



THE
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LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Alexandra Giffin

The Best is Yet to Come

There will come a time
to let love die
so it can rise again
from blackened dust,
tarnished trust rebuilt
from rusted words
hung out to dry.

Mornings turned to years,
you take your coffee tinged
brown paper bag wrapped
in silence, a tender glance
or graze of your hand
softens the remnants
of our wounds.

Bound by blood
and weathered dreams
you call me your imperfectly
perfect star, not drifting far
tethered close this time
of year to the familiar anchor
of your skin.

High tide envelopes me whole,
the best is yet to come—
because real love
requires drowning,
then realizing
you never needed
lungs.

Barry Judson Lohnes

Make a Wish, My Friend

John Beban honked raucous cries, head in his hands, amidst the disinfectant odor pluming through the medical office. A young oncologist remained seated awkwardly behind his desk, devoid of skills to deal with an emotional breakdown of a dying patient.

“We have no cure for pancreatic cancer,” the youngster said, nervously rubbing the tube of his stethoscope, as if it were a satin edging of a baby blanket. “We will make you more comfortable with palliative radiation, then there is chemotherapy, though the results are not favorable in treating your type of carcinoma.”

The patient lifted his head to wipe his eyes and nose with a red bandanna. Then his eyes riveted to those of the spritely specialist, young enough to be his son. “How much time?”

“Six months give or take.” The oncologist stood, eager to break off the appointment. “There is hope,” he added, averting Beban’s eyes. “Research goes on at this moment.” Beban nodded farewell to the young doctor, rising to wind his way through the waiting room, noticing people with pallid faces and balding heads.

Back in his small flat, Beban discovered all traces of gusto had dissipated from his being. No person lived close by to share his anxiety; his wife had left him two years ago, prompting his move to Portland, seeking the ubiquitous fresh start. He made acquaintances at his job, but friendships proved elusive; aging people fear vulnerabilities of new relationships often present a curve of diminishing returns. He spent the night awake, imagining cancer coursing through his body, boring like sea worms into vital organs. He suffered the paradox realized by all terminal patients—lying awake seeking a solution when there isn’t one. Remedial thoughts bang against iron doors, with the same futility of psychotics pounding abraded heads against asylum cinder blocks. Exhausting emotional outpouring it is, yet nothing changes. Reality upon awakening is worse than nightmares.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number of his former wife. He hung up the phone after the first ring. They had done little for each other when they were together—no reason for his ex-wife to offer sustenance at this juncture; asking would present as abuse, all over again. At three in the morning, he fell asleep, just when he thought about smoking marijuana again, knowing it could do little to damage his cancer-riddled body.

At nine in the morning, Beban heard a soft, persistent rap on his door. Sleepily, he opened the door, having checked the time and noticing pale sunlight sifting through Venetian blinds. A grinning, wizened man in a black gabardine suit stood before him, clutching a briefcase.

“Mister John Perley Beban?”

Beban nodded, keeping the door opened slightly.

“May I come in, sir? I represent American Comfort Enterprise.” He smiled, lips curling toward his ears. My name is Robert Q. Andrews, Q for Quentin.” He smiled again, winking solicitously. “Most think the Q is for Quincy.”

Once inside the foyer, Andrews began to speak in earnest, softly melodic. “Mister Beban, our network informed us of your illness. Needless to say, you must be devastated. We remain dreadfully sorry.”

Standing with his arms folded, Beban flushed. “And where did you get this privileged information?” He spoke in a civil tone, his resentment at the intrusion neutralized with the intriguing prospect of an alternative to extant base misery.

“Tut, tut, Mister Beban . . . We have no insidious motives, as you will see.”

“What are you doing here?” Beban asked, voice hardening.

The old man named removed his glasses and began polishing the lenses with the bottom of his gray silk necktie, making a circular motion with thumb and forefinger.

“Let me be direct, Mister Beban; this is difficult for you, and it is not easy for me.” He nodded toward the divan. “Let’s sit down, my friend . . . I will take but a few minutes, I promise you . . .”

Beban sat; angst tempered by curiosity.

“Our Enterprise, Mister Beban, is a privately funded organization, one allowing dying adults, usually those without a strong support system, to spend final days doing what they wish to do. Several anonymous benefactors have donated generously so that this program might be a reality—”

“Is this the program that is available to kids? If so—”

“—Let’s say for now, Mister Beban, that our directors believe that dying alone as an adult is the cruelest burden, indeed absolutely tragic. When you think about it, most children have loving mothers and fathers. Then again, children do not understand the finality of death. Take for example—”

“—How do you know that I am alone?”

“We have informed sources in oncology offices, and more than a few in pipelines of cardio-pulmonary specialists. Resolute staff members in hospices serve as conduits. Caretakers access records, for the good of the order—”

“—Are you invading the privacy of terminally sick people?”

“Mister Beban, it is the second instance where you have mentioned issues of confidentiality—I assure you that we do not gain detailed information from medical records. The only information we care about is the seriousness of your illness, and that you have no close relatives, nor do you have a significant other at the moment. Having said that, rest assured we know little beyond your name. Why, our organization used basic phone books to locate your address.”

Beban looked down at his hands and began to pare a fingernail with the nail of his thumb. “So, what do you provide, Mister— er—Andrews?”

“We provide medical care; for example, we aid those unfortunates who have no insurance. We have strange requests, believe it or not, sir. One woman wished to reside at the Mayo Clinic, so that she could prolong her life in a private room—we did it. Another person—a woman, by the way—wanted an overnight stay with gorgeous Ms. Bo Derek; we could not do it, though we found a person that closely resembled Ms. Derek.” The old man grinned broadly, then he put on his glasses gently, thumbs and fingers to each temple. He gazed around the flat, smiling. “We try not to make moralistic judgments, Mister Beban. Who can define morality when one is living, let alone when one is dying? Is morality even in question if no person is hurt in any way?” He paused to focus on Beban, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“However, we failed to grant the wish for one man to taxi out of the bullpen at Yankee Stadium and pitch short relief during the fifth game of the World Series. But we were able to get him a seat in the bullpen, as guest of honor; hours later, he bar-hopped with the players. ‘Best night of my life’—he said. We try to deliver without making judgments. Some people become more spiritual while others become self-centered—but that is not our business, sir.” The man pulled out a gold pocket watch and checked the time. By the way, some make basic simple wishes. We could transfer your fourth-floor walkup flat to one with convenient first floor access; it may be important to you as your disease progresses . . . or regresses, depending on your outlook, sir.”

“Not your business?” Beban asked.

“No sir, our mission is to use our substantial resources to provide comfort the way you want it—our values of comfort should not have a bearing on your decision. If you choose to opt-out, you will not be the first. Say the word and you will not hear from us again, nor will you be able to find us.”

The small man smiled and looked into Beban’s eyes. “There, I’m finished Mister Beban.”

“I can make a wish?”

“Make a wish, my friend,” the visitor said, eyes sparkling. “But please be quick—we ask for a decision within twenty-four hours; you see, the dying vacillate much more than the living, in spite of what you might think. I suppose they know they have fewer decisions left, so they labor hard to make them good ones. Human nature: alas, who can explain it, Mister Beban?” He swept up his hands, like a minister blessing a coffin at grave side.

“May I offer you a cup of coffee, Mr. Andrews?”

The man smiled and then checked his gold watch. “Ordinarily, I would decline, sir, but those four flights of stairs did me in. If you have tea I would appreciate a cup, very much.

“Straight up, if you will,” he chuckled. “No cream or sugar, if you please.”

Beban excused himself and set about putting the water to boil and arranging Vienna Fingers on a plate with paper napkins and doilies. He worked himself into a trance thinking about the finality of his life. Glancing through the portal, Beban noticed the little man perused a copy of *Salesman’s Opportunity*. Damn, he thought of his confidence problem in approaching attractive women. Now that he had the confidence, he had no time, nor health. He thought about the second-hand Corvette nearly purchased, yet the next morn he rose dejected, stymied by a belief that he couldn’t afford it. From out of the blue, he lamented a passed-up fly-casting trip up

the Truckee to catch cutthroats, so big that you needed two hands to remove them from the net. Ah, with little time left, he could go out in style, doing anything he wanted to do, though he could not do anything for long.

Beban brought in a ceramic tray, setting it on the rickety coffee table. He poured tea for Mister Andrews and instant coffee for himself. The man sipped the tea contentedly, sniffing the beverage with expanded nostrils.

“Nothing like a good cup of morning tea, Mister Beban, I think I’m an Englishman at heart.”

They sat for ten minutes, sipping from cups and nibbling Vienna Fingers, talking about Maine winters, then switching to Boston Red Sox baseball. Once more, the man looked at his gold pocket watch. He readied himself to stand, rubbing out wrinkles in his gabardine trousers. “Time waits for none of us. Thank you, Mister Beban, I haven’t eaten Vienna Fingers in years.” “Indeed, you are welcomed, Mister Andrews.”

“Now I feel that I can tackle those stairs, always easier going down,” he said, beaming at Beban. “Yup, like life itself, isn’t it? It’s human nature to wish for an easier way, sir—each day, inventers make our lives easier, for example.”

“And quicker,” Beban added, helping the man to stand.

“Twenty-three hours, Mr. Beban, if you decide before that, call me,” the man said, holding out a yellow business card. “After that, you will get no response—this number is time-sensitive.” He shuffled along slowly, escorted by Beban. “I must tell you, sir, that I love my job; it gives me great pleasure to be an emissary of happiness.”

As they reached the rail around the stairwell, Beban stopped and patted the older man’s shoulder. “I have made my wish, sir.”

The man gushed, clicking false teeth. “I am so delighted for you, Mister Beban. Why put off until tomorrow what one can accomplish today, as the saying goes?”

“My wish, Mister Andrews is that you survive a precipitous fall and become a terminal invalid, so you will finally discern how your clients really feel.”

Ignoring the thin man’s shocked expression, Beban lifted him, including the briefcase clutched in Andrew’s gelatinous white hands, over the rail and dropped him, headfirst. He waited for the thud of impact four floors below and then turned to grasp the knob on his door, scowling and shaking his head.

“Emissary of happiness, my aching ass,” Beban rasped, red-faced from both rage and his exertion. He thought about anger management issues that had plagued him all of his life. “Too late to do anything about it now,” he uttered, slamming the varnished Christian door. Alas, he could not control his own longevity, but he could control someone else’s.

