-may-care—seemingly unaware of the dangers around them.

• • •

Casandra stood slowly from the kitchen table and crept into their bedroom where she would attempt to digest what she had just been told, to ponder what life would be like without Dane, should he ever die in some cataclysmic disaster. Which he almost had. "I'm going to go over to Robert's and tell him about this morning's fiasco," called Dane through the closed bedroom door. "If the body shop in Ozona calls, could you take a message? The car's not insured for collision, so if it's too expensive to repair we'll just have to sell it for junk. I should be back by lunchtime."

Casandra didn't answer. She couldn't. Her quavering voice would have given her away. She listened for clank of the closing of the front door, then put her face into her pillow and wept.

• • •

The phone call to her mother didn't help. The sixty-eight-year-old woman was totally self-absorbed, concerned only with her own dilemma over what to prepare for Thanksgiving. "At least Dane didn't get injured," was all the woman had to say about the matter. When her mother's first husband—Casandra's father—deserted the family to be with another woman, the prideful mother went into mourning for a year or more. Traumatized and bewildered, twelve-year-old Casandra and Joyce, her younger sister, spent that time pretty much fending for themselves, preparing meals and school lunches while their mother sat in the darkened living room and smoked Virginia Slims and drank glass after glass of Southern Comfort,

Janice Joplin's drink of choice. Now, Casandra's husband had nearly died and all the woman could think about was turkey versus ham. Mashed potatoes or a casserole.

Twelve-forty-five and Dane hadn't returned. Casandra sat at the table and listened for sirens, but Dos Pesos, Texas only had one patrol vehicle, Sheriff Ortega's Ford pickup, and the sheriff had the entire county to cover, twelve-hundred square miles; there was a good chance she wouldn't have any warning before the knock at the door—a long-faced neighbor, hands clenched into a knot at their chest, there to give her the devastating news. She sniffled and blotted her painful, reddened eyes with a tissue. Dane's bologna sandwich and Fritos sat on the plate like an expectant father in the waiting room of the maternity ward. If only, she thought, she and Dane had had a child. It would make things easier. But, at forty-seven, she had waited too long; putting off having a family until they were financially set seemed like the wisest course at the time. The salaries of two schoolteachers should have been adequate, but it never turned out to be. And now it was too late.

• • •

It was after one o'clock when Dane returned from having coffee with his friend, Robert, the PE coach at Travis Elementary. The bachelor had been more than happy to dispense advice, most of it good. "If it's more than six hundred dollars, get rid of the clunker. You were smart to just carry liability insurance. A twelve-year-old car's not worth it." The rest of the morning was taken up with a contentious discussion of the Dallas Cowboy's upcoming game with the Packers, a game Dane would watch in Abilene with Casandra's mother's third husband, Joe. Along with Joyce's husband, Rick, a likeable-enough insurance salesman from Waco. Thanksgiving—Dane's favorite holiday.

Dane ate his sandwich and relayed to his wife everything the coach had told him about the repair of the car and about the upcoming game. Casandra appeared to be deep in thought about other matters; most likely she was concerned about the trip to Abilene later in the week, and about what to prepare for the family feast. Around the holidays she sometimes became depressed—more than likely due to unpleasant memories of the holidays after her father had abandoned his wife and children for a younger woman. When she was this way, Dane knew best to just allow it to pass; it always did.

In the bedroom he was startled to discover his charcoal-gray suit laid out perfectly on the bed. His white dress shirt and gray tie carefully tucked inside the single-breasted coat. Dark socks and his black dress shoes, perfectly polished, were on the bed (bad luck, he'd been told as a child) beside his slacks. Puzzled, he looked at the corpse-like form, almost as if he were seeing a ghost. He could think of no upcoming wedding they were to attend. Certainly, Thanksgiving was going to be casual, as it always had been. No funeral that he knew of. Casandra had her ways of doing things. Dane just went along for the ride when it came to her oddities. Either she would explain, or she wouldn't. It didn't matter. She always knew exactly what she was doing.

Duane Anderson

The Right Place

As I sit waiting while
my clothes are getting cleaned,
every once in a while
I look out the window
to watch the cars pass by,
and they make more noise today
than most days
since it had just finished raining
and there is still water
on the streets.

If I put my clothes on the wet pavement
along with some detergent
hoping the cars' tires will beat them clean,
I would just be wishing?
Right now, I am only dreaming,
somehow knowing I put my clothes
in the right place.

