



THE  
RAVEN REVIEW  
LITERARY MAGAZINE

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RAVEN REVIEW  
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Spring 2025

*Founding Editor:*  
Rachel Strickland

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*Amanda Nicole Corbin*

## **I Sleep Through Another Lunar Eclipse: A Pantoum**

i am done losing track of cosmic occurrence,  
no longer slumbering through the moon's slow  
reveal. victorians and their moon-wonder:  
an obsession with reaching foreign orbit,

no longer slumbering through the moon's slow  
fade. like a body reclaiming a fetus, it's  
an obsession with reaching a foreign orbit  
for the strange, glowing other. how we

fade like a body reclaiming a fetus; it's  
the earth discarding secondary moons  
back into the strange, glowing other. how we  
love this shedding of parts, the mimicry of

the earth discarding its secondary moons.  
i am done losing track of cosmic occurrence,  
but love this shedding of parts, the mimicry of  
reveiling the victorians and their moon-wonder.

*Ashley*

**Los Angeles, 2005**

We walked through what was left—  
    milk cartons bobbing  
in the street's rivered throat, a bicycle  
    half-sunken in the mud, wheels  
still & rusting, spokes like the silent hands  
    of a broken watch. The wind  
howled for mercy, for the fury  
    that ripped through the wounds  
of shattered windows. In the overflow  
    of a gutter, a doll's face grays  
through the storm, eyes beady, blue  
    & wide, silent as the dress clung  
like seaweed to her frame—fluttering  
    like a flag of surrender. Across the street  
mourners light candles—flames  
    trembling like ghosts against walls  
that once held us. We stood, mud  
    hiding our ankles from sight, weeping  
thick tears into the air, our voices receding  
    with the water: not knowing  
if anyone could hear us praying  
    for strength to stitch us whole,  
to sew us back together.

*Charles Jensen*

**Older**

I watch my youth fade,  
a city in the rearview  
shrinking in my wake.

The way years cascade—  
a decade, then two—  
I watch my youth fade.

Forty-seven birthday cakes  
placed end to end, a frosted queue  
shrinking in my wake.

My face changes shape.  
My body softens, too.  
I watch my youth fade

even as my memory breaks,  
everything I once knew  
shrinking in my wake.

Time heals, but it also takes.  
There's nothing I can do.  
I watch my youth fade,  
shrink to nothing in my wake.

*Conan Power*

## **From the Shadows, the Cold Air Comes**

In the dead of dawn,  
a chair rocks empty,  
threads of a favourite blanket  
unravel, throwing frayed secrets to the floor.

A kettle's lament fills the kitchen,  
whistles curling into silence,  
as steam settles inside the glass  
that frames a hollow garden.

And clinging to each wall,  
our sepia ghosts, frozen,  
with eyes that follow me  
all through the hollow rooms.

I found your watch today,  
hands still clasped around our last goodbye,  
the time stopped  
at the hour we last spoke.

Neighbours pass with casseroles,  
practiced sympathies frail as frost,  
words fluttering like moths  
against the porch light.

Night descends with a velvet shroud,  
and from the shadows, the cold air comes,  
floating traces of that perfume you wore,  
from a blouse still swaying on the line.

I reach out,  
grasp only the brittle air,  
from the space where you once breathed.



*Daniel Lowe*

## **Flu Shot**

He'd taken to getting his flu shot on the same day he put out seed for the birds, usually in November, but this year, December, and it was coincidentally the first measurable snow, an inch or so through which the tips of the grass still showed. These years of living alone, there was always something to do, but this day he lay back on the couch and waited for the occasional fever that accompanied the vaccine. He imagined the birdseed as the dead virus and the birds themselves as white blood cells come to ward off the ravages of winter. The first to approach the feeder was, unsurprisingly, a blood-red cardinal.

As he laid back, the inoculation site gently throbbing, his cell phone rang, and his daughter's picture appeared.

"Hey, Dad, guess what?" She almost never sounded unexcited.

"What?"

"I got the part!"

"What part?"

"Alright. I mean, it's off-off Broadway. I mean off. But it's the lead role!"

"God, that's great, sweetie. What's the play?"

"It's by a New York writer. It's called *Blue Heron*."

"That's funny."

"No, it's not. It's not a comedy."

"No, I mean the play has a title about a bird, and I was laying here watching the first birds of winter."

"You got your flu shot today?"

"Yep."

He heard her breathe twice into the phone, and in the background were sounds of traffic.

"So you gonna make it up for opening night?"

"When's that?"

"After the holidays. First weekend in January."

"Sure, I'll be there."

Again, her breathing. She must have been walking. She said "Hey!" to someone passing her on the street.

"So, Dad."

"Yeah?"

"Guess I made the cut." Nothing for a moment. And then, "Get it?"

When she was a child, at thirteen, he'd been doing her laundry and discovered in her pocket a note from a girlfriend that confessed several secrets, but one that read, "When I asked you to cut yourself to prove you loved me, I didn't think you'd really do it." He'd confronted her when she got home and demanded that she roll up her sleeves, though he knew the cut could be

anywhere, and when she finally relented over protests of “You don’t trust me,” he saw the line of a scab on the inside of her arm at the elbow. “The cat did that,” she said. “That is not a cat scratch, Amy. Did you make this cut? Did you make this cut?” But she wouldn’t confess that she had. For several weeks afterward, he’d sneaked into her room at night to look her over while she pretended to be asleep.

“Get it, Dad?” she was saying again. “I. Made. The. Cut.”

He laughed then, unconvincingly. “Good one, Aim.”

“See you in January,” she said, and then pulled the phone away from her ear and he heard her say, “My father— “before she was disconnected.