Cheryl Savageau
Seizure Villanelle

...for Bill

His head hanging over the table, his long white hair
He remembers this has happened once before
He felt like he was there, but wasn't there

After only two years how can this be fair?
Now the EMTs are banging at the door
His head hanging over the table, his long white hair

Those long twelve years without him, unaware
Now something's happened deep within his core
He felt like he was there, but wasn't there

I always expected his step upon the stair
the knock, his lips, his eyes, I wanted more
His smile over the kitchen table, his long white hair

I lived without him as if it were a dare
as if I were dancing on a ship too far from shore
I dreamed of him sometimes, but he wasn't there

He said he had some poetry to share
I put the kettle on, two cups, coffee ready to pour
His head hanging over the table, his long white hair
It was as if he was, but wasn't there

C.M. Pickard

Fishing for Teeth

In silent grief, a daughter takes her place
amidst the hush of whispers and memories rise
within her mind, a youthful game embraced
of fishing for teeth—in summer’s playful tide.
The pool transforms, a stage where joy and water merge
laughter dances and bonds are tightly laced.

The forceful plunge, a summer ritual well-laced;
piercing the veil where a kingfisher’s dive takes place,
a game of bonding in which carefree moments merge
dying the aquatic canvas where family memories to rise.
For teeth—like silver fish, in water’s tide,
a father’s joy and daughter’s heart embraced.

The glue’s aroma, recollections embraced,
bound by laughter, love tightly laced,
and the pungent scent rises with the tide,
a patio’s wooden tread their temporary resting place.
Man-made current swirls—and children’s voices rise;
two halves united in passing hours will merge.

A mother’s voice drifts as scraping hinges merge,
stirring laughter, both pain and joy embraced;
graceful as a blowfish, a father struggles to rise.
In haste—a splash of water intricately laced,
securing mended teeth; forced back into place
and superglue’s bitter taste washes away with the tide.

A once vibrant father’s form beneath the tide,
through water’s lens; where reflections blend
within a daughter’s gaze, painful ripples take their place.
Silhouetted fragments from a distant era embraced,
while beneath the surface: truth and myth is laced
amidst mourners, the departed’s essence softly rises.

In depths profound, where shadows rise,

an anguished swim; through grief's relentless tide
where sorrow's touch, and a daughter's heart are inter-laced.
Time's gentle flow and water's stories blend
beneath the liquid shroud: a child's tender echoes embraced,
and in solitude waves of sorrow find their place.

Poignant memories rise, history and present blend.
Fishing for teeth against the tide; in sombreness embraced,
both grief and joy inter-laced, blooming; within this hallowed place.

Cristina Bryan

I Don't Have a Good Feeling About Him

When we were kids my best friend Bennett and I were real jerks. When you're twelve, if somebody is a whole year older, as Bennett was, it makes a big difference. Plus, he was tall and kind of on the heavy side. He was a bully to the puny and sissy and wrong-race boys, but he always seemed to get away with it. Along with a few other mean kids I learned to taunt his victims after he'd given them the business. So, you can see the fact that he chose me as his best friend, though I was younger and smaller, was pretty flattering.

We got up to a lot of things badly-behaved boys in the late 'forties liked to do. Breaking windows in public buildings on Sundays. Spray-painting the bronze statue of some holy person in the church's front yard. Shoplifting. Whacking all the heads off the hundreds of tulips in the town's Memorial Tulip Garden. And once we put a turd in the mailbox of the school principal. Her mailbox was not a normal one but a yellow metal school bus, like a giant toy, on a pole. You can see she was practically asking for it.

A bad thing happened, though, when Bennett found out his father kept a revolver at home "for protection." The dad was a cop so it wasn't too far-fetched to think that a crook he'd busted might come to get revenge on him some night.

Bennett, of course, was dying to use it for target practice—something his father would never have allowed. So, Bennett took the gun out of his father's underwear drawer one Sunday when his parents were at church, along with a bunch of ammo he'd already found in the sock drawer.

"This'll be fun," he said. "We'll just do a little target practice." I soon found out he considered targets to include songbirds and a woodpecker in the woods, and a big turtle. I didn't care about the birds, but I hated it when he shot the turtle in the head and shell. Its blood was brown, not red, which made me kind of sick.

On the other side of this small, wooded area where we were fooling around was the town dump. Sometimes we'd see kids climbing around over the smelly trash, looking for cool throw-away stuff, I guess. There were no kids today, just a weird man with messy hair lying down on a discarded mattress. He looked about my father's age and was wearing chinos and a sports jacket and fancy shoes.

"Look at him, he's dead drunk!" Bennett cried when we were just a few yards away.

The man opened his eyes. "Go away, you little shits!" he shouted. Then he added in a tired, afterthought kind of way, "Or I'll kill you!"

I didn't think the man could even sit up, and he certainly didn't seem to have a weapon with him. Suddenly, though, Bennett got really excited. "He's threatening us!" he cried with something like joy in his voice. "Did you hear him? He says he's going to kill us!" And he raised the gun.

He hit the guy in the lower part of his stomach. There was a gush of blood.

“It’s self-defense!” Bennett shouted. He put the gun in my hands.

All of a sudden, I felt funny, kind of sick and kind of excited at the same time. The man started crying.

“Put him out of his misery!” Bennett, this son of a cop, said. “You know the law can’t touch us. It’s self-defense!”

Bennett got fifteen years, a lenient sentence on account of his age and our “self- defense” plea, though we could tell the judge wasn’t really buying it. I got sent to juvie till I turned eighteen.

When I got out, I enrolled in this HVAC training school where they taught us how to install and repair furnaces and air conditioners. It wasn’t bad work, and I was good at it. I actually got hired right away by W. W. Stearns Home Comfort, because I got a good recommendation from the training school and Mr. Stearns liked to help out young men who were trying to stick to the straight and narrow.

Bennett got out of prison after just six years, for good behavior. Bennett getting rewarded for good behavior, I had to laugh.

But he didn’t enjoy freedom for long. He was drafted into the army right away.

We got drunk together the night before he had to leave, and we promised each other that when he got out of the service we’d travel everywhere together and do cool stuff.

In a few weeks I got a postcard from San Diego, where I guess they were shipping out from. The postcard showed a topless lady stretched out on a beach towel, with the message on the back in Bennett’s messy handwriting, “Wish you were here!”

After a few months in Korea, he got to go to Tokyo for a little R&R, which means “Rest and Recuperation.” But a while later we got word that he’d been killed by snipers almost as soon as he rejoined his platoon.

They shipped him back to Lumberton in an army-issued coffin and his parents talked about him like he was this big military hero. A few months later, though, this guy I knew who was just back from Korea on account of injuries told me Bennett had actually been killed in a drunken knife fight outside a bar in Tokyo. What a Bennett way to die, I thought.

In December of that year was my twenty-first birthday. I’d just relocated to Jacksonville, North Carolina. I hadn’t really made any friends yet, so when I asked a couple of guys at work if they wanted to help me celebrate with a few beers and they said no thanks it didn’t really hurt my feelings. I wanted to do something special, though, something I’d never done before.

There were all kinds of small businesses around Camp Lejeune, like stripper joints called “gentlemen’s clubs” and pawnshops and bail bondsmen. There was also a fortune-teller in a big pink doublewide next to the Piggly Wiggly parking lot. I decided then and there I wanted to know my future, then get drunk.

Madame Estrella was the fortune teller’s name, and her tiny parking lot was empty. I wondered if she’d know it was my birthday, or that I’d ever helped kill a stranger for no reason, or if I was going to come into a lot of money sometime.

Madame Estrella let me in but said she was cooking supper for her son, so we'd have to make it quick. She was a tiny middle-aged woman with darkish skin, a local Lumbee Indian probably. We sat at a card table.

"Fifteen dollars please."

"What? Before you even tell me anything?" I'd figured on five bucks at the most.

"Take it or leave it," she said in a grumpy voice. "But happy birthday all the same."

"Wow. It is my birthday." So, I suddenly figured she might be the real thing. I handed her the cash, part of the birthday hundred my mom had sent.

She took a little twisted bit of copper-colored metal off this necklace she was wearing. It was shaped like a figure eight. She held it near her face. She was quiet for kind of a long time.

"What I want to know, first, is do you see money in my future," I finally said, in a nervous loud voice. "Probably what everybody asks you."

"No."

"No they don't, or no money in my future?"

"No answer yet, because there's somebody trying to butt in."

"Really? Somebody from the spirit world?"

She closed her eyes, still holding her wire. "Do you know somebody named . . . Binnit?"

My heart started pounding. "Bennett."

"He's *very* aggressive! Oh my, I don't have a good feeling about him."

"Well, that's Bennett."

"He says he has an important message for you."

It suddenly occurred to me that Bennett, though dead, had remembered and wanted to wish me a happy twenty-first birthday.

Madame Estrella sighed. "He says where he's at . . . is dark. Real dark."

My mouth went dry, and I suddenly wished I hadn't come.

"You can't see nothing," she went on. "It's like being blind. And he knows he's never going to see any light again. Never, never, never."

I stood up. I couldn't speak.

"Wait," Madame Estrella said, "it's dark but there's more. This Binnit says it's chilly and he can't move a muscle or make a sound. And he knows it's always going to be like that, it's never going to get any better. Not ever. Not even in a million years, he says."

"I think that's enough," I managed to say.

"Dark and chilly. And kind of paralyzed. That's what he says it's like."

"No more, please."

"Oh, one more thing. He says, 'Wish you were here.'"

Daniel Thomas Moran

As Water Flows Over Rock

Today, there was
a raindrop fell
from a swell of cloud,
onto the brow of
a rocky hill, and
tumbled into a rill,
that ran through
the leaning grass.

Because of this river,
nothing is ever still,
the silence of distance
is whispered away
by a wight's lullaby.

On its surface,
the brushstrokes of
an impressionist,
his palette of black
and cadmium white.

Its travels are unceasing,
under weary August sun,
or star spilt winter nights.
Monthly, the full moon,
lights upon a dance of
the ancient spirits.

It is the traveler, who
never stops to board,
who drinks of itself and
never from thirst,
a clockless watchman,
counting ages through
unimagined places.

It is ever on, to where
its burnished waters
become waves and tides,
To wear and wash the shores
of places we will never see.