Elle Jacobson

Affairs of the Heart

How quickly the teardrops fall
parallel lines cutting sharper than swords,
glide down each cheek
past rosy ridges where words may speak.

They roll further down
form armour, shield and crown
and envelope my bleeding heart.
Dilute the blood, cleanse battle scars.

He tries to break the well-worn shield.
My tears, valiant soldiers, do not yield,
they meld pieces of my heart in desperate kintsugi.
He retreats, spitting venom cruelly.

I'm left champion, Queen of Hearts.
Yet mine breaks the further we part.
Royal blood bleeds sapphire-blue
but sorrow stains mine the same hue.

J. Davies

Helen

But should I let the next one ring?

I might.

I'm sorry about everything, alright?

For running up your driveway late at night.

For burning out that motion sensor light.

For lying about every Queen I had and not keeping the old times ironclad.

For swapping out the best days for the bad.

For looking a bit too much like my dad.

I watched your purple eyebrows bend and drape above your cracked pink lips hanging agape
when I erased your Peter Jennings tape and then let all the freezer air escape.

I didn't mean to leave them there, okay?

They wriggled as I wandered off to play.

You giggled when you said they all turned gray.

It took you slightly longer to decay.

For now I'll let my voicemail say goodbye and sell the strongest parts of you to buy
a weaker conscious that might justify letting the next one ring until you die.

Jasper Glen

I Felt for Light

In the dark heart
of your hallway;
behind the door,
a likely key:
another heaven
for him. Is this
psychic dark?
Or not, would
you trade friends?
This is my heart.
A dead giveaway.
Have you got it yet?

Jessica King

Defiled Fertilizer

I only wear *that* dress in my dreams:
red like lipstick stains and flushed skin,
modest like angels and virgins.
Your favorite Valentine gift

In my sleep, I suffocate with the memory
of your soft breath behind my ear;
a sweet embrace in the back of my car
that made the pain feel like a lie

How can a caress feel like a bruise
and “I love you” sing with sweet poison?
How did you turn affection into a masquerade,
and how did I learn to crave the agony?

If tears could purify rotten soil,
my heart would explode with sunflowers
finally turning away from your passion.
Maybe then I could’ve been saved

John Brantingham

The Earth Waits for You

You have to be careful after you drive
all those miles of deeply rutted dirt roads

into the California desert valleys to get back
to the old mines that were abandoned by people

desperate enough to walk into the Mojave
100 years ago. They're far back enough

that the government hasn't fenced them off,
so you can still climb down into the dark

with your little flashlight to see what once was,
and these holes spike down into the crust,

and they have their own kind of beauty
filled with echoes and bats that cluster

on the ceiling and move together as one
in their sleep, only a single guardian, still awake.

You have to be careful of trapped gasses
and explosives too heavy to carry out so left behind.

You have to be careful about crumbling posts.
Maybe, the earth shouldn't be entered any longer.

Maybe the fissures we've left.
It waits for the moment when it can collapse,

swallowing you and your every memory
of the world above.

John Grey

A Farmer Fixing Fences

He's out on his ranch some place fixing fence.
And hard to distract. For he'll just ignore
Your calls to his cell phone. And what is more
It's probably turned off. The job's immense.
His burden is the overwhelming sense
That if he doesn't do it, that and more,
It won't get done. That's what he does it for.
The doing is sufficient recompense.

The days are searing, the nights bitter cold.
No more unholy squall than when it rains.
There's little money in fanning. No gold
In slamming in poles, he often explains,
Nor laying wire. But it never gets old
When it is your land, your piece of the plains

Joseph Couchet
Burning Shade

You know it's there even though you can't see it. Behind you, in front of you, beside you, under you, it follows your every move. When you stay in one place, you know it lurks right there, the constant companion you never wanted. If it could just not be there, even just for a little while—is that too much to ask?

Each day begins with possibilities. Maybe you can start anew. Maybe it was never even there. But of course, it is. So much for thinking you can forget it and move on.

Everyone else seems to notice it, too. You can read it in their piercing stares as you pass by. Under their breath, they mutter ever so lightly. Sometimes it's not so slightly. Nonetheless, you almost always swear that you hear something. and you want to turn and confront them. But you don't. And you can't confront it, so you just keep walking.