He laid back down, his face flushed, whether from the conversation or the vaccine, he was uncertain. Several birds had discovered the feeder and were chattering, chasing one another from the seed holes. He closed his eyes, and an image of Amy’s mother returned to him, that one time she had stood naked at her apartment window, the winter light shining through the small space above where her thighs met. He felt his fever rise from desire or disease, summoning his blood for migration.

*Daniel Lurie*

## **Weight of Living**

A blue hue through the window shade, quiet  
morning, not even the birds have stirred.

The cat's face crinkles into a smile as he places  
his head between the cleft of my chest and chin.

My sister says I must remind him of our mother,  
as I lie in her bed surrounded by medical documents.

There's nothing exceptional about living. Organs  
burst and breathe without a thought. All you must

do is compel your bones from room to room.  
Tug a tomorrow rope in front of yesterday—

where I left her to swaddle the television remote.  
As the hospital shuttered. Tumors ripple under

my fingers while I wait for the ghost of a sigh  
to rise from the cat. Caught in the act by a nurse

who had stumbled upon me holding a mirror  
beneath my mother's purple lips.

*Dave Swan*

## **The Sweet Boys**

Tommy knew he had to be super quiet. Using both hands, he gingerly turned the knob, then pushed the door open just far enough to squeeze through. His short arms tensed, and his heart beat fast as he shut the door and stepped into Ethan's room.

Everything was like his brother left it: the soccer posters, the keyboard, the pile of clothes, the papers spilling over the desk. Though Mom and Dad had warned Tommy to keep out, he missed Ethan so much that he had to go in sometimes, thinking about all the fun they had, trying to wish him back home.

• • •

Before Ethan went away, he'd been shutting himself up in there for hours, which wasn't like him at all. He was a cool guy, the fastest player on the high school soccer team and the class vice-president. The best thing was that he treated Tommy like a buddy even though he was sixteen and Tommy was only eight. But lately he'd been ignoring the whole family, staring into space at dinner and grunting if anyone tried to talk to him.

Mom and Dad hadn't been acting like themselves either. Tommy was wide awake in bed the night of that awful argument downstairs, everybody yelling at once, followed by something smashing and Mom crying. Her eyes were still red in the morning when she explained Ethan would be going to boarding school.

That didn't make sense. "Why?"

"It's the best place—I mean school. It's a better school for Ethan right now."

"But I thought he had all A's on his report card."

Mom sighed. "Tommy, you have to trust me even if this is hard to understand, okay?" He said okay but wasn't sure he believed it, especially since Mom didn't sound like she did. It was cold and crummy outside when Ethan told him to be a "good dude" before climbing unhappily into Dad's car. Mom held Tommy tight as they pulled out of the garage into the rain, her other arm around his sister Molly, who didn't look happy either. As he walked through the living room afterward, he noticed Mom's grandmother's vase was gone from the mantel.

Ethan had only called home once, the four of them leaning over Dad's phone on the table as though that would bring him closer. He said he had a nice room and liked the other kids, but he struggled with his words and didn't mention his teachers or classes. No one said anything about why he had to change schools in April, with the term almost over.

• • •

One afternoon while Mom worked in her office and Dad cut the grass, Tommy opened the big spiral-bound notebook in Ethan's desk. He couldn't make sense of the writing, the words and sentences crammed together in chunks and too small to read. There were drawings too, women with no clothes on, lizard people, and all kinds of weird shapes. He didn't know what it meant, but he recognized the one that made everybody so mad when it got sprayed on a wall at Ethan's old school: ✨

That night Tommy sat up in bed, groggy and confused. He'd seen his brother, wearing his soccer gear and carrying the notebook, and had cried, "Ethan! Ethan!" as he disappeared down the hall. "You had a bad dream," Mom said softly when he told her. "It happens. You've probably had them before."

"It was really real," Tommy insisted. "He was wearing his uniform and everything." Looking down into his cereal, he added, "I don't know why he didn't answer me."

"I know it's tough," Mom said, slipping her arm around his shoulders. "I feel the same way. Don't worry, he'll be back."

"But when?"

"I don't know, honey. They do things differently at this school."

An idea popped into Tommy's head. "Can I go there too?"

Mom looked startled. "No, you can't. Hurry and get your backpack or you'll be late yourself."

That afternoon when Tommy tried to do homework, all he could manage was to aimlessly turn pages in his English book. Thinking a snack might help, he headed down to the kitchen, then froze a few feet from the door when he heard Mom say, "...having these vivid dreams about him. He even asked if he could go to Ethan's school."

"You didn't tell him what it really is, did you?" Dad asked, sounding worried.

"Of course not. But I'm afraid the dreams might be the beginning of something worse."

"He misses his brother," Dad replied, using his calm voice. "You know how close they are. He's fine."

"That's what the doctor said about Ethan," Mom snapped. Tommy couldn't believe his ears; his mother, who never said bad words, had put a really bad one between "the" and "doctor."

"He's much too young," Dad said. Then he used a big word Tommy didn't know and said it "never starts before the teens."

"I'm terrified, Steven," Mom said. "He's a sweet boy. Like Ethan used to be, remember?" Her voice breaking, she added, "I almost can't remember."

• • •

Now Tommy was scared, too. He had to talk to somebody, and the only other person around was Molly, who was in eighth grade and like Ethan, was his friend. "Hey, little man," she said when he walked into her room. "What's going on?"

"What's, um, skizzy – skitz-a-frenna?"

Molly quickly shut her door and sat him down on the bed. “Where did you hear that?”

“Mom and Dad were talking.”

She took his hand. “Tommy, I’m not supposed to say anything about this. You can’t tell them you know, okay?” He nodded and she wrote out the word: *s-c-h-i-z-o-p-h-r-e-n-i-a*. “It’s a disease like the flu, except it hurts people’s minds. It makes them see things that aren’t real and do bad things sometimes.”