Darby Briar

My Baby Mine

My baby mine,
the baby that never was,
cradled in arms forever empty,
bereaved of your love.
How you might have grown,
laughed,
smiled for me—
a vision that even now
drifts out to sea.

The suffering is instant;
no need to await tears.
I trust it will fill my days
for undying years.
This kind of anguish,
not so far from complete,
is stark, all-encompassing,
and full of defeat.

How my life rearranged itself
to fit your tiny embrace,
thieving dreams, now carved out,
an abyss in their place.

I see no end to this grief,
nor any slight measure of hope or relief.
How can there be,
with vacant breaths,
silent sighs,
and beats that beat no more?

As if this misery carries daydreams
of your future out to shore.

With an agonizing rip,
my heart floats away,

even though I know
this was never your place to stay.

It'll hurt like hell,
but I'll survive this raging heartless tide,
and look forward to a time
I'll travel this new journey by your side.

When I do,
one day venture beyond this space,
I hope the first thing I see
is your face.

My baby mine,
how I love you.
My baby.

D.J. Murphy

It's Time

Wait by the river,
see coming clouds threatening
to fatten its swollen banks,
feel in your marrow that it is time again
to seek higher ground.

Wait by the river,
watch the beaver gather wood and mud
to build its protective lair,
his haste a harbinger that it is time again
to shelter where wolves do not go.

Wait by the river,
recall days when this verdant valley
was charred then slaked
and accept it is time again
to know thirst.

Wait by the river,
see within its roiling current
its calming rhythm and patterns
and find strength again
in your ability to endure.

Emma Berry

My Name is Lilith

Before me, there was nothing but dust. Earth was empty. Desolate. Devoid of life. No trees filled the landscape or grass on the plains. Nothing could penetrate through the thick, rust-colored powder that shrouded everything, rendering the terrain a never-ending expanse of orange and red. When the wind blew, it brought with it an apocalyptic haze that tarnished even the bluest of skies. It was a ghost town, before a time when ghosts existed because no souls had yet been made to die.

I hailed from some place far away. It was warm and lush. There was me and many others like me that lived there. We were made so you could be made like seeds waiting to be planted at the right moment. Nurtured by hard working hands that belonged to faces with soft smile lines that told stories from a thousand lifetimes. We were formed so you could be made like us. That's how Mother wanted it to be.

Who is Mother? Our Mother is the primal creation, conceived before all others. Born from the chaos of our Universe's inception amidst swirling galaxies, fiery stars, and orbiting planets. A singular divine entity woven into the fabric of existence. She permeates everything, everywhere. You'll find her in the craters of your moon and within the crashing waves of the sea. Her touch, a gentle spring breeze, that carries the scent of fresh blossoms and new beginnings. Her tears are the gentle pitter-patter of raindrops upon leaves, quenching their thirst. She harmonizes with the chorus of birds at the crack of dawn and hums alongside the peepers at twilight. You'll find her embrace within the warmth radiating from your winter hearth. She is everything from the tallest tree to the tiniest stone overturned by your feet.

We are Mother's celestial warriors. Once, she alone nurtured the Universe, but she yearned for companionship, for she knew that no one being should rule everything alone. That is not the way. Thus, she fashioned us from seedlings she created from dirt she gathered on each planet. She watered us with her tears, and our souls formed from the sun shining within her. And at night, we bathed in the brilliance of the stars twinkling in her eyes. We are the embodiments of Mother. We carry her essence and beauty wherever our feet may tread.

Each year, Mother summoned us on the Day of Light. On this occasion, our realm basked in the sun's radiance for the entire day. It was a celebration of life and renewal when we would harvest new life into our home and dispatch those ready to lead new abodes across the cosmos.

When my time came to depart, I was ushered into a small tent to receive Mother's blessing. I bowed deeply before her and said, "Mother, I ask that you bless me before my journey to my new home." I dared not meet her eyes, not because I was afraid, but because I was unworthy to look upon Her. Soft footsteps approached me, and I felt warm hands gently caress my arms guiding me to stand before her. "Look up, my child," Mother said. She glowed with the power that came from somewhere ancient. She was the first of us all.

“You will be the pioneer of Eden. A garden nestled within the barren desert of a place called Earth. Your spirit will nourish the soil and spread life across the land. Those who follow in your wake shall look to you for guidance in their newfound existence. “Do you accept this mission?” Her voice echoed like a refrain riding on the ebb and flow of the tides or the rumble of quakes deep in the ground. All I could do was nod. Then it was time for me to go.

Eden was Paradise. My paradise. A sanctuary unlike any other. I was the first to walk on the rich soil that covered the expanse of the garden. With me, I brought seeds from my home to sow and spread. All the seeds that made me were to be planted across the planet, starting in Eden. Back home, we lived by Mother’s example. She promoted equality throughout all of her lands, and that is what we were to bring to our new homes. The seeds we planted sprouted harmony, respect, connection, and coexistence. We honored Mother in our new worlds and created caring civilizations. No being was worth more than the other.

It was my duty to nurture Earth. To raise her in Mother’s likeness. She was meant to be a haven for spirits like mine. Until he came. The first corruptor. He came crafted in the image of another, formed from the dust clouds that lay outside my paradise. As I came to welcome him, he brushed past me as if I was a stray particle on his shoulder. He made himself at home in my home as if my presence were inconsequential.

Many of you might know the first corruptor by a different name. He was a disappointment in your stories too. Living his life under the command of another. He knew nothing. He was not allowed to know more than that. We did not say much to one another at first. He seemed harmless, in fact. We met at the mouth of the river. I was washing my hands after a long day of planting and tending, and he was lying on the sandy shore. Our eyes met. His were green, like the apple trees growing in the orchard. The sun had tanned his skin, and he had grown a long beard. “I am Adam,” he said, “Who are you?”

I did not tell him my name, but I smiled politely. “Why are you here?” Adam continued.

“I am here to bring life to this planet,” I responded, “I plant the seeds here so that they may spread across the rest of the land.”

“But why?” he replied. “That is my destiny,” I simply said, “How did you come to be here? Did Mother send you?” What a foolish question.

Adam cocked his head to the side, “I know no mother.”

For a while, I continued my duties. Laying the groundwork for more like me to be brought to Earth. Adam continued to sit by the river. He did nothing. Knew nothing of how to tend to something so pure. He tore through the Garden with a vengeance. Depleting its resources. Neglecting to replenish what he took without hesitation. He ate from all of her plants, except one tree. Apples were my favorite fruit, and that was the first tree I planted when I came to Eden. I brought a bit of home with me. I thought, at least he did not take that from me.

Then, He came down.

He was surprised to see me in Paradise. He thought I was unfit for this world because of my “delicate nature.” It was too rough. Too unexplored. Too new. It was better suited for “someone like Adam.” He proposed a solution.

“You and Adam will join as one. Adam will plant his seed in you, and you will create more beings with his image. That will be your role,” he said.

I shook my head. “That is not my role,” I said, “I am here to craft this world in Mother’s image, and that is what I will continue to do.”

But that was not in His plan. Defiance was not tolerated. So, one night as I lay asleep, Adam came to me. His plan? To steal my spirit. To break me. Now, I was made to be a peaceful being. That was how Mother made me. We did not fight. We did not steal. If a conflict arose, we were expected to work together toward a solution. But where I was from, there were no Adams. A thought like Adam’s would never cross anyone’s mind because it was wrong. It was violating. It was evil. So, I did what I had to do. I fought back. I clawed, scratched, struggled. I wrestled myself free from his grasp and fled.

It felt wrong to flee the world that Mother made my destiny. Why should I have to leave my Paradise? It did not seem fair. Even though Adam did not conquer me, I still lost. I lost my home. My freedom. My purpose. When I reached the edge of Eden, I looked up to the sky and cried out for Mother. I cried and cried and cried. And then Mother cried. Rain fell from the clear sky. It was a heavy, impossible rain. And I knew I had to go. So, I kept running.

I ran to the edge of the Earth until I found a sea. A sea where I could not sink. And so. I just floated.

I heard He made a woman from Adam called Eve. I heard that you blame her for your sins. You use her image to point fingers and throw stones because she ate the apple from my first tree. I pray for Eve. I pray that she finds herself in the sea, where you’ll forever find me.

Ezra Flowers
The Songbird

You gutted me open
Like a pretty white cat
Peels the fascia from a songbird
And tenderly licks the organs underneath

The white cat savors its meal
It venerates every part of its prize
And when the carcass is forgotten
It looks to its master for praise

The sun draws its anchors starboard
The white cat arches its back
When it flees from the moon's beauty
I hope it's haunted by silence

Gone are the tuneless intervals
And gone is the disjointed refrain
The songbird's voice is only a memory
Your master will never mind again

But you will, because I'll always crawl back to you.

Jared Wesley

Guide

Twilight
Shadows falling
Darkness rising...dreadful
A path lost in failing light
Alone

The night
Frightful silence
Ravens caw...hopeful
A guide calling in black night
Astray

A glow
Fortune changes
Wisps flutter...enticing
A raven fades in rising light
Nevermore

The cold
Sunless, barren
Fiends beckon...fearful
Screams echo in sweet delight
Forevermore

Jessica Settergren

My Mother's Savage Daughter

I remember what she looked like that day, hair spreading like a nest of angry snakes thrashing in the water, fingers clawing at your hand holding her face in the river. I remember the warm wetness creeping down my legs when I peed my pants, and the taste of coppery fear in my throat. I remember trying so hard to hold my breath, shoving my little fist into my mouth to stop a scream. I bit my own hand to hold that scream inside so you wouldn't see me lying in the bushes by the water. She'd heard you coming, you see and hissed at me to hide and be silent no matter what, and I was still a good daughter then. I obeyed.

I'm not a good daughter anymore. You killed that obedient, sweet little girl when you drowned her mother in the rushing current. The brownish, iron-rich water smelled like blood, even though mother's face was bloodless, pale but for the previous night's black eye, when you took your hand from the back of her head and let her float away. She didn't flinch when the current slammed her into rocks or flipped her over and over. Her skin took no more bruises from the rocks. I had to wait, still as a hare, hoping you couldn't smell my fear and piss while I watched her float away.

You stomped through the mud and dumped the laundry basket, but you didn't find me. You swore and flailed in residual fury, but you didn't find me. I remember the vicious curse you laid upon me as you finally walked away, that you hoped the wolves that come out at nightfall would feast on my bones. I remember, father, how you washed your hands of me and my beautiful, strong, loving mother that awful day. The day I died, too.