It walks away, too, although not from you. No, it follows your every move. Sometimes you give into the impulse to stop, turn, and face it.

“Leave me alone!” you demand.

It's always gone before you even turn around, though. The last thing it wants is direct confrontation. That would be too much, though, perhaps enough to extinguish the flame altogether.

“I just want to move on,” you explain just as you have so many times before.

“No,” you can almost hear it whisper from its hiding place, “I'll only leave on my terms, but I always move whenever you do.”

Sometimes this makes you just want to admit that it's won. Why not just accept that and move on yourself? But you know the answer.

They also won't let you step away from it. They seem to prop it up and keep it active with every look and whisper, even with every thought about it, almost like they breathe more life into it and charge its power. And they do it without realizing they are the ones truly in the dark. What a hollow ironic victory that is.

“It's not my fault,” each one would claim. No one ever said it was their fault, but you know what they really mean. They don't want to take any blame for not letting it go.

“Don't worry about what other people think.” That's a common response, too, like suddenly everyone is your mother.

“We are living in a society,” they need to be reminder, “and what other people do and say does matter. It can matter a great deal.”

“Shrug it off.” That is another great piece of advice. Over time, it has grown so large that a shrug would never do it anyway. It would just land right behind you with a thud and then roll behind you every step of the way. They even have you second-guessing yourself. Perhaps it really is all in your head. It can't be that bad after all, at least that's the impression they give. If

they only knew. At times you want to do just that and tell them all about it. Get it off your chest, as they say. Unburdening yourself might be just the right thing to do. It would be such a relief.

But maybe it would just mean putting it out there for everyone to see. Once it is in the public domain, you can never take it back since you no longer own it. We all do. Then it becomes a commodity that keeps growing and increasing in value until someone decides to cash in, leaving you with nothing. It can become a trust fund that takes away your sense of trust. That would make it into an even bigger weapon. You have let it all well up inside you for so long, but you've only used it on yourself or when other people use it against you. Can you cut it off at the current source? That's the nagging question you haven't answered.

And look, I understand. This is not easy for me, either. Nor is this the first time I've brought it to your attention, tried to illuminate it for you, but you won't see things my way. No, you just stay in the dark recesses of your own thoughts. Not that I blame you. Staying there can provide some comfort at times. Even though you know it never goes away, the ability to forget about it is something so ephemerally precious. Then it is right back where it was, and you and I both cannot change a thing about it.

Not that I haven't tried. Being stuck in this predicament takes a toll on me, too. You're definitely not alone there. I feel the isolation and foreboding almost every day, too. It comes from the same source, which creates empathy but not pity or sympathy. We are pretty much on our own for those. The latter two provide little more than false support, anyway. Once we have been there, nothing we can do can change it. You and I can only grin and bear it together, and we do every day.

So, I guess you think the two of us are going it alone, then. We are together in spirit yet always at a measured distance from one another. The measurements can be hard to calculate at times, though. I have to say that I don't just walk a mile in your shoes, I wear those shoes. The same voices you think you here resonate with me, too. How do you think I got here in the first place?

I get it, that's why, every day. Every time a shudder or murmur is made, I feel like they know all about it. I have no way of really knowing, but how can they not? I must be invisible, but they see right through me to it and to you, of course. It has not always been this way, though. I had to meet you first, or, to put it another way, I entered it. I wasn't expecting this. It just happened, not my fault. But if you have to blame someone, blame me. Since I am the only other one who really knows, I do not know how beneficial that could be. Anything is better than how things are now with it, I suppose.

You are the only one who can make that determination. You always have been. That fact may make you feel even more isolated, but it is what passes for the truth. Others make it every day, but who are they anyway? They can never know what you do. It takes on to know one, to borrow an apt cliché. The thing is, do you really want them to know? Despite the desire not to be so alone about it, sharing might be even worse. Inclusion means the unknown. If you open the door, anyone might walk through it. You already feel like you have lost too much control. An open-door policy might be too much.

That leaves you with just having to deal with it. I could say on your own terms, but that would not entirely true, would it? It dictated the terms as soon as it happened and put you in adaption mode. I would have said “left,” but it never really does. No matter what kind of day you have, you can only compartmentalize it for so long. It is always waiting for you, and everyone else knows. They have to.