“What did Ethan do?”

“He wasn’t nice to Mom and Dad. You didn’t know because they wouldn’t talk to him about it unless you were asleep.”

That explained why Mom had gotten so strict about his bedtime. “Was he not nice to you?”

Molly seemed to be deciding whether to answer. “He tried to—to do something wrong. I wouldn’t let him, and he twisted my arm really hard. That’s one reason they sent him to the new school.”

“What did the fucking doctor tell them?”

She turned white. “Did Dad say that, too?”

“No, Mom did.”

“Oh, my God.” Molly giggled and clapped her hand over her mouth. Serious again, she said, “He’s going to be okay. Really,” and put her arms around him. “You can always come to me.” That made him feel better, but it still hurt to think Mom and Dad were keeping secrets. Didn’t they know he loved Ethan as much as they did?

• • •

No matter what Tommy tried, he couldn’t enjoy it. When he played soccer, it just reminded him of how Ethan taught him the game and didn’t get mad like the gym teacher. He didn’t talk much at dinner, and neither did anyone else. They ate in a hurry and scattered to different rooms, as if they’d stopped being a family.

One evening Tommy went to bed wondering if he’d ever see Ethan again. He pretended to be asleep when Mom looked in on him, but after she left, he wished he’d said goodnight. He knew he’d been mean to her and didn’t understand why. Nothing was the same.

All of a sudden, Tommy couldn’t breathe. Something was stuck in his throat like a too-big bite of food. He woke up coughing hard, his breath coming back in a gulp as tires screeched in the driveway. Racing into the hall, he found Molly in her nightgown. “What’s happening?” he shouted.

“Mom and Dad had to go somewhere. It’s okay.”

But it was so late! A terrible thought hit him. “Is it Ethan? Is something wrong at the school?”

Molly put her hands on his shoulders. “It’s going to be fine,” she said in a shaky voice. “Go back to bed. Come on, I’ll get in with you.” After they’d climbed under the covers, she

kissed the top of his head and whispered, “Good night, little man.” A few minutes later he heard her sniffing.

He closed his eyes but couldn’t sleep with his throat sore from coughing and his stomach hurting because he was so afraid. He needed to know if Ethan was all right and couldn’t wait for Mom and Dad.

After making sure Molly was asleep, Tommy pulled on pants and shirt over his pajamas. Outside, he started down the quiet, empty street, walking fast and not sure where he was going. He thought Ethan’s new school might be in the same direction as the old one, where the family watched his soccer games. But after he’d covered a few blocks and turned right, he found himself on a strange road, with big houses looming in the darkness.

In spite of the cool night air, Tommy was sweating and his legs felt like they were on fire. When he couldn’t take one more step, he sat down to rest under a tree, hoping the people in the house wouldn’t mind. He had to find Ethan, he had to, if only he wasn’t so tired...

Something nudged him, as gently as a breeze or a breath. He opened his eyes to a black, silent world, yet not a threatening one. Ethan was leaning against the tree, his arm outstretched. Though his dark blonde hair was cut short, and his face was thinner, his smile was as big as ever. Tommy blinked and his brother was still there. He rubbed his eyes. Still there. Ethan’s mouth formed words, and Tommy heard his voice in his head saying, *don’t worry, bro, I’m cool.*

A second later, Mom was kneeling on the grass and holding him, Dad and Molly beside her and tears running down her face. A red light flashed in Tommy’s eyes, and he got anxious again. “Am I in trouble?”

“No!” they all said together as Molly helped him up. ““But where were you going?” Dad asked.

“I was looking for Ethan.” Tommy said weakly. “He told me he’s okay.”

“You were dreaming again but he is all right,” Mom said. “We just came from the school.” Tommy started to say no, he was here, then felt too exhausted to talk and dozed off in the car while Mom and Dad spoke to the police officer.

• • •

A few evenings later, Mom laid a piece of paper on Tommy’s desk. “This is for you,” she said, “from Ethan,” and gave him a long hug, gently stroking his hair. His eyes opened wide as he read:

*Hey, dude. Mom and Dad and I decided we should tell you some things. I’m not in a new school. It’s a hospital for kids who have problems with their brains.*

*You know when you get mad and want to smash something? I felt like that all the time. Either that or I was so zoned out I couldn’t move. It’s not my fault or anybody’s. But I have to stay here a while.*

*I'm really sorry about the other night. What happened was I did something stupid with my pills and got sick. I was trying to hurt myself, but I just hurt Mom and Dad and especially you. I'll never do that again.*

*I know you don't get it. But until I come home, keep practicing your kicks and don't run off anymore, you little doofus! ☺ Love, Ethan.*

• • •

Under a bright September sun, Tommy tore across the grass, leaving defenders trailing him helplessly like Ethan did. The goalie on the other U10 team looked panicked as he lined up his shot and drilled it right into the corner of the net. The stands erupted, one voice rising above the others, yelling, “Whoo-hoo! Yeah, buddy! YEAH!” The voice was his brother’s, loud and strong and no dream.



*Dawn Levitt*

## **Gentleman Caller**

The door I chose not to answer  
when bold Death came to call,  
though he brought as a courting gift,  
a dark funeral pall.

He, unbowed by my resistance,  
slipped 'round to the back gate.  
He'd no patience for a woman  
who'd not accept his date.

His lipless kiss pressed hard on mine,  
colder than any grave.  
His lidless eyes stared into me,  
and yet I did not wave.

He forced his presence upon me,  
ravishing my weak flesh,  
but I would not let him have me  
while I was quick and fresh.

He raptured spirit from body;  
he broke the bonds of earth.  
Still, I kept myself a maiden,  
my death a virgin birth.