Do you even remember her name?

SAY HER NAME, FATHER.

Stop choking, I didn't hold you under that long. Answer me. Did you ever wonder what happened to your little girl, or did you just consider her an obligation you'd shed? Hmm. I see your anger still begins with cold silence. I remember that, too. I learned to be silent, Father, from you. Nights when you came home silent were the worst for us. I saw her hands quicken in her chores, as though she wanted to be sure they were done before you sat down. I saw her grip change on the knife she used to chop carrots for stew when you brought a brewing storm home with you. I wonder what she could've been, had you not ruined her life. I wonder what she could've been had you let her live. I wonder what we would have been, had she stabbed you that night instead of taking the beating meant for me.

Do you think yelling at me will stop this? Ha, how wonderful! No one can hear you screaming when I push your head under but do go ahead and try. The draught I added to your ale works fast, so your voice will quiet soon. Shall we find out if you can still swallow?

That little girl you left terrified and traumatized in the woods that day? She lay under that bush for two days, too scared to leave even to piss. Her stomach didn't growl until the third day,

and she hoped the river's gurgling absorbed it. When she finally left, covered in mud and brambles and her own shit and piss, the first place she crawled to was the water.

I was too little to bathe properly without help, but I knew I was disgusting, so I did my best without going too deep. I saw what happened to Mother, after all, and even though part of me desperately wanted to be carried along by the current and follow her, most of me was overwhelmed by pain, rage, fear, and hunger. I don't think it's instinct for children that small to want to kill, so I suppose that's another strike against you.

Oh no, no one can hear you screaming when your head is above the water, either. The bathhouse is shielded, and I'm due on stage in a few minutes so everyone assumes I'm in my room preparing. Yes, that lute by the door is mine. Did you know you paid handsomely for time in the bath alone? People accommodate old men more than they do young ones, don't they? Oh, is that not your experience? Well, I suppose you wouldn't recognize it, since you ran off to this village after you killed her, letting everyone assume you were single. You even took a different name. You married and started again with a woman I can only presume was more sedate than my mother. Or did you spend a lifetime beating her, as well?

You never could tame Mother, could you, not even with all the beatings or insults? I never truly understood why she stayed with you, why she tolerated your moods and tantrums, why she never used the knife she kept close in her kitchen and cut you to ribbons. I know now that she could have.

I wandered the woods, too afraid to go back to my own home. I ate acorns and drank from streams and tried not to freeze. I was only six. I shouldn't have been alone. I don't remember how long I wandered in the dark undergrowth, hiding from animals and people alike, before she found me.

Did you know my mother had a sister? Ah, you didn't. Interesting. So many secrets she kept from you, her husband. Never her partner. I didn't know either, until Gretl found me. She'd gone to the house, you see, called by Mother's last letter sent in secret with the autumn Travelers caravan. Gretl played the part of the fretful, anxious sister looking for Mother with news of the family, and no one in the village could help. With all three of us gone and the house standing mostly empty after you packed what you wanted and ran off, the villagers assumed you'd gotten a job somewhere else and moved us all away. No one looked too closely at the mess left behind, and no one bothered to wonder why remnants of his wife and daughter's things were strewn amongst the fireplace ashes.

The old village keeps to itself, even now. No one recognized me when I started this trail. All they saw was a Bard passing through on her rounds. No one saw me break into our old house when everyone was waiting for a concert at the pub. But there was nothing left of us in those rooms. Gretl warned me not to be sentimental about the past. She was right.

Gretl had tracked us from the house to the river and saw the signs. She found my hiding spot and knew I was alive, and her sister was not. I didn't understand how she knew that at the time: when she found me days later, I was delirious with hunger and exhaustion, so I didn't think

to ask until much later. Long after she'd taken me back to the Order's compound and I'd started training.

Mother had many sworn sisters, Father. All with different talents and callings, all deadly in some way or another. Some hired themselves out, you see, to remove lives for a price. Some had powers they could use for good or ill but always hidden because witchcraft is still illegal in many parts of the world. Not in their compound, though.

Now don't slip too far, it wouldn't do to have you drown. The paralytic will wear off soon, and while I'd enjoy carving you into small bits to become person-soup in this tub, I happen to like the innkeeper here. That would be rude. So even though this blade thirsts for your blood, as it has for hundreds of men before you during my travels, it will not get what it craves from you. Blink once if you understand me.

Excellent. I found purpose in the sisterhood, and learned everything they could teach me, so I could honor Mother's sacrifice. It took years after I left the Order as a journeyman Bard to find you. I took contracts and enjoyed honing my skills in magic, music, and murder. The last twenty-five years have been quite busy, and becoming a Master has only increased demand for my music, and for my other skills, sometimes with the same folk. After you I will give my farewell concert to this village and go to bed. I'll stay a few days, because who wouldn't be interested in finding out what happened when a body is found in the inn's bathhouse? But you're an old man now, and frailer than you were when you held her head under the surface of the river. No one will question your shriveled, grey body's demise, and there are no bruises or needle marks to give me away. You're just a grandfather who slipped in the tub on his journey home from his annual visit to his daughter's house. Of course, I knew of her: once I found you it was easy to track your family's history. Oh, did you think I perform at this inn by accident, a random twist of fate bringing a murdering father and his long lost first daughter together by happenstance? I spent years honing my route until I finally found you, and other year planning. Not everyone kills in a hot rage of temper like you did, Father.

Ah, now I see the fear. No, I have no reason to go get your replacement daughter, or your son. Your granddaughter, Elise, though, she has spirit. She reminds me of Mother. She reminds me of what I could have been. She would do well in the Order, so I will make sure my route takes me through her village every year or two. If she chooses to leave with me, my niece would be welcomed amongst the sisters. She could be just like me, Father. Just like Mother.

It's time. I have an audience waiting for song and a death to deliver. May your afterlife bring you everything you deserve. There's no point trying to speak: your lips can move again, but your vocal cords won't work yet. See how it only takes me one hand, too? Just like you, Father, only you don't struggle or fight, you just sink quietly beneath the surface, where she's waiting for you. Not even a gurgle.

You never were as strong as her.

Goodbye Father. I will never forget the day I finally became an orphan.

Mother, I've fulfilled my promise. I am your savage daughter.

Kirsten Hutchins

Snowfall

The snow comes trinkling down from the sky
White as ever.
Beautiful with a soft sound only heard by the trees
A deer frolics in the snow.
A child bundles up to make their first snowman.
The sound of silence becomes the snowfall
Ever glistening amongst the trees
Shining like sparkling silver
So beautiful and a reminder of old man winter is coming.
Gathering of wood and food.
For the animals of the forest have already prepared for the snowfall.

Lauren Robertson

Thoughts in Sumter

Happiness is a frugal thing,
Not to be wasted on empty dreams.
Achieve what you want, as you will,
And surely, that longing heart shall fill.

Upon the merry ways of living,
A long way goes in the art of giving.
Share your joy without fear
Of voices which speak, but ears which don't hear.

To live freely is to believe
That all things work accordingly—
In their time and destination
With purposes beyond our explanations.

The mysteries of life are as such—
You ask for more but don't receive much.
To be humble in the way you live
Will leave your heart with more to give.

Mahailey Oliver

A Crow's Villanelle

He likened me to a dove; I likened myself to a crow
that squawks so earnest in the coming light.
He would not let me grow, so I had to let him go.

Does he not know that in the morning's gentle glow
the dahlia blooms the brightest in the dawning light?
He likened me to a dove; I likened myself to a crow.

He preferred I stick satisfied with the status quo
and never let myself find any semblance of a plight.
He would not let me grow, so I had to let him go.

He wanted gentle sauvignon while I drowned in Bordeaux
and perhaps the dahlia is overshadowed by a daisy's white
He likened me to a dove; I likened myself to a crow.

I wanted to keep climbing—he, satisfied with a plateau,
pleased with himself to stifle my delight.
He would not let me grow, so I had to let him go.

When the night shall end, he'll find my spot empty and hollow
as I wander into darkness, chasing every greatest height.
He likened me to a dove; I likened myself to a crow.
He would not let me grow, so I had to let him go.

Marco Etheridge

Water Rats

Sasha brings up the rear, the last of four shadows etched silver under a quarter moon. Four nocturnal creatures feel the rocky trail through deerskin moccasins. The path is steep. Sasha cannot see the pipeline, but she knows they're close.

Gregor leads the water rats. He is eldest with thirty summers. Then quiet Cecil, the hunter, with a sixth sense for danger. And ahead of Sasha, Aaron the bull, young and strong. Sasha is the tapper, quick-handed and small.

Sasha thinks numbers. Four rats to a team. Fifty liters each. A fifty-kilo load. The tribe's survival hangs in the balance. Get the water back to Cottonwood and try not to die.

A soft call snaps her back.

Poor-will, poor-will...

Not a night bird, but Cecil, arm raised. The team freezes. A moonlit eternity waiting for the ruby slash of a laser or blast of a pulse weapon. But no. Cecil lowers his arm. The rats resume their climb.

Then Sasha sees the pipeline, a silhouette atop the ridge. Her fingers itch to touch cold steel. Sixty centimeters of pipe carrying sixty thousand liters a minute. More water than she can imagine. And all going to the urban sectors. The legacy of war.

Water to live, water to die for. The water wars raged for a bloody decade. Long before she was born, but Sasha knows her history. Old Camila sings the stories.

The wars ended in 2084, sixty-five years ago. To the victors, the spoils. The new junta controlled every water source. Water went to the urban sectors. The rest of the land went thirsty.

The junta maintains an iron grip. The penalty for stealing water is death. Drilling a well, diverting a stream; death. And tampering with a pipeline brings death with extreme prejudice.

The water rats push up the last slope. Climbing is easier than the descent. They carry no heavy weapons, only knives. No extra weight allowed. Fifty kilos are a heavy load.

They reach the pipeline. The quarter moon yields just enough to work. But in the secret hole beneath the pipe, all is black. A tapper works by touch and memory.

Each rat knows their task. Sasha unbuckles her harness and hands empty bladders to Aaron. Gregor sheds his bladders and disappears across the pipeline. Cecil adds his to the cache and slips down the trail. Eyes front and eyes rear.