And of course, I never stray far. How can I? I have been with you from the start of it. You know I am not as involved as this every day, but I can be if we both want me to be. So, as you drift off tonight—or lie awake pondering it—just remember that you are never alone. I’ll always be right here.

Lika Sharashidze

Untitled

Two demons were drifting through darkling eternal space,
While they were slowly keeping their pace,
Night had already stained the earth,
Because the extinguished sun was of no worth,
Two demons laughed at mankind's madness,
While stream danced out of the velvet darkness,
Crownless kings swam through our existence,
Like swans, who have moon as their mistress...
Voice of two angels melted down,
Like an old canvas at perishing painter's hand,
Agony of two crownless kings it could not withstand,
As echoes slowly painted the enchanted lake,
It was more than that wrinkled hand could take,
Heavenly creatures knew no demise,
Because they met aspect of hope in children's eyes...

Matt Keane

The Garden of Love

I was preparing breakfast, and half-listening to a radio phone-in. The presenter introduced a new topic.

“Are people inherently selfish? A recent study has shown that 72% of the public believe selfishness is a common trait. Let me know what you think.”

As I buttered my toast, an irate caller grabbed my attention.

“Take that nutter in his cottage out at the airport. Bloody curmudgeon is standing in the way of progress. They’ve had to shelve plans for the runway extension because of him.”

“I’m sure our listeners will have seen the story in the news,” the presenter interjected. “What do you think should be done?”

“Kick him out. He’s a bloody nuisance.”

I had often wondered about the cottage at the airport. I’d spotted it many times from my vantage point in the back seat of a taxi or the top deck of the airport bus. A thatched cottage, not what you’d expect at the end of a runway. A thin plume of smoke from the chimney suggested the house was inhabited. Each time it caught my fancy, and I found myself imagining who could live there.

That evening, I went on-line and read blogs and newspaper opinion pieces decrying the owner of the cottage who refused to move, forcing the airport to operate around him. No amount of incentives or threats could make him leave his home. One article, entitled *Joe Won’t Go*, included a photograph of the cottage and the man’s name, Joe Nolan, but no information about him.

I decided to visit this man who stood in the way of progress. More than curiosity, I was impressed and even daunted by his individuality. Standing up to such opposition and criticism required a strength of character and purity of will. Maybe there was a story in this, or something I could turn into a story. I had to meet Joe Nolan, see him in the flesh and hear what he had to say.

The taxi trip to the airport felt strange, passing billboards advertising different airlines, but having no plane to catch.

“Arrivals or departures?” the driver asked.

“Neither,” I said. “Can you take me to the cottage off the runway?”

“Why do you want to go there?”

“I want to meet the man who lives in the cottage.”

The taxi driver shook his head. “That miserable old bugger.”

We drove by warehouses, and signs for long-stay parking and passenger pick-up. Past the life-sized model of the Alcock and Brown Vickers Vimy at the airport entrance, and along a secondary road. The driver pulled up on the hard shoulder by a gap in the hawthorn hedge that ringed the perimeter of the airport.

“There’s the entrance to his majesty’s estate.”

I paid him and turned to open the door.

“Here.” He handed me a card. “There’s my number for when you’ve finished your business. Otherwise, you’ll be stuck out here.”

I watched the taxi drive away. The dirty sky threatened rain. I buttoned my coat and went through the gap. A trampled grassy track led to the cottage.

Blustery wind whipped the tail of my coat against my legs. It was late November, twilight at three o’clock. In my mind I shuffled through possible words that best described the surroundings and settled on *bleak*.

Fifty metres to my right, the concrete strip of runway reached into a grey distance. A flashing light rotated on the bulbous control tower. The rumble of an airplane as it took off intensified into a thumping roar. I hunched over, nerves vibrating, waiting for the crescendo to abate.

As I got closer, I could see the rundown state of the cottage; stone walls discoloured, the thatch mossy and bare in patches. I knocked on the front door, and waited, then knocked again.

The door opened a crack.

“What do you want?”

“Joe,” I said, “excuse the intrusion. I’ve just come to tell you how much I admire the stance you’re taking, standing up for your rights.”

“Are you from a newspaper?”

“No, I’m not.”

Heavy drops of rain spattered my head. A surge of wind buffeted the cottage. The door opened wider.

“You’d better come in out of the rain.”

The door led into a kitchen. Sparse light penetrated a small window, augmenting the glow from a fire burning in a tiled fireplace. The smell of fried onions hung in the air.