He did not know my history,  
a Reaper on my own.  
All the men who've fallen to me,  
reduced to skin and bone.

He does not wish to battle me  
upon an open field.  
He does not wish to remember  
the one who made him yield.

Yet someday I will fall to him—

all mortals must depart—  
but I shall leave such scars on him  
to win, for mine, his heart.

*Eloísa Pérez-Lozano*

## **Mom's Always Late**

Mom's staying late at work again, and I wish she'd come home sooner. I sit on the floor against my bed, staring at the wall, waiting. Dad comes home first, and he always sends me to my room. I always rush to hug him hello, yearning to feel the warmth of his arms, but he always stops me and with a wave of his hand, I know where I have to go.

Later, I hear the front door open, and I know she's home. I've tried running out to meet her hoping I can prevent the screaming and hitting, but I'm always too late so I stay in my room because I know she doesn't want me to see what I know is happening.

I've already tucked myself in by the time she comes in to say good night. She always turns off the light before sitting beside me on my bed so I can't see the brand-new bruises already blooming on her face. But it doesn't matter because when I sit up to hug her, I feel her body shrink as I squeeze, and she knows I know.

Even so, she tries to hold back the pain provoked by my tender touch. She tries to hold back the joy of feeling safe in her son's arms. She tries to hold back the tears that have already fallen into my hair.

*Finn Brown*

## **Milena**

I was watching the wasp drown in the orange syrup when Milena arrived. She looked at me and then she looked at the wasp and then she came and knelt down by the glass on the opposite side to me, so that now I wasn't just watching the wasp drown, I was watching Milena's face warped by the shape of the glass watching the wasp drown. After the wasp stopped moving, we watched each other.

"Sticky day," she said. Then she took off all her clothes.

I had never seen a woman naked before, but I knew from the shapes I saw under people's clothes and the way men's eyes followed them that this woman was very beautiful.

Milena dragged the metal tub into the yard, and I helped her fill it with cold water. Back and forth from tap to garden we went, balancing liquid in a mixing bowl and the largest saucepan we could find.

When my father came home, Milena was still in the bath, her fingers pruning as I plaited her hair.

He looked at her skin greedily and then scowled at me, like I was tainting her, like I was trying to steal some part of her away from him.

That night, she made us all dinner and when it was time to go to bed, she pulled me into her long arms and kissed the top of my head over and over again. "Sleep well, little one," she said to me as my father was leading her away, putting a door between us.

The next day, my father left early for work and Milena came to wake me up. She stroked stray hairs off my forehead and asked me what I wanted to do.

"School, I guess," I said.

Milena rolled her eyes and went to the window, pushing the curtains aside and bathing herself in an oblong of light. "On a day like this?" she said. "Surely not."

We went out into the fields. Milena let me help her get dressed, doing tiny buttons up with tiny fingers. Then she dressed me in a shirt of hers that she tied with a ribbon so that it looked more beautiful than anything I had ever owned. We ran through grass up to our waists and pulled apples from a tree when we got hungry. I showed Milena where to find the ripe blackberries, and we ate them until our mouths and tongues and teeth were stained with purple. It was the most perfect day I could remember, and we went home holding hands, and we giggled all through dinner, giddy with the goodness of it.

• • •

The next morning, Milena had a welt across her face and said we could not go outside again. "Did someone do that to you?" I asked.

Milena did not look at me. "Something from the dreamworld came whilst I was asleep,"

she said at last. “Awful things can happen whilst you’re resting. Be careful.”

I wasn’t satisfied with this answer, but her open face was closed and so I sat at her feet and stroked the light hairs on her shin and did not ask anything else. I wondered if she would make me go to school, but the time to leave came and went and I stayed where I was, and she stayed where she was. At some point, I was too hungry to keep being still, so I sliced bread and tomatoes and fed them to myself and to Milena, who still hadn’t moved by the time I went to sleep that night.

Milena started sending me to school again, and when I came home, she would often be sitting where I had left her, her face pale, her eyes elsewhere. She wore the same dress day and night, and the edges of it started to fray and turn the colour of dirt. One afternoon after school, I pulled the tub out into the garden and filled it painstakingly with water warmed on the stove, but she would not go in. I sat outside in the bath until my skin was goose bumped with cold, and then I emptied the water over the grass.

My father changed, too. He came home later, less ravenous for her. I didn’t mind. I ran home from school to spend my evenings with Milena, to help her cook, to watch her soften as the sun went down, giggles rippling through her. I was not used to seeing the adults in my life laugh—though looking back, Milena couldn’t have been more than 25—and it was a delicious surprise to see a face change like that.

• • •

“What was your mother like?” Milena asked me one day. Milena was chopping fruit, and I was eating it messily.

“I don’t know,” I said, sucking juice off my fingers.

“You must know something about her,” said Milena. “Hasn’t your father told you anything?”

“She loved to swim,” I said, through a mouthful of plum.

“That’s nice,” said Milena.

“She drowned herself.”

“Oh,” said Milena. “Did your father tell you that?”

“No,” I said. “They wrote about in a newspaper article. I found it at the library, and I cut it out even though you’re not supposed to do that sort of thing to library books.”

Milena frowned and I wondered if this had made her angry. Then she said, “Did your father tell you she liked to swim?”

“No,” I said, spitting out the plum’s stone onto the flagstones of the kitchen. “But why else would she have drowned?”

• • •

At school, we had a careers day, and when I got home, I asked Milena what her career

was.

She was sitting on the windowsill, one leg in, one leg out. “I don’t like to work,” she said.

“But you can do anything you want. You can be a doctor or a fireman or a carpenter or a fishmonger.”

Milena laughed and her head dropped backwards. “Is that what they told you?”