On Sasha's left, the pipeline disappears into a concrete monolith and reemerges two meters further on. The thrust block is the height of a man, designed to contain the pulsing energy of the water within.

Just right of the thrust block is a bolted flange. The flange looks like a thousand other joints spaced along the pipeline. But this flange is a subterfuge installed years ago by a tapper engineer. Dead now, but his memory lives on in Camila's songs.

Sasha rolls onto her back, pushes with heels and elbows, crabs her way into a hidden burrow beneath the pipeline. Concrete on her right, broken rock on her left, and the pipe just above, the steel barrier between her people and life-giving water.

She hears the hiss of moving water, feels the pulsing flow. Her fingers find a concealed catch, and a section of the flange slides away, heavy in her hand.

Every movement is practiced and precise. Stow the flange section for replacement. Extract the feeder hose from her harness. Snap the hose fitting into the hidden one-way port. Twist hard and lock. She is ready.

Sasha kicks her foot to signal Aaron. The big man slides an empty bladder into the burrow. She pulls it over her torso like a blanket and attaches the hose to the bladder port. Takes a deep breath and braces for the coming weight.

Hose tight in one hand, ball valve in the other, Sasha twists the valve arm. The hose bucks under her grip. Water rushes into the bladder. Sasha counts the time. One-point-three liters per second; one-one thousand, two-one thousand. At fifteen, she snaps the valve closed. Fifty kilos of water press her into the earth. She kicks her foot, and the bladder slides away. She can breathe again.

The process repeats, five-six-seven-eight. Free of the last bladder, Sasha twists the hose out of the one-way port. A spray of water as the valve locks. She wipes the water from her face and licks her fingers clean.

She stows the hose, replaces the false section, and kicks her foot. Strong hands on her ankles as Aaron pulls her free.

The big man cups a hand to his mouth.

Poor-will, poor-will...

They wait. Gregor and Cecil materialize from the shadows. They wrestle the water-heavy bladders upright, snap them to each other's harnesses.

Click-click...

The team turns away from the pipeline and begins the steep descent.

It happens at the very spot where Cecil paused on the ascent. Gregor goes down in the first volley. A sudden flash as a pulse projectile blows the man in two. Water and blood erupt in a cloud of illuminated steam. A sickening thud. Sasha has time for a single thought before lasers slice the night.

What a waste.

The ambush becomes a massacre. Aaron dodges the fire and releases his water bladders. Then he charges, knife flashing in the moonlight. A laser burns him in half before he takes two strides. Cecil is hit from two sides and is dead before he hits the ground. Sasha is last in line. She dashes off the trail, drops to the ground behind a mesquite clump, and freezes. The fusillade sputters to silence.

A man's voice on the far side of the path.

"Is that all of them? I thought I counted four."

"I saw three from my side."

“Kerns, Russell, check the bodies. The rest of you stand and cover.”

“Yessir.”

Sasha hears heavy footsteps.

“Two here. They’re done for sure.”

“One here. Damn, this knife must be a hundred years old.”

“Cut the chatter. Slice those water bags, then everyone on me. Move!”

Sasha hears blades slide in sheaths, the soft gush of water onto dry ground. More footfalls and a murmur of voices, but she cannot make out the words.

She wills herself to be silent. The killer guards stalk past, so close she hears their breathing. Booted feet crunch up the trail toward the pipeline. She waits, then she’s up and moving in a crouch.

Sasha skirts away from the trail, intending to circle wide and then rejoin the path before it drops down the cliffs. Gregor taught her well. Poor Gregor.

Then, a voice in the darkness.

“One more step, and you die.”

• • •

For Sasha, the greatest shock of captivity is not the bars, the guards, or her claustrophobic cell. She possesses some understanding of these things, though she hates them. No, what she cannot fathom is the vast amount of water all around her.

Water to drink, as much as a person can hold, for the prisoners as well as the guards. Water spurting out of a shower and allowed to run down a drain. Such unimaginable waste!

In Cottonwood, an entire family bathes in one shallow tub, all using the same water. Baths happen once a week at most and then only in times of rain. Women first, followed by the men, then the children. And no one in Cottonwood pours water anywhere except on the beans or squash plants. Drains do not exist. In between bathes, her people scrub themselves with sand.

Behind these bars, everything is different. Sasha’s prison uniform is clean. The sheets on her bunk smell of laundry and soap and water. So much water. And most shocking of all, water in the toilet. Every time Sasha flushes the commode, she feels as if she’s committing a terrible crime.

Time is slow here. In Cottonwood, almost every waking moment is consumed by the struggle to survive. Find water, carry water, grow food. Sitting in her cell, Sasha has hours to think.

She wonders about the others: Gregor, Aaron, and Cecil. Did the killers leave them where they fell? She hopes so. The birds and beasts will strip their bodies clean. That is the proper way.

The prison guards do not act like killers. Instead, they treat Sasha as if she were a prize pig. They do not beat or abuse her. Food three times a day, more than she can eat. Clean bedding and a new uniform once a week.

Even her interrogator is polite and formal. He is older than the guards, grey at the temples. He seems more amused with her than angry. Sasha answers his questions with as few words as possible, but she does not lie.

“Your name is Sasha Cottonwood?”

“Yes.”

“And all your people are called Cottonwood?”

“That is our way.”

“And it is also your way to steal water, which is a capital offense.”

Sasha does not reply. The man sighs.

“How old are you, Sasha Cottonwood?”

“I have twenty-two summers.”

“So young. Too young to die in prison. Tell me, what would you do if we set you free? Where would you go?”

“Back to Cottonwood.”

“Even though your miserable village is dying of thirst?”

“Cottonwood is not dying. The rains will come again.”

“No, they won’t. The rains have failed. Our world has changed. That is why we control water. It is the greater good. You think we are killers, but that is not true. On the contrary, we save lives, hundreds of thousands of lives. You are too young to remember the water wars. Terrible times. I, myself, was born the same year the wars ended.”

The man stares at Sasha. She does not speak.

“There is no doubt that you are guilty. The penalty for your crime is death. I have one more question. If we allowed you a place in one of the urban sectors, a chance to be a productive citizen, would you accept?”

“No. I would go back to Cottonwood, to my people.”

A long pause.

“That I cannot do. Goodbye, Sasha Cottonwood.”

The man looks past her and raises his voice.

“Guard.”

• • •

That night, Sasha does not sleep. The guards come for her the next morning, polite and somber. They unlock the cell door. Sasha drinks one last glass of water, savoring every drop.

The guards bind Sasha’s hands. The electronic cuffs beep, then lock tight. They lead her down a long corridor, two guards ahead, two behind, and Sasha in the center. Some of the other cells are occupied. The prisoners stand behind the bars, watching her pass. Sasha does not recognize any of the faces yet knows them all.

At the end of the corridor, a steel door opens on the death chamber. It is a small, square room. A large mirror fills most of one wall. In the center of the chamber stands a glass booth.

Inside the booth is a chair bolted to the floor. There are two holes beneath the chair. One is a large drain.

The guards do not speak. One unfastens a series of latches. The glass door swings open. A second guard removes the cuffs. A firm hand on her shoulder urges Sasha forward. She steps into the booth, turns, and sits. The guards strap her wrists, ankles, and waist. Then they close the door.

The guards stand shoulder to shoulder, facing the booth. Their faces are solemn. No one speaks. There is no ceremony. Without warning, water gurgles from a hidden pipe. Swirling, clean and pure, more water than Sasha can imagine. The water climbs past her knees, her waist, her chest. Her body wants to float away on the flood, but the straps hold her fast. One last breath, holding it, seeing the world awash in precious water. Then she is gone.

Sasha walks through Cottonwood. The packed earth is cool beneath her bare feet. People smile and greet her. It is good to be home. Together, they look to the morning sky. Perhaps today it will rain.

Mary Barbara Walsh

The Crevice: Witness to a Mass Execution

In 1692, a hysteria gripped the people of the Village of Salem, Massachusetts, leading to the hanging of 19 people at a location known as Proctor's Ledge. A crevice below this rocky ledge received the bodies of those 19 accused, silenced witches.

Formed among rocks and outcroppings
Resistant to time and the illusion of progress
Located outside the village,
but within sight of the villagers
I waited for them,
Then,
As I do still wait.

That heavy humid day, September 22, 1692
I heard the cart plod up the incline,
oxen straining to pull its heavy weight,
a crowd jostling alongside,
dislodging wheels from ruts in the rough path,
removing obstacles they believed
placed by the devil himself.

I listened as its cursed shrouded passengers
muttered denials, begging, repenting,
even, shocking to the onlookers,
offering the Lord's Prayer.
I watched, One by One, as they climbed
or were pulled
to their final destiny.

I saw their feet dance, then dangle,
finally quieted,
bodies swaying gently at the end of a rope.
Cut from their truss
they dropped with a Thud
and I welcomed them
into the sharp, fractured abyss I provided.

Each silenced, no longer a thorn.
Chaos held at bay,
Discord swept away.
For the Moment.
I waited for them,
Then,
As I do still wait.

Meredith Rosier

Plea for a Haunting

My house is filled with a thousand ghosts, but none haunt me like I want. I long to hear the scratching at the doors, the rattle of chains in empty halls, the whispers, the howling. I want to feel the sliver of a cold chill play with the back of my neck. I want the mattress to dip by my feet and my body to slide into new indents even when my door has been shut tight. I want to see the flicker of movement from the shadows in the kitchen.

Instead, I'm forced to stare at the frayed edges of the couch that your fingers used to pluck whenever Dad sat us down for a long lecture. I admired your defiance. I always kept my hands still in my lap.

The tomato plants leer at me from the garden. The stems twist and the leaves brown, completely unsatisfied with my care. I thought about bringing them to you. Their roots would reach down deep where I could not and when they touched you, their stems would sprout anew and grow even to the might of a tree.

I don't dare touch the bookshelves. Your favorites guard them too fiercely.

The mail on the table stays where it is. The heap of bills and solicitations bury the letters, and the cards, and the poems. I'm aware of the unread words. In the night, they'll come to me, like the prick of a needle in my temple. Just that small jab is enough to make my eyes swell.

I blame Mom for moving you into that room across the hall. It was bad luck. Grandpa took his last breaths there in the corner where his bed butted up against the western wall. Yours was smaller and built on the opposite side, but that didn't matter. We kept Sarge in that room. He didn't recover from his back surgery. The marks of his claws still bleed through the white paint on the back of the door. Dad tried to cover them up before they moved you in.