“Take a seat.” Joe gestured to a table piled with newspapers, plates, and cutlery.

He was bald except for wispy hair around his ears, his face lined, a dewlap sagging from his neck. He wore a misshapen jumper, torn at the elbows, and tweed trousers that were too short.

“How did you get here?” he asked.

“I took a taxi.”

“Right, so.” He eyed me up and down. “I’ve just made a pot of tea. Do you take milk and sugar?”

“Just milk, but don’t go to any bother.”

He went over to a dresser and reached for a cup, his movements slow and hesitant. He must have been well into his seventies.

The tea tasted weak, probably made from reused teabags. Joe sat at the table across from me.

“I hope you’re not from one of those newspapers?” He pointed to the pile on the table. “Looking for a new angle?”

“I’ve nothing to do with any newspaper. I just wanted to meet you.”

“Well, that’s a first.” He picked up a spoon and began polishing it on the sleeve of his jumper. “I’ve had my fill of journalists.”

We sat in silence. Joe continued his polishing. He showed no inclination to speak.

“I really admire what you’re doing,” I said, “sticking to your guns.”

“I don’t like being pushed around.” He put down the spoon and took up a knife that he rubbed on the knee of his trousers. “The airport offered me plenty of money. Enough to buy a house with all the latest mod cons in one of those new developments. And tickets to exotic places, all the popular holiday destinations. Hawaii. Caribbean islands. The Bahamas.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. “I don’t need the money. It wouldn’t do me any good. I have all I want here.”

I looked around the gloomy kitchen, taking in the cracked linoleum and mold on the walls.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “Are you sure you’re not from a newspaper, come here to mock me?”

“I just want to understand.”

“Right.” Joe nodded his head slowly. “You want to understand.”

I sipped the weak tea and waited. Joe lifted himself from his chair, grunting as he straightened his back.

“Here, let me show you something.”

I followed him as he shuffled over to a small room off the kitchen that may have once served as a pantry. It contained a single chair positioned in front of a large, framed picture which covered most of one wall.

“*The Garden of Love* by Peter Paul Rubens,” Joe said.

He stood with one hand resting on the back of the chair and regarded the picture. I stood beside him. The print was an art gallery poster advertising an exhibition of Rubens’ work in the Prado.

“I don’t need to go to any exotic destination or holiday resort when I have this. I don’t even need a garden, some suburban patch of grass with weeds and squealing kids next door.”

“I see,” I said but I didn’t really, or only partly.

“I sit here for hours on end and look at those fat-arsed cherubs, like little Michelin Men.” He smiled and moved closer to the print. “Everything you could ever want to see is in this picture. Dutch women in their long dresses, acres of satin. Intrigue and flirtation—Rubens put it all on show. There you have Venus sitting on a big fish, squeezing her breasts, and lactating. Amazing. Those cupids encouraging all manner of licentious behaviour. Look at the angel on the left pushing that woman into the arms of the scoundrel in the broad-brimmed hat.”

He turned to face me, his old eyes glistening. “I sit here and find something new every time. The expressions on the women’s ruddy faces. Expectation. Hope. Dreaminess. Only

yesterday, I spent the afternoon trying to figure out the stern look on that woman with the feather. And the fellow with the lute—I still can't fathom what his expression means. Even the attitude of the doves and the dogs and Juno's peacock is strange. There's craziness in this painting. I sit and look and think of the Garden of Gethsemane, and I picture it as something similar. Jesus with his followers arranged like this, maybe Judas cozying up to Jesus like that chancer in the big hat."

Joe closed his eyes, nodded, and sighed loudly. I kept quiet, fearing that anything I said would sound crass. We went back to the kitchen and sat at the table. Joe picked up another spoon and rubbed it on his sleeve.

"A thatched cottage is unusual," I said. "You don't see so many of them anymore."

"I did it myself, learned to thatch when I was sixteen. I was trained by William Cahill, a master thatcher, and a true artist—the Rubens of thatching."

I considered suggesting that the thatch needed repair but decided against it.

"Do you think you'll be allowed to stay?"

"There's no reason for me to leave. The more they push, the more I'll resist. They say I don't want people to travel. I'm not stopping them. That's none of my business. I have all I need here, a roof over my head and my *Garden of Love*."