“The world’s your oyster,” I said because this is what Mrs. Barric had said to us.

“Do you know what an oyster is?” asked Milena, and her eyes were on me, wide and full, just the way I loved them to be. I shook my head. “They’re sea creatures, slick wet things that live inside shells until they are prised open by human fingers, slipped down throats.”

“They sound horrible,” I said.

“True,” she nodded. “But out of all that slime, they can produce pearls.”

I imagined Milena with pearls around her neck eating oysters in the garden and promised myself I would have a career so that Milena did not have to.

“Why don’t you like to work?” I asked.

“In a workplace, there are many men,” she said. “In the home, there is only one.”

• • •

“Can I see the article?” asked Milena, one milky afternoon.

“Which one?”

“The one about your mother,” she said.

I took the stairs two at a time and pulled the book off the shelf that held it flat. Milena put it down on the table carefully, craned over it, traced each letter with her fingers like she was caressing them.

“Will you read it to me?” she asked.

She sat on a chair, and I sat cross-legged on the floor, leant against legs. “Woman found dead in strong river currents,” I read.

The article talked about the man who found the body. He was in a fishing dinghy with his son. The article said that the currents had been reported to be particularly strong. There had been warnings; signs had been put up. It speculated about whether the dead woman could read. It talked about how long she had been there, how very dead she had seemed, how strange it was that no missing persons reports had been filed when a loved one had been gone for days. At the very end of the article, like they had forgotten about it, it said her name. The name of the dead woman, it said, is Karin Heller.

“I wonder what it feels like to go like that,” said Milena. “To be swept up in all that water.”

“Wet,” I said, and Milena put her fingers in my hair.

• • •

One day, I came downstairs, and Milena was holding large silver kitchen scissors. “Help me,” she said, and I sliced through the tablecloth for her. She sewed quickly and gave me small jobs with clear instructions, a pocket to cut, an edge to hem.

She tried on the dress when it was nearly ready. “I look like a new person in this,” she said to me. “Someone else entirely. What sort of life do you think I could lead in this dress?”

I smiled, delighted to see her smiling. “You could do anything, Milena,” I said. “I know you could.”

For a few days, she was happy, and we ran through orchards instead of going to school and took baths in the garden. My father was away, and I didn’t think to ask where he had gone. We didn’t miss him. We didn’t need him. The house was ours and the fields were ours and the earth was ours and the sky was up because we had asked it to be.

Until it wasn’t.

When I came home from school the next day, Milena was repairing a rip in her lovely new dress. “Already?” I asked.

“A stray nail,” she said, without looking at me.

Before Milena, there had been someone else. A sharp woman who kept a clean house. She used to say that if you drank enough milk and grew them long enough, your nails would be strong enough to gouge a man’s eyes out. She drank gallons.

• • •

The day Milena left was one of the hottest days of the year. Steam seemed to rise off plants, greenery curled.

Milena was standing in the middle of the kitchen wearing her new dress with a small brown bag next to her which was full up. She was soaked through, her hair tight to her face, encasing it, her dress limp.

“You were right,” she said. “Wet,” she said.

I ran to her and put my arms around her stomach.

“I don’t want to drown,” she said. “I want to be able to do anything.”

I nodded into the damp material, collecting all of her into me. I willed the smell of her, the feeling of her skin, the shape of her in my arms to sink into me.

“I’m sorry to leave you with him,” she said. She knelt down so we were face-to-face, noses almost touching, and then she kissed me on the cheek and left through the front door.

When my father came home, I was in the bath eating blackberries. “I’m going to survive you,” I said to him. I watched him with hard eyes until he bowed his head and went upstairs.

*Gabriel Knott-Fayle*

## **This Broken Glass Still Fills with Light**

This broken glass still fills with light,  
The one you placed on the windowsill,  
Blaze with fire the blue glaze might.

This debris of a quiet fight  
That overflowed from boozy swill,  
This broken glass still fills with light.

With fingers cut and so cut sight,  
The shards are royal pieces still,  
Blaze with fire the blue glaze might.

Aqua rays are made from white  
And cast upon the carpet frill,  
This broken glass still fills with light.

Oozing stain seeps into night,  
Though we can't replace what's spilled,  
Blaze with fire the blue glaze might.

Cobalt debris on the sill,  
Tranquil trace of rage fulfilled.  
This broken glass still fills with light,  
Blaze with fire the blue glaze might.



*Hannah Levy*

## **I Once Fell Asleep on the Shower Floor**

and for once, I wasn't scared of sleep at all.  
It was the clearest my mind had ever been.

In my mind, emotions became bruised  
and the shower scrubbed them clean again.

And again, I drew hearts on steamed mirrors.  
My tears salted the water as they faded.

Warm water had been fading faster,  
prune fingers ran through tangled hair.

The thoughts were treacherously tangled  
I'd been unraveling them all the time.

As I unraveled memories, they blurred,  
my cheek rested against the tiled wall.

I watched colder water run down the tile  
and for once, I wasn't scared of sleep at all.

*Hayley Verdi*

**Well Good**

I don't think I'd like to be weary  
today I'd rather roll  
downhill through a garden  
in full June-time bloom  
then scoop up by handfuls harvests  
of red light and sunlight, the warm juice of time

But lately I can't find the time  
I am gray I am weary  
with dark, sickened harvest  
of long days that roll  
until just when the mold blooms  
my own ingrown garden

rock garden  
grim timer  
where what's there to bloom  
are days cold and weary  
of filling my role  
my loss in the interest and love of the harvest

Then just when I think I've lost my full harvest  
you'd stroll through the garden  
read off the roll  
tell me that time  
never grows weary  
always is ready to pass and to bloom

And what blooms  
honey harvests  
Not one works weary  
in a garden  
where time  
rolls

rolls, richest bankroll

of those who full bloom  
just in the right time  
and harvest  
their garden  
of fruit weighted limbs grown wonderfully weary

I'd like to roll into harvests  
with you in some garden  
where time blooms for even the weariest two

*Iris H. Mauricio*

## **If You Listen, You Won't Hear Me**

I wake up in a dream where everything is in halves, split between shadows and what the light can see. Split between whispers and all the things I don't want to hear. I'm staring at myself in a mirror, but I can't read my own expression. It could be apathy. It could be tragedy. It could be the history of my family, unraveling.