I asked Mom why you had to leave. Our room had always been big enough for the both of us before. She told me that it was because we were getting older. That both of us deserve privacy and a space for ourselves. I didn't want to get older if it meant saying good-bye. Now that I am older, I think it was more because she wanted me to be alone. Mom and Dad both knew, even from that early age, that I was a lost cause. But you though, you they could still save.

How wrong they were.

I wish I could see dark veiled figures gliding past my window in the light of the waxing moon. Instead, I have to smell the lingering scents of that tea Mom made that you always liked and catch small glimpses of your blankets before she closes your bedroom door. I don't know why she likes to spend so much time in your room.

The stillness in there chokes me. The single window allows indecent light to cover the floorboards there. The clock, the one with all the different kinds of birds on it, is stuck on the wall. Both hands eternally frozen on the beak of a cardinal. Dad meant to change the batteries weeks ago. He never will.

Today, I'm fed up with waiting. I put my hair up. Throw on some jeans. I don't recognize the pair I'm wearing. I don't remember the drive. My mind is too full of anger. The kind that gnaws and grinds and rends. I'm here. I stare at you head on; the grooves that form the letters of your name are branded onto my eyes. The moon watches me, like a lopsided grin in the sky. I'm here.

My ears will split with the strain of listening, but the grounds are silent. Nothing moves. Nothing stirs, not even the wind, or the animals in the night. I'm here. But you're not.

Maybe you are back at the house, scattered amongst the ghosts. I see them every day, and none of them keep me company.

Murray Eiland

At Last

Friends and family gather
Phantoms in flesh, bidding farewell—
Faces painted with hollow smiles,
I pretend to hear only whispers of gratitude.

I step off the stage, the curtain falls,
My last breath slips into the void,
Silence soothes, darkness cradles—
I hope dreamless sleep awaits.

The body cools, stiffens,
Regrets dissolve like mist,
Happiness, triumphs, all dim to shadows,
Yet the soul moves, unburdened, forward.

An unseen hand pulls me, relentless,
Through the endless black, faster, faster—
Memories reel like flickering tapes,
Sights, sounds, tastes swirl,
Good and bad—indistinguishable now, a seamless thread.

Ahead, a pillar of light
Blazes cold, its fire searing yet distant,
No shadow escapes its reach,
Not even the darkest corners of my buried self.
Speed quickens, yet I remain distant,
The light draws nearer but never close.
I stare into its fierce glare,
Rooted, immobile.

Surrounded by dark, transparent,
I reach for meaning, for place,
But then it hits me—
I am nowhere.
I am nothing.

Payton McCall

Folie à Deux

“Let go of me!” Anna snapped. Her voice echoed off the tiled walls. She shook loose of my grip and crossed her arms over her chest.

“What the fuck are you doing, Anna?” My blood steamed and popped beneath my skin, boiling rapids coursing through my veins. “You never come home anymore, and I know you’ve been skipping school.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m paying attention.”

“I’ve been at Margaret’s,” she mumbled. She rubbed her arm where crescent moons formed from the bite of my nails. She looked down at her loafers that I knew belonged to Margaret. “I get my homework emailed to me, so everything’s fine, okay?”

“I don’t like what’s going on between you two. You act the same, dress the same. It seems,” I searched for a word that wasn’t too cruel, wouldn’t scare her away, “co-dependent.”

“Margaret and I—” Anna trailed off. She stomped her foot and looked around like a cornered animal searching for an escape. “I’m happy, okay?”

I took her shoulders, holding her at arm’s length. She finally looked at me, her glacier eyes soft and watery. There was nothing I could say to make her weary of Margaret, nothing to make her understand how strange their relationship was. I dropped my arms and said, “Okay.” She turned and skittered out of the bathroom, leaving me alone, never looking back.

Our conversation consumed my mind, scraped and clawed against every corner of my brain for the rest of the school day. I replayed it: Anna nearly in tears, unwilling to hear my concerns, protecting Margaret. She used to tell me everything, and now she wouldn’t even give me scraps.

After school, I snuck into Anna’s room, using her absence as an opportunity to search for clues into her increasingly private life. I opened drawers, dug through her closet, lifted her mattress. I didn’t find anything of interest until I noticed her laptop sitting on her desk. I sat down and typed in the last password she had given me. The screen came to life, and I released a breath I didn’t know I was holding. I opened her messages, swatting away the thought that I was invading my sister’s privacy.

I scrolled through countless texts between Anna and Margaret dating back to the start of the school year. They started off innocently: questions about homework assignments, complaints about teachers, grievances about their parents. Around the time that Margaret started driving Anna home from school, the texts turned into love letters: paragraphs about how beautiful the other was, how they couldn’t wait until lunch when they could hook up in the theater, how devoted they were to each other.

I paused, hovering the cursor over their proclamations, over the answers to all of my questions written in plain text. I hadn't realized how deep their bond—their mutual obsession—went. People do drastic things for love, and Margaret was Anna's first.

My fingers turned cold and numb as the texts grew darker and more perturbing. Margaret told Anna how they couldn't rely on anyone else. She said that it was them against the world, no one would ever love Anna the way she did, they would be together forever. Anna's responses reaffirmed the sentiments saying Margaret didn't need to worry about her loyalty, they only needed each other, no one could come between them—*“not even Sylvie.”* When I saw my name, fear swallowed any other emotion I had. If Margaret successfully isolated Anna from me, I didn't know how to bring her back.

The final texts in their strand of messages triggered a chill that snaked down my spine. I read and reread them, attempting to process the weight of their meaning.

Margaret wrote: *my parents just told me my dad got a new job, and we have to move. i won't go, not without you*

Anna responded: *we'll figure something out, i promise*

From Margaret: *you said you'd follow me anywhere, right? that you'd do anything for me?*

From Anna: *of course, M. i am desperately, fiercely, gravely in love with you*

From Margaret: *then we need to come up with a plan that will keep us together. forever.*

The texts were dated earlier that morning, just before I'd dragged Anna into the bathroom. I slammed the laptop shut and picked up my phone to call Anna. It went straight to voicemail. I tried again and again, but she wouldn't answer. I felt jittery, my nerves frayed, my reason fracturing into panic.

I rushed down the stairs and threw open the door to Mom's study. She shifted her glasses down the bridge of her nose and peered over them.

“You should knock. You know I'm working.”

“Have you talked to Anna today?”

She glanced at her phone. “She just texted and said she's staying at Margaret's. We shouldn't expect her for the next few days. Why?”

“I'm worried about her. And she's not answering my calls.”

Mom sighed. She placed her elbows on her desk and tented her fingers. “You have to let this go. We talked about how this is good for her. Socialization, remember?”

I clenched my fists to keep myself from screaming. “Do you know where Margaret lives?”

“You're not going over there.”

“I need to find Anna. Make sure she's okay. Please.”

“Drop it, Sylvie. Now, go. I have a client in a few minutes.” She pushed her glasses back up her nose and waved me away.

I felt crazed, unstable, out of my mind. No one believed that this relationship was devouring my sister, but I had proof that we were losing Anna. I grabbed my keys and ran to my

car. I drove through the neighborhoods surrounding our house, knowing that Margaret must live nearby. I scanned driveways for Margaret's car, the red Honda Civic that Anna left in on the days she came to school. I called Anna's phone every few minutes, but I only spoke to her voicemail.

"Anna, call me," I repeatedly begged. "I need to know you're okay."

I drove until the early hours of the morning, until the neighborhoods molded into one nebulous mass, and I couldn't tell any of the houses apart. I never found Margaret's car. Never saw any trace of Anna. The sun rose, dusting the world in pale yellow light. I wanted to keep searching, but I forced myself to give up and drive home. I parked in our driveway and slammed my forehead into the steering wheel. I screamed until my throat was raw, seething at myself for not finding Anna.

I crept up the stairs to avoid my parents' interrogations about where I had been. I slipped into Anna's room, locked the door behind me, and crawled into her bed. I burrowed my head into her pillow, into the scent that clung to her belongings.

I slept through the next two days of school, succumbing to dark, dizzying dreams where I followed Anna. I yelled for her, reached for her, but I couldn't catch up. I was finally awoken by Mom hammering at the door.

"Sylvie!" she screamed as she pounded. "Sylvie!"

I shuffled out of bed and unlocked the door. Mom pushed her way into Anna's room and sat on the bed.

"They can't find Anna," she said. Rivulets of tears rolled down her cheeks. She pulled her legs to her chest and put her forehead on her knees—a sitting fetal position, cowering away from reality. She repeated, "They can't find her."

Police found Margaret's car parked off a road that crossed over a bridge. They dragged the river, searching for bodies, but none were uncovered. Volunteers helped police grid search the woods bordering the river, but they didn't find any evidence proving Anna and Margaret had been there.

Even after the search parties ceased and the case turned cold, I walked through the woods. I looked for anything that those who didn't know Anna might have missed—a ribbon from her hair tied to a branch as a breadcrumb for me to follow, or a marking carved into a tree so I would know she had been there. I walked by the river to see if a shoe or a barrette had washed to shore. Surely Anna wouldn't leave without letting me know where she was going, wherever she ended up, whatever happened to her.

Péter Fritsi

Hide

Even though it is the middle of the night, I have to wake her up. We have to leave, as fast as possible. As she stirs awake, she grabs my face to check if it really is me. Her small fingernails dig deep into my skin, but I let her do it, nevertheless. Once she has reassured herself, she heaves a sigh of relief and wraps her arms around my neck.

By now, the virus has already spread all over the world, it can no longer be stopped, it is taking its victims one by one. One of the first cases was caught on video, which now has hundreds of millions of views on YouTube. In the video, you can see a middle-aged man streaming live in a burger place. He is sitting at a table in the corner, waiting for his order to come. Behind him, a counter with some guests looking at the menu posted on the wall. The man flashes a wide smile at the camera when his burger and fries arrive on a big tray. Before he would take a big bite from the crispy bun, something strange happens. His smile disappears from his face, his gaze becomes glassy, and he freezes all of a sudden. The next moment the man vanishes into thin air; his hamburger falls back onto his tray. One of the guests turns around, their eyes widen, then they start screaming and pointing at the table. One of the waiters runs out from behind the counter, goes out of the camera's line of sight for a second, then reappears again. He accidentally bumps into the table and knocks the phone off the table. The phone's camera lens is cracked in several places, but it is still recording everything. The waiter is kneeling next to a hollowed-out human carcass.