"Have you ever thought of visiting Madrid and seeing the original painting?"

Joe stood, took my half-finished cup of tea, and emptied it in the sink. Then, he made his way to the front door.

"Right, so." He held open the door.

My visit was over. He stood aside to let me out. It had stopped raining.

"Goodbye, Joe," I said. "It was good to meet you."

He stepped outside and looked around at the bleak landscape. "People can travel all they want. I don't care. All I know is that I've got all I need here."

He shut the door. A burst of wind blew me backwards. I took shelter against the side of the cottage. Checking my pockets, I found the taxi driver's card. I had come all this way to see a man who had no need to go anywhere.

Another airplane took off. I watched it climb, higher and higher, the noise a whistling echo.

Matt Cooper

Justice

*“I’m as green as the grass
In every song you wrote.”
—John Moreland*

Did you fall off of the Earth?
Did you go out to sea and you’re
Still out there floating somewhere?
Did you take a flight to Brazil one weekend?
Are you just in the Amazon now
And you’re still hanging by one arm from the
Old boughs of a big ancient Precatoria tree?
Did you take off for Los Angeles to
Find where the music came from?
Are you still on the 405 and sitting
In your busted Oldsmobile Cutlass—
Tapping your feet transient to
The beat of John Bonham comin’ back to life through
The speakers mixing with the beat of the wind
Rolling through your windows that won’t
Roll up?
Did you board a flight to Israel?
Did you find your lord at the Wailing Wall
And make your peace with god
For taking her away?
And then did your plane home get swept
Up in the Bermuda Triangle and now
You’re having tea with Aleister Crowley
And Rabindranath Tagore inside the event horizon
Of a black hole somewhere/sometime/
Maybe you’re outside time?
Well—are you? Did you?
Did you, old man?
Or—did you really die, but just in some funny way?
Did you visit a paper factory and trip and
Fall head first into the paper maker
And now your heart and fingertips are mixed up

In the sinews of the paper I'm writing this poem on?
Would that even mean you were dead?
Because I don't think so.
Did you enjoy the trip and
The universe's fingerprints on your eyes?
Because I did. And I also know—it was Just.
It was just cancer—
With its heavy ass foot on the gas pedal of your life
Taking you
Taking you through the garden of Eden just to watch
Where it started
Taking you through the great voids of the cosmos
Taking you, taking you into the past and future and present
Taking you into the hearts of your grandchildren that
Aren't born yet
Taking you into the mirror I see when I brush my teeth
Every single day
Taking you
Taking you
Taking you
Faster than the speed of all the light—
Back home
To god.

Michael David Jones

Where the Young Ghosts Live

There is, on the southern side of campus,
an old building bound in brick and shaped stone,
enwreathed in the verdant greens of tall trees,
planted in some past that I have not known.

The doors, that dark brown of once-felled lumber,
open slowly, stalwart soldiers in spite
of wind and water from Heaven above
and chills of frost in the depths of the night.

When this grand place empties, becomes a tomb,
footfalls find their places in verse and song
as the chambers remake themselves, a home
for the poets who keep the lamp's light strong.

I am numbered among them in these days
as we haunt these halls and I learn their ways.

P. L. Salerno

Tell Me When I've Had Enough

Blood drips to pavement,
Leaking from a thousand wounds
That you inflicted.

Bruises erupting
From beneath my skin's surface.
Gruesome masterpiece.

Red becomes the paint.
My body is the canvas
That you created.

From top to bottom,
I am completely covered
In your harsh tattoos.

Your face, a cruel
Distortion of what I see
In crystal mirrors.

You claim to be me,
To know me so well, so just
Desecrate my soul,
Since it is yours, too; simply
Tell me when I've had enough.

Robb White
My Double

I took an empty stool at the end near the door and ordered a whiskey. Maybe it was my agitation causing me to drink too much. I kept ordering whiskey shots with a water back until I was buzzed, and my throat scorched. That spreading glow of warmth was a sure sign my legs would be rubber when I got off the stool.

Stumbling out of the bar, bumping shoulders with passersby who muttered under their breaths or called me names, I was too busy concentrating on walking straight like a toddler putting one foot in front of the other.