I try to speak, but a fly crawls out of my mouth and rubs its legs together in prayer. It buzzes away humming the word of the Lord, and I am listless.

There's no way out of this.

• • •

"Where are your eyes?" my mother asks. "Don't you see them?"

She's in the kitchen, cooking. I can hear the splatter of oil, the scraping sound of the spatula against the pan. I can't smell what food it is even though I can see the halo of smoke curling around her hair. She's wearing what used to be her favorite nightdress, the one with the hole at the hem. She has her back turned to me. All I want is to see her face, but I know I won't see anything there. Just a mirror, and my own reflection.

I reach out to touch her shoulder but find instead the hands of my father, closed into generous fists. They gravitate back to me, arcing meteors of discipline. Destruction with the best intentions. I daydream a conversation with my mother's spine while I wait for them to land. My continent breaks and I call her name, but when she moves to turn to me, I turn away.

• • •

I wake up in a dream.

I'm in my bedroom, wading through dark floodwaters. All my things are afloat in pieces, bobbing up and down in the violent current. I'm looking for something, but I don't know what. It's something important. It's something I lost a long time ago. It's something I don't know if I'll ever find again.

My hands sting. They've been scratched by splinters, the jagged ends of what's left of my bed. They brush up against seaweed and I'm cold. The waters keep rising. My feet have lost sense of the floor. I swallow water and it feels like pills sliding down my throat.

I've forgotten what moment this is. I think it's history, coming undone in my head. Trying to drown me since I made the choice to bury it. Trying to drown me because I won't admit how much it hurts. Something snags my leg, and I'm dragged under. Above me, the surface of the water. Beyond it, the ceiling, moving like shards of glass. I think about death and being its daughter.

• • •

“Listless,” someone’s telling me, “You are listless.”

I want to say I’m not, but my eyes are closed. My mouth’s a numb hinge I can’t move. On my arms are leeches, latched on. They’re trying to cure me, trying to suck out all this emptiness. Trying to make room inside for somebody better; someone more rock and less water. Trying to turn me into a girl so good that I can finally fall in love with her.

The back of my throat is cotton. It soaks up all the words I’ve never been strong enough to say. All the words that I thought would make me feel brave. I don’t know how to give them a chance. How to spit them out without hurting anyone else in the process. I choke instead and I’m helpless.

• • •

I wake up in a dream. There’s nothing here but static air. Everything is in halves, split between what I can see and what the light won’t touch. Split between what I tell myself and what I’ve heard before. I’m staring at myself in the mirror, but I can’t see my face. Just my mother. A mirror. An infinite number of possible mistakes. I don’t know which are the ones I’ll inevitably make.

A fly lands on my glass surface and crawls across it. It rubs its legs. Mumbles the Lord’s prayer. Baptizes me in spit before I can kill it.

*Jack Borden*

**Saturday Night**

The night is silence  
The stars are grim  
The memory of violence  
Makes stars seem dim

The air barely breathes  
Like maybe god above  
In his horror may heave  
And look away from us

Death fills the air  
In a silent scream  
But it doesn't care  
About the blood stream

*Jacquelyn "Jacsun" Shah*  
**Our Aberrant Darkness**

Here is a darkness I have  
never encountered.  
Many fingered, many bodied,  
it's made of cloud and thunder.

Here is the unexpected murk  
gloom shadow without single form  
but too many manifestations  
of man and his coming crimes.

Here is a new night  
to sleep in, night after night,  
a night to wake to  
each morning for how

many mornings? This darkness  
is pressing down, down  
on innocent dreamers.  
Here is darkness with no

moon stars release  
hope. For nothing,  
no reason, we're given this  
startling absence of light.

*Janis La Couvée*

## **The Sea: A Sestina**

wander down to the ocean at low tide  
pick among shells and rocks  
look for sea creatures living or dead  
treasures drifted up storm-tossed from the sea  
feel the tang of salt air, the power of wind  
imagine a passage calm and unhindered

what does it feel like to live, unhindered  
a life not subject to oceans and tide  
where nothing depends on rain or wind  
imagine instead a garden, and you, picking rocks  
while miles away, on the shore of an island by the sea  
villagers stagger awake at night, search for the dead

ships foundered and sailors have washed ashore, dead  
all those widows, cut from marital ties, unhindered  
the treasure of their life, tossed as flotsam on the sea  
drifting back and forth on tide  
while they, are left to pick up shattered rocks  
howl, grief-stricken, on lonely nights, into the wind

imagine a time, in spring, with sun-warmed wind  
a time before their husbands washed-up, dead  
when waves swished, gentle upon the rocks  
and life was free and easy, loose and unhindered  
they wait for no man, time and tide  
it's the fate of many who go, in boats, on the sea

men find freedom and joy as they explore sea  
mounds, hair rigid with salt air, blowing in the wind  
sensing powerful currents, waiting for tide  
sitting, becalmed, adrift in the water, dead  
easy to say we are free and unhindered  
while in reality, fear grips us on approach to rocks

once upon a time, mermaids lured mariners onto rocks



boats shriven, men sinking into deep blue sea  
there was music in their chants, floating notes carried by the wind  
far into the air, before dropping, abruptly, dead  
powerful and beautiful creatures, sleek, unhindered  
by convention, in command of current and tide  
a few sailors, plucked, unhindered from rocks  
lifted by tide, free from the shackles of sea  
while gale wind buffeted the remaining dead