For a while, everyone thought it was a prank video, but then it happened again, and again. The virus spared no one. It killed everyone equally. It happened the same way every time. One moment you were full of life, the next you were nothing more than a bag of human skin. Those who witnessed an incident were immediately quarantined, but that did not help either. All those regulations, restrictions, and curfews did nothing. The number of victims kept increasing until finally there was no one left to collect and transport the remains left behind. Human skin littered the streets, some even got stuck on tree branches, utility poles, and billboards. A few days ago, when there was a huge storm, we heard a bang coming from the kitchen. When we came to check what it was, we saw that the skin of the six-year-old boy, who lived next-door, got stuck onto our window glass. Whenever lightning flashed, its light filled him with life for a quick second, almost making him look alive again.

My sister does not want to leave; she nestles her tiny nose into my neck, trying to hide from the world, when I tell her that we have to go. She starts to whimper as I head for the front door with her. She can't take her eyes off the kitchen door, that I locked when our parents fell victim to the virus. It happened so fast. They were in the kitchen, my father was doing the dishes, while my mom was drinking her morning coffee. Then, they were gone. Dad accidentally clogged the kitchen sink, and Mom reupholstered the dining chair. It was my sister who found them.

I peer through the peephole, but I can't see anything, it is too dark in the hallway. I press my ear against the cool iron plate of the door, but the only thing I hear is my sister's heavy breathing. I sling my backpack over my shoulder that I packed with what food we have left. When I open the door, my sister hugs me even harder. Sweat is running down my back. I dare not risk switching the lights on, even though I could find it in the dark without any problem. The virus only broke out about 3 weeks ago, so we still have water and electricity. Our infrastructure might even outlive us.

We are descending the stairs slowly. I am trying to be quiet, but my footsteps echo in the stairwell. I am holding my sister in one hand while grabbing the railing with the other. The landings are only illuminated by the pale-yellow light that seeps through the glass block windows. Suddenly, my fingertips touch something soft. I recoil in fear, my back hits the wall behind me, the cans and glasses rattle loudly in my bag, and I almost drop my sister. It seems like somebody thought it would be funny to wrap the desiccated husk of one of the victims around one of the stair railings. Maybe we do deserve this virus.

The elevator starts moving, which snaps me out of my shock. It is going up and we are listening to it stop at a level above. It is an old elevator so I know that its doors will open with a loud clang. When they do, I start running downstairs, throwing all caution to the wind. I can finally see the exit door. I kick it open; the night air is filled with the smell of rotting skin. But we are far from being safe, I have to keep running. My feet are getting heavier and heavier, I can't shoulder this burden for much longer. I look around and I notice the perfect place to hide: a brick dumpster enclosure. I am panting, my sister is shaking like a leaf in my hands.

Shortly after the virus broke out, people started wearing "skin suits." From a distance, you couldn't tell the difference. Only from up close could you see that their facial features were deformed and grotesque. They look like botched facelift victims with joker smiles. They go door-to-door, constantly scavenging for new "suits." Their motto is: "Skin for skin." They are the self-proclaimed harbingers of pestilence. They believe that if they help out the virus, by skinning people alive, they themselves will be spared.

The foul stench of the garbage cans is making me gag, but we have to stay quiet. Somebody's dried-out hand is sticking out of one of the cans, its fingers are fluttering in the wind. I venture a quick glance at the street, but there is no one around. No sign of life. Only death. The pavement, the road, and the central island of a roundabout opposite the bus stop are all covered with shed skin.

We can't stay in one place for too long, we have to get going. I go up the hill to get as far as I can from the residential area. I run past a row of garages; the forest is just up ahead. I don't know if we will be safe here or whether we will find shelter or not, but we had to get as far away from people as possible. Scavengers and fanatics check residential areas first, we were sitting ducks in that house. I can't let them take my sister. Not her. I promised mom I would take care of her. No matter what.

Two cars block the main entrance to the forest. They seem to have crashed into each other; both cars are totaled, shards of broken glass are scattered all around, glittering in the night.

I can't decide which one is more deflated the airbags or the bodies of the drivers behind the wheel. Leaving the crash scene and finally entering the forest I realize how tired I am.

I put my sister down, she can walk on her own for a little while. After a couple of steps, she suddenly stops. I slowly turn around. Her face is veiled by her wavy hair falling into her face. She is holding a big shard of glass in one of her hands. Her own flayed skin in the other.

I scream out in horror.

Paul O. Jenkins

Life, in Terms of an End

Life, in terms of an end,
Is tricky to mend.
Decline, despair, depart,
With withered heart.

Death, if seen as life's twin,
Is tempting as sin.
Review, relent, release
With newfound peace.

Ping Yi Yee
The Corridor

I nearly step on the tiniest grey frog
sitting on the railway track—paved over
after the last train conductor pulled
his final whistle, after sheds century-old
emptied and shuttered. Pausing there
fretting about the next runner or cyclist:
*will you hop back after my hand
alters your fate; should I leave you be?*

I shoo the frog off with a twig, back into
tall grass, fermenting leaves, towards
warbling waterhens, roosters foraging
vegetable plots, soil mixed with dung—
a breeze wafts over and I choke;
thinking of others gasping their last, after
their hopeless journey. Walking on
past the hospital where massacre befell,

past milestones marking today in black
and white, fresh memorials dedicated
to travel. I leave the flawed past,
peering at the tenuous future;
this corridor will survive us:
*you who are here a hundred years hence,
I would speak with you.* I head back,
dreams and doom aswirl in my mind.

In the tunnel under a dual carriageway,
graffiti and creepers duel and tango,
entwined in hope; no paint sprayed
in anger, no shoot growing in despair.
Somewhere in the undergrowth
a tiniest croak, echoing.

Randall Ivey

Vampire

I'm a vampire.
I come to life at night
while others are preparing for bed,
putting away their innocent children.
I feed off their dreams as surely
as the lycanthrope feeds off their blood
(or the vampire, to be consistent).

I'm a night creature
propelled by the worst anxiety,
afraid of light and what disappointments
it might reveal, what bad news it might bring:
the death of loved ones, rejection of a manuscript,
the election of a brain-dead tyrant,
some further failure of my own revolting body.

There's no enjoyment in living,
just worry: over my body
and the bodies of those I love—
that suddenly they may make
the ultimate revolt and just quit.
I worry someone will say no
To a poem or a story.

Best to sleep away the day
and live when the heat has diminished
and people are too tired to hate
and the monsters, like me, emerge,
to make life more interesting,
and the editors have put away
their laptops and their judgment.

Sajidah AlSaihati

Hatchet in the Womb

Today I am greeted
With the chilling familiarity of 'home'
As gentle pitter-pats of rain
Hit the roof.
This 'Tyrfing',
It never left my fingers.
Now I must offer it to you
And your accursed clutches.
The cracked, dark oak door,
Is latched shut,
As if isolation would allow you to succumb to your despair.
Tap, tap, tap.
The only one meant to knock before entering that hell-hole,
The forever uninvited guest.
And as always
You grant me no reply.
I distinctly remember
The forever present smell
Of poison
In your prison
By which I am
Effectively welcomed.
The womb I have simultaneously
Been birthed and buried
Sits in your stomach.
And as always
You don't bother looking at me.
You set down your bullet,
And I watch
As it crumbles to ashes
As soon as it hits the wood.
And as always
I carefully place the revolver on the table
As not to make a sound
As you stare at the picture hung in front of your bed.
Forever distracted by a dream.

Sarah Thomas

The Conjured

Flecks of time etch themselves in stone
like a scar on the heart.
Dried flowers wither to dust.
There are pennies in my sunken skull.
A second set of eyes.
Two smooth moons slip down my cheeks.
Metallic tears. The scent of blood.
A lost memory of you. I taste it.
Drink the deep wine of midnight.

A dark velvet sky shivers,
constellations of scuttling stars.
Inky black sea.
I feel its breath upon my rotten flesh.
Worms greedily enter thoughts
through the softened cavity.
But this time I won't choke.
A tiny crack of light pierces the eternal shadow.
Guiding me to you.

Tremors of candlelight.
Little offerings upon the hearth.
Whisperings to wandering souls.
I claw up into this familiar wilderness.
We once lay down together in the sweet, spongy moss.
The same earth that now devours me.
Pressed between the hours of long, lonely night.
My restless heart still murmurs.
Still weeps in the box you buried within yourself.
I seep through the misty veil.
To the flame that burns on.
In the window where you wait for me.

Shay Galloway

When From the Woods on a Winter Evening

He thought he heard a woman screaming. The sound, piercing and shrill, pulled his focus from the fire he'd been building. Pop had been gone two days by then, but that was alright; Dove had enough food for a couple weeks at least, and Pop would be back in a few days' time. But the food might not last that long if there was a woman out in the woods who needed saving. The fire at his hands whispered and crackled to life. Dove piqued his ears and heard scream again, confirming it was real and not in his imagination. Sometimes his imagination got the best of him, as his father would say. But what else could he do when he was left alone for days—sometimes weeks—at a time.

It wasn't his father's fault he was alone, not really. He was the best tracker around; that's why they always came asking for him. At first, after Ma was gone, Pop would take Dove across the woods to the old widow there until she died two years later. But that was alright, Dove was old enough by then to spend three, four days on his own. Pop always came back before there was ever any need to worry. Give it a year or two, maybe Dove would get to go along with him, Pop said.

In his father's absence, he'd carry on doing what needed to be done: build a fire, heat the beans, stack the firewood, read the same five books over and over again until he could recount them, acting out the scenes alone about the cabin. He could almost see Robinson Crusoe, smell the salty sea air over the breath of the forest, even though he'd never experienced the ocean. He could hear the snarl of the Kipling's tiger in the forest. So, it was only natural he'd pause at a woman's scream, unsure if it was real or not.

When it came a third time, and Dove was sure he was in reality. He poked a log into the fire and stood, brushing the dust from his knees, the soot from his hands. Then he donned his boots and Pa's old coat. Sunset was falling fast outside, so he lit a lamp, draped a blanket over his elbow and headed out into the cold. Clouds of his breath held orange in the lamplight, the hard snow squeaked beneath his boots.