At the crosswalk of Freddie's Grill, I spotted him on a bench eating from one of those paper boats of French fries. I headed for him, my eyes glazed but my focus zeroed on him, my double, a man who could have been my identical twin, a man I saw a week ago and had been looking for ever since. My brain reeled the closer I got. I intended to grab him by the shirt if I had to, pin him down, and hear him speak. *If he had my voice, too—what then?*

About halfway across, the fender of a car clipped me behind the knee, and I went sprawling head-first to the other side of the street. My head stopped short of smashing into the curb. That, anyway, was what the bicycle cops wrote in their report after I declined a trip to the hospital. Apparently, I was so belligerent that any pity for me dissolved, and I was arrested for public drunk and resisting arrest. At the Sheriff's in the county seat six miles away, I was booked, fingerprinted, had a buccal swab taken, and my DNA entered into CODIS, the national database of persons arrested or convicted of crimes. After the processing, a deputy led me to a cell where I spent a long night listening to the guy in the bunk below cope with the DT's.

I bonded out the next day, pled guilty at my brief sentencing, and as a citizen with no criminal record and "ties to the community," as my lawyer said, I was ordered to serve a month in the county caboose. My wife packed her bags and stuck a post-it note to the fridge. It said only three words: "The Last Straw."

My welding job at the manufacturing plant was history as soon as my arrest made it into the police beat of the *Herald-Tribune*. One month after my release, life returned to normal. I'd just picked up a minimum-wage job driving a tow motor at the recycling center. "Normal," that is, until that pre-dawn knock by two detectives in SWAT gear.

I was charged with two counts of murder in the commission of a felony, and two counts of aggravated felonious assault. They told me my DNA matched skin cells taken from a baseball bat used in a recent vicious crime. Cops are allowed to lie by the courts, so I didn't panic. I asked for my lawyer and that ended this interrogation. I was booked for the second time in weeks. One cop asked me where I got that running scar down the right side of my face when he told me to stand up for the cuffs.

"What scar?"

The cop snorted as if I were joking with him.

Two days later I was shaving with the plastic Bic they give inmates when I noticed it in the mirror: a zig-zagged stripe of dead-white skin that started under the right zygomatic arch and disappeared into the beard below my jawline. I know what scars are on my body and the closest one to my face is on my left palm where I slid on a piece of buried glass at ten years old. I didn't know how that scar came to be there. Every time I tried to remember; a black wall came down.

At my trial, I wanted to take the stand, but my milquetoast lawyer talked me out of it. He said I'd do more harm than good with my history of blackouts and the forensic evidence.

That evidence turned over to my lawyer in discovery was "a Walmart tote of incrimination," according to the prosecutor. The Assistant D.A. who prepared it wished him "good luck" and winked. It started with closed-circuit film from an all-night Dairy Mart where a red ragtop Wrangler was caught passing in the early morning hours. It also included witness statements attesting to an altercation with a man in the parking lot of the Crow's Nest. He identified me by my scar on my left eyebrow. The worst was my DNA on that baseball bat.

My lawyer refused to believe I was nowhere near the crime scene. I can't alibi myself for that night because my wife couldn't be traced. I remember drinking and going for a long drive in my Jeep to clear my head. My double was all I could think about. I remember pounding the dashboard with my fist—even ripping the mirror off the windshield. No one can understand the frustration of living in a small town, seeing "yourself" on every street corner, yet not being able to confront your lookalike.

That's all I remembered about that night, I told him: no altercation at the Crow's Nest, a sports bar I avoided.

He looked at me. "Blood from the cut on your hand was on that bat. How do you explain that?"

My double . . . He's behind everything that had gone wrong with me.

The crimes I'm accused of? At two-forty in the morning two days after my release from county lockup, a security guard behind the medical offices plaza on Lake Avenue received a call from his wife on Tryon Road less two miles away. Someone moving around in the storage barn behind their house where the family powerboat and four-wheelers were stored. She sent their eighteen-year-old son out to check. He grabbed a baseball bat and left for the barn. When he didn't answer his cell phone, she called her husband. He sped home, strapped on a holster with a Taurus Bulldog and raced to the barn.

Using his laser sight to sweep the grounds for the intruder, the guard gave the intruder a target. He stepped from behind a fir tree with the boy's Louisville slugger and bashed the guard's head in. The boy was found unconscious from a blow to his head. Life-flighted to Cleveland's brain-trauma unit, he barely survived. She went in search of her missing man and was found lying beside her husband with a crushed skull, brain matter leaking from her nostrils. Cops theorized the killer's swing improved with each victim.