*J.C. Reilly*

## **Depression Villanelle**

The darkness like an eclipse came  
slowly, though at first, I did not see  
how it spread. The feathers of blame

began to cleave to my weary frame  
and failures like rocks upended me.  
The darkness like an eclipse came

and I lived the days in bed the same  
as nights. As though I'd lost the key  
to consciousness. Feathers of blame

swirled about me, kept up their aim  
against my weakest points, as by decree.  
The darkness like an eclipse came

and so too arrived the tears and shame  
in moments of lucidity.  
As they spread, the feathers of blame

choked me of breath, overcame  
me till there was nothing left but pleas.  
The darkness like an eclipse came.  
It spreads like sorrow, like plumes of blame.

*Jennifer Dotson*

## **Mother's Day Visit, a Constanza**

It's a surprise for Mother's Day.  
She makes the trip back home to see  
the changes time has made in me.

Her arrival from far away,  
we'll take some time, I have a hunch  
and enjoy a delicious brunch.

Our springtime reunion each May  
gives me hidden anxiety  
about our love's fragility.

Buds and blooms in the breeze do play  
but will this end in shouts or tears?  
History repeats. I have fears.

Nerves on alert, not all is gay.  
There are minefields; emotions tugs  
yet conclude this visit with hugs.

*Jeremy Stelzner*

## **Smoke and Mirrors**

They say that seeing is believing. Well, Kasam was a man who could make you see things that weren't really there. As a theme park engineer, his prized creation was a ride called *Escape from Dragon's Cove*. It was one of those 3D dark rides where you never went anywhere, but it felt like you did. Each nut, each bolt, each inch of suspension wire and gimble track, all of them were like little gifts to Kasam, each a tiny piece of a larger puzzle required to make the illusion work.

The best part of his job was getting to watch wobbly-kneed guests stumble from the exit. Decked out in overpriced park merch and on the verge of barfing, they'd gleefully probe one another, "How'd they do that?" Kasam got a kick out of listening to their unbridled theories like "It must have mirrors under the tracks" or "They've gotta be using magnets to pull open the dragon's mouth." Every now and then, a brave guest would approach and ask him about the mechanics of the magic. He'd get this wry smile on his lean face and say, "There's not much to it, really. Just smoke and mirrors."

The day it was all taken from Kasam was one of those scorching days at the park where the air seemed to sweat under the savage Southern sun. He sat alone on a bench in his starched park-issued baby blue polo, licking around the top of a melting ice cream cone, careful not to let any drip onto his park-issued pleated khakis. He licked away on the refreshing treat and took a moment for himself. Just one moment to delight in the wonder of the park.

Kasam was just a boy when his mother first brought him there. You've got to understand his family wasn't like these families. These days, a family vacation to the park could cost as much as a new car. Kasam's family could never afford such an extravagant trip. But his father had just died. His mother used some of the insurance money to take her only child to a place where he might forget, if only momentarily, the weight of such a loss.

It worked. Maybe that's why they call the park *The Fantastical Realm*. It's not just the rides, after all. Sure, they're fun. Kasam saw to that. But it's the meticulous detail engrained in every element of the park, from the turquoise and pink façade of *The Great Fairy Castle* to the fire engine red garbage cans that look like little rocket ships in *Future World* to the orange, green, and pink plastered Coral Reef Mountains of *Wally the Whale's Enchanted Tales Adventure*. Such thoughtful features make guests feel as if the magic of this place is molecular. When Kasam first stepped through those iconic golden gates all those years ago, he breathed in that magic for the first time, and the remainder of his tragedy vanished into the ether, leaving the boy with nothing but lungs full of wonder.

Was it easy to get a job as a ride engineer at the park? Of course not. There were tens of thousands of applicants each year. But it wasn't easy getting into MIT either. That took tens of thousands of hours at empty libraries where the only thing that kept him focused was the wafting aroma of dust jackets and dreams. Once he got the gig, Kasam worked even harder. First one in,

last one out, and all that. When he'd leave the park late at night, long after *the Phasmagorical Fireworks Show* had ended and all the guests had gone to bed, he'd head home tired and hungry and happy.

"Kasam, you alive over there?"

Kasam snapped out of his trance and shielded his eyes from the harsh sun. The park administrator, Mr. Dolittle, was looking down on him. It seemed like whenever Kasam was around his pasty face would break out in tiny red spots from a volcanic fusion of rage and sun rash.

"Kasam, in this country, we work when we're at work. We don't sit around eating ice cream cones and daydreaming about nonsense!" Dolittle said, his prolific belly jiggling angrily after each infuriated exclamation. "Now, have you checked those hydraulic rotors yet?"

"Mr. Dolittle?"

"Earth to Kasam! You in there?" Mr. Dolittle asked, snapping his thick fingers in front of Kasam's face.

"Of course. I'm sorry, sir. Yes, I took care of those rotors this morning."

"Fine," Dolittle said, wiping the sweat off the back of his neck, "Now we're not paying you this well to sit on your ass and eat ice cream!" His triple chin wiggled as he yelled at Kasam. A slight emendation, it wasn't exactly a yell. The exclamation possessed a volume just below a yell. As the park administrator, Mr. Dolittle knew how to walk that tightrope, balancing along the precipice of making a scene without actually making one. It was perhaps the man's only talent.

"Sir, I'm sorry. Truly. I was just..."

"Kasam, I've had just about enough of you," Dolittle said. Then he paused, looked around the park, and snapped his fingers again. "You know what? Swing by my office after closing. It's time we had a chat."