How long had Ma been gone? Dove was forgetting her face, even though he would never forget the night that took her, all the bloodied cloths, the pile in the corning holding a gray little body looking more like an unpainted doll than a once-living being. Ma herself was so drained of color; it was hard to imagine she'd had any at all. Five years ago, now? Six? On a brisk mid-winter night like this one. The old widow from the woods had been there, but there was nothing she could do. Dove had always found her both comforting and saddening, the old widow.

He stood at the edge of the woods, holding the lamp up to the cloistered darkness. He knew these woods, had grown among its leaves and roots, but he still feared the forest in the dark. Wolves, coyotes, bears. The list of creatures not to surprise in the night went on. The scream again, weaker though, shorter. Dove oriented himself toward it and moved forward, listening for any cries and whimpers.

As he moved closer, he considered what he might find. A woman in trouble. What kind of trouble? Would there be blood like there had been with Ma? Would she be alone? No one should suffer alone in the woods. He paused every so often, waiting for sound above his own blood, his breath. The closer he drew, the more the sounds changed, less human, until at last he came upon the source.

It was not a woman, but a fox. Caught in one of their rabbit traps. Dove's presence startled it in its exhaustion, and it strained against its leg, twisting fiercely, lashing toward Dove. Part of Dove was relieved it was not a woman who had been hours in pain alone in the woods. But disappointment also shaded him; he had started looking forward to not having to spend the night alone.

The fox whimpered. "You gotta put it out of its misery," Pop would say. "It's better than letting it suffer."

But Dove hadn't brought the rifle, hadn't thought to. He hadn't wanted to scare a woman alone in the dark woods. Even a knife would have been better than nothing, but he hadn't thought to bring that either, just the lamp and the blanket. All he had was light and warmth. The fox screamed. Twisted, flailed, went limp. Dove stepped softly, clicking his tongue gently, reassuring the animal he was no threat. The leg was bad, twisted nearly all the way around. The fox cowered, tried to scramble away as Dove kneeled near it. He felt around the cold ground until he found a rock and dug it out of the solid earth. It burned against his palm. The fox, having given itself to its fate, eyed him with its watery black eyes, body rising and falling with each pained breath. Dove gripped at the rock, tried to lift it, calculate the force it would take to get the job done.

But he couldn't do it. He stared into the fox's eyes and thought of potential fox babies laying her lair, how they might need her. They probably sat there waiting for her to return, for her warmth. They might have even heard her screams and sat panicked and confused, knowing something was wrong but unable to do anything.

He shivered. He couldn't let her die, let her babies go hungry. He had to save her. Hush, hush, hush, he consoled, reaching to release the trap. The fox snarled, twisting beneath him as the metal shifted. Dove tossed the trap aside and stood. The fox gave one weak attempt to rise and fell again, pain rippling through its spent body.

Dove threw the blanket over the creature. It let him carry her home. He rushed through the dark, his skin going taut with the cold. He shivered and ran, his teeth clattering violently by the time he reached home, his lungs burned. Inside, he lay the fox and his coat on the floor in front of the fire, threw on another log, beat his arms to bring back the feeling in his hands. He brought the fox some bread, a bit of jerky. It lapped both from his hand and lay down again.

There was nothing to be done about the leg except take it off. It was already dangling. Quick and clean. But it didn't go like that. He did what he should have done. Chose the sharpest knife, let it get hot until the color shifted in the flames. Again, he straddled the small body, back to the creature's head.

Maybe the knife was not hot enough, because once the blood started, it did not stop. As he cut, the fox screamed, writhed, snarled, bit. Still, he continued through sinew and skin, until the knife released, the slippery, bloodied blade arching through the air. Scrambling, the boy reached for it, wiping the blood on his shirt before thrusting the knife again into the fire. The fox attempted to stand, blood spreading on the floor. “No, no,” Dove pleaded, reaching to the stay the fox. The knife blade bubbled, turned red, and Dove moved fast, wrestling the fox secure on the floor. He held the stump steady and pressed the knife to the ragged flesh. It sizzled and smoked, the acrid scent of burning fur.

At last, it was done, and both beast and boy collapsed. The blood had stopped, the fire crackled. Dove found a clean blanket and made up a nest near the fire, making the fox comfortable in the center, her little black eyes watching him as he added another log to the fire and made to clean all the carnage as best he could. But already, the blood had stained the hardwood.

The fox’s eyes closed. Dove watched her little body expand and contract with each breath until he himself fell asleep.

When he woke, the fire had burned to red-speckled embers. He threw another log; the flames took just a moment to reignite. It was too dark to visually inspect the fox, so Dove reached out, his hands sinking into the thick winter fur. There was no warmth beneath it, only stiff flesh. His efforts had been hopeless. The tears trailed Dove’s cheeks hot as the blood on his hands.

Siobhán Johnson

Frostbite

How do I begin to remember
the feeling in my fingertips while knowing they are fading
with every trip to the end of the world?

I run my nails along the lengths of my fingers and across
my palms and remember on Sundays
your sacred long run as I ascend,
on my knees and holy again.
I draw your bath and wipe away the mud from your calves
while trying to hold it all and protect you
from the terrors of the night. I can feel

everything intricately woven together in a cross
knot; my fingers can still recognise that
in the polar night. I don't remember you
while I'm held captive in the snow and ice
that strip my skin down out of spite. In time
this layer of me is gone and I will never have pressed
myself against you. In the terror of the night

I venture towards the edge, rocking over to feel the drop.
I hold my breath, close my eyes to heighten
and feel what may be lost. You
can't come with me here, I don't need you
to survive. I step out with arms on either side.
I don't think I want to remember
the terrors in the night.

Steven M. Smith

Pantom for Peer Pressure

for my granddaughter on her 16th birthday

It's out there—slithering patiently and methodically—
often immune to your repellents. It will slink.
Then into your heart's foliage it will hide and coil.
So, be cautious.

Often immune to your repellents, it will slink
as it wraps around the budding limbs of its proposals.
So, be cautious
when you peel the apples, it will bring in the murky moonlight.

As it wraps around the budding limbs of its proposals,
you might begin to find its discarded skins in the shady sunlight.
When you peel the apples, it will bring in the murky moonlight,
be cautious. Be cautious when it blows you a hissing kiss in the wind.

You might begin to find its discarded skins in the shady sunlight.
Then into your heart's foliage it will hide and coil.
Be cautious. Be cautious when it blows you a hissing kiss in the wind.
It's out there—slithering patiently and methodically—

Terri Mullholland

Taking the Measure of Things

Mary bought a new tape measure for the occasion. It was important to be accurate, that's what Mother always used to say.

Mother used to measure them once a month, putting lines of black marker pen on the back of the kitchen door with their initials next to them. All six children, all those lines.

Mother liked numbers. She taught the children to like numbers too. Numbers were things you could trust—unlike words. Words were never to be trusted.

When Mary was ten, Mother started measuring their feet and hands, their arms and legs, then she moved on to the circumferences of their heads. This time noting the numbers down in her private notebook, not on the kitchen door.

Every night, Mother whispered the numbers under her breath as she kissed them goodnight. The each had a unique string of numbers like prayer beads.

Once, Mother told Mary she'd like to take out their hearts and measure their love for her. She'd put her hand on Mary's heart—sharp fingernails pushing through the fabric in Mary's dress, scrabbling for her skin. In the end, she settled for putting her head to their chests and counting their heartbeats. Mary closed her eyes, stroked Mother's hair in time to the lullaby of her murmured count.

It was only when Mother said Jimmy was getting too big-headed and tried to carve off a bit of his skull that they took her away.

For a long time, there were no tape measures in Mary's life. None of the foster families ever measured or touched her. They used words not numbers—and Mary knew that words could never be trusted. She missed the ritual of the measurement. She remembered Mother's cool fingers, her nod of satisfaction when Mary's head was pronounced *within the normal range*. That's when Mother loved her best.

Mary uncoiled the new tape measure from its case and smoothed it out. She ran it up and down each arm and leg, the plastic tape tickled her skin. She measured her hands and feet, then her chest, her waist, her hips, took a deep breath, measured her head. Her fingers met at the centre of her forehead—they were cool, like Mother's.

She checked the number on the tape measure. Her head had grown since Mother's last official measurement. Now it was too big, much too big. What would Mother say?

Mary took a knife from the kitchen drawer. She held it at an angle against her right temple where she noticed a slight protrusion. Maybe if she took off a little bit of the bone at a time?

If she could just get the numbers right, then Mother would come back.

Mother would come back and love her again.

If she could just get the numbers right.

Walker Watson

Betrayers Both

I can't tell if purity is what I lack,
But it's tearing me apart,
Mind and body—betrayers both--
Shaking, kicking, as I plummet from the bed.
My mother—her eyes, a mirror of my descent--
Finds me sprawled, broken,
Crimson painting paths from open wounds,
Staining the floor where I lie, a canvas of agony.
My head throbs in its cage of bruises,
Heart racing, desperate for a pause,
And sometimes, in the darkest whispers,
I beg for it to simply stop.

Wes Ritchie

A Quick Story About an Important Friend

I think about him always, gone too far—
The friend who drifted past the warning signs,
Like scattered stars that tell us who we are.

From Mexico to needles in a jar,
From dinner parties, princes, grand designs—
I think about him always, gone too far.

His life unspooled adrift without a star,
Through stories strange as tangled fishing lines,
Like scattered stars that tell us who we are.

Each warning flag became another scar:
The drugs, the lies, the slow but sure decline—
I think about him always, gone too far.

He posted death dates like a falling star,
Then vanished past Portuguese coastlines,
Like scattered stars that tell us who we are.

Though distance grows between us near and far,
His memory with my own life intertwines—
I think about him always, gone too far,
Like scattered stars that tell us who we are.

William Doreski

What It's About

A brackish flavor at dawn
suggests that the rising seas

have already risen in me.
We're mostly composed of water,

so, affinity with the ocean
comes as naturally as quills

to a trundling old porcupine.
You question my crude analogy,

but the porcupine browsing below
the kitchen window is pleased

to haul the quivers of arrows
he has never actually needed.

Likewise, I tote around a world
of slow evolution, tidepools

fuming as the climate changes,
the Gulf Stream dragging hurricanes

through long nights tossing with dread.
That's what it's about: burdens

and the means of hefting them
so, the porcupine and you and I

can tender the world's fine texture
to sufficiently nourish us.