My lawyer stood up, shoved papers into his valise, and started to leave the conference room for inmates and their lawyers.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not death-qualified.”

“You can transfer DNA,” I said. “You know that, right?”

He ignored me, looked back once, and left. His expression told me everything.

Here’s where it gets confusing. My *pro bono* lawyer wanted me to plead to diminished capacity based on “a lifetime of alcohol abuse.” He found a shrink willing to state—after a couple brief interviews—that I was “the most delusional human being” he’d ever encountered. After the second interview, he insisted on carrying a man-down into our interview. At my trial, he testified that my “submerged but true persona” was “a boiling magma of repressed violence” able to burst through the surface of my personality at any provocation. He accused me of having “a homicidal affect” and called me “a cicada buried in the dirt for seventeen years.”

I am the meekest of men. I carry no grudges. Yes, I’m an alcoholic. But I don’t skulk inside people’s storage barns and knock their brains in during the wee hours of the night. The prosecution had some tool-mark expert testify that the scratches on a tire iron in my Jeep’s trunk matched jimmy marks on the face plate of the hinge on that barn.

My lawyer’s shrink hung my “fantasy” of a double around my neck. He said my binge-drinking blackouts had worsened until I began blaming a fictional lookalike for all the calamities in my life: the arrest for public drunkenness, the failed marriage, losing the job. I’d “slipped into this phantom-me so to blame him.”

My double disappeared from Northtown on the day I was sentenced given the LWOP sentence—Life Without Parole. I just missed lethal injection in the death house in Lucasville on the Ohio River. I never told anyone—not my wife or my lawyer—that I first saw him seventeen years ago on a street corner in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

When that creep from the parking lot identified me on the witness stand by the scar on my forehead, a zigzag of dead tissue resembling a tiny white spider, I jumped up from the defense table and called him a liar. Two deputies pinned me to the floor and cuffed me up. The judge ordered me confined to an isolation cell.

Divorce papers arrived a month later. I’m currently in SHU, the segregation unit, at Youngstown State penitentiary, a super max. I had to defend myself from a greasy slug of a convict who tried to extort me in my own cell. I bit off part of his nose and pulled out one eyeball with my thumb. The Violent Prisoner Extraction Unit stormed in to take me down. The monkey mouths on my tier who shout at the “new fish,” called me “Bug Boy” when they pushed me past them hogtied on the gurney.

The prison shrink’s a secret boozier. He’s fascinated by my case. He can’t get enough details about my “cicada-persona,” as he called it. He wants to write a paper on me, he says, and he’s going to use “the Wrangler wave” to describe the emotional trigger for what he calls my prolonged fugue states. What a moron. Drivers of Wrangler Jeeps wave to one another on the highways just as motorcycle riders do. It’s meaningless. The day I passed my double driving an identical red Jeep on Ninth Street, I waved out of habit. I only glimpsed the driver. But

I *knew* him from that accidental sighting back in Arkansas seventeen years ago long before I became a problem drinker.

On the day, I'd just left a college bar and picked up a copy of the student newspaper. I normally ignored it, a stupid rag full of academic gibberish and pretentious poetry. But that day I saw a photograph of me—not me, but my double. It was drawn by a police photographer of a rapist on campus. People looked at me differently from that day on. I had to transfer to another college. Nothing seemed right after that. I lost my bearings, began drinking, flunked out, and started drifting from place to place, the jobs always getting harder and the money shorter.

If I don't get chalked up again, I can get back to general population, so I nod, smile, and listen. He read a passage to me from a thick diagnostic manual on mental disorders. He called it his "bible." I considered it bullshit, but I humored him. I'm not crazy.

Yesterday afternoon, he had a book delivered to me from the library with my chow. I found a passage that is sure to please him in our next session. I've memorized it:

"But things that fall hopelessly apart in theory lie close together without contradiction in the paradoxical soul of man."

Trevor Carter

To the Dead

Demons circling brazen and bold
Closing in as plague takes hold

Young and old in talon clasp
Faces with quietus gasp

Depraved view before my eyes
Sounds of wailing and mothers' cries

Pestilence assassinates indiscriminate
Reaper's coming swift and imminent

My own fortune, a source of guilt
The blossoms 'round me sadly wilt

Nothing done to end the fall
Now we follow a requiem call