A chat? But he hadn't done anything wrong. Before he had a chance to explain himself, Mr. Dolittle had started wobbling away. For some reason, Kasam had always imagined that those who ran the park would have a cursory knowledge of the ins and outs of the mechanisms needed to make guests fall under the spell. He'd imagined the administrators would be professional magicians like him or at least huckster illusionists like the Great and Powerful Oz. But the Great and Powerful Dolittle possessed no such skill. He was a talentless hack whose primary role was to squeeze as much magic from the magicians as he could for as little money as he could.

What would Kasam do without this work? It was too painful to even consider. And to make matters worse, in the minute and a half that he spent spiraling downward into the abyss of his looming despair, the ice cream had melted all over his hand. The company had strict rules about employee cleanliness while in the park. No facial hair, no visible tattoos, and no unsanctioned hairstyles. He knew the execs up in Central Office wouldn't look kindly on an engineer covered in melted ice cream, so Kasam scrambled to clean himself, washing off his hands in a nearby drinking fountain.

Suddenly, he heard a familiar *almost yell* on his walkie-talkie, “Kasam! Are you washing your hands in the water fountain?”

Kasam spun around, searching for a sign of Mr. Dolittle so he could explain himself.

“I can see you, Kasam!” Dolittle said. “For Christ’s sake, we have twenty-seven thousand cameras in the park. Now wash your hands in the restroom like a normal person! Remember. My office. Closing time!”

Kasam shut off his walkie. He was no dummy. For months, Mr. Dolittle opened their conversations with, “People like you, Kasam,” or “In this country, Kasam.” It didn’t take a degree from MIT, which Kasam had, to realize that man had it out for him. That man. That little angry man. Kasam had every reason to hate a man like Dolittle. But he didn’t. He didn’t hate anyone. Though he didn’t respect him either, which was about as close to hate as Kasam could get.

Kasam considered rebellion. He considered going to Janet in H.R. and reporting Mr. Dolittle for an imaginary crime, like calling him a racial slur or ogling a female guest. Kasam could never do something like that. Then he considered resetting the system-wide ride track timers to increase guest wait time by over 40%. He knew such an adjustment would unleash a hell storm of guest furor, and the park would descend into chaos. But such a petty vengeance taken upon innocent strangers would also erode the magic veil of this place for all of the children in the park, both young and old. No, Kasam could never do something like that either.

He could have spent his final hours in pensive anguish over his pending eviction. Instead, Kasam spent his final evening as an employee at the park wandering the imaginary landscape of the *Fantastical Realm* like a child lost in a dream. He strolled past *Lightning Mountain* and listened to the euphoric screams of the delighted riders. He walked by the *Giant Panda Revelry Animatronic Showcase* and whistled along to their country ditty. He moseyed along the *Santa Fe Water Flume* track and breathed in the delicious familiarity of chlorinated water and fried dough.

It was all so clean. It was all so safe. It was all so absent of tragedy. Kasam was no sucker. He knew it wasn’t real. He knew it was all an illusion. He knew it was just smoke and mirrors. But he didn’t care.

*Lilibit Ray*

## **Rueful Reminiscing**

Do you remember,  
back when we were kids,  
do you remember,  
the incident of the dog and the car?

I remember,  
walking back from swimming hole,  
wet, distracted, young little peeps,  
moseying along narrow road,

parked cars lining street's berm closely,  
your shoelaces untied,  
our ice cream cones in hand, melting  
almost too fast to catch up,

and then, a sudden flash of black ahead,  
squeal, clonk,  
oncoming car stops,  
dog on ground lies motionless.

Moment of trauma witnessed  
so young, and I remember  
The towel, gloves, box,  
pup picked up,

some memories so vivid, so real,  
when recollecting, they're brought to life  
while other memories change to dreams  
faraway, too draining to revive.

Did this really happen?

I remember seeing  
young face looking out  
the window of a nearby house,  
watching, waiting

his eyes open wide,  
I see his tears  
released one by one,  
feeling them on my cheek.

Did you cry, too?



*Line Langager*

## **A Solitary Dinner**

The narrow window in the blank envelope of the letter reflects the afternoon sun's attempt to cling to the light. Winter weighs down the hours of the day—compresses the day to a useless size, surrounded by oppressive darkness.

My breath turns into a heavy fog with every exhalation. An apparition of my breathing, which is diluted by the frost-bitten air. I let my cooled thumb run lightly over the sender's name. It's my own. I don't remember sending this—and least of all, to myself.

I pry open the letter. It feels like a breach of an unwritten law. An intrusion. The sound of the torn paper seems to resonate among brick buildings. So unforgivably loud.

My eyes fall on the only sentence of the letter. The letters, despite their shaky expression—carry a self-confidence I do not yet possess. The address does not immediately spark recognition.

“You are invited to celebrate our joint birthday on February 11th at 18:00.”

It's tomorrow, on my twentieth birthday.

A pigeon flies by at high speed. Its characteristic, flickering sound of flapping wings, a reminder that I, too, should be moving on. Not just from this place, but onwards in life.

Inside the apartment, I put the letter down on the worn entrance furniture. The slope of the writing threatens to throw the poor letters over the edge. Is the Earth flat in their world? A single dimension of compressed wood, decorated with ink from a printer. I wouldn't want to test the theory for myself.

My world is just as flat.

Is it because I never seek boundaries? Do you have to design the dimensions of life yourself, or do they arrive by mail?

I look at the letter one last time before I go to bed for the night.

I turn in my sleep. A sleep without dreams. A life without purpose. I'm ashamed in the dark. I am ashamed of how many thoughts I have about how few thoughts I possess. The morning does not awaken anything within me. There is no difference between day and night. Between days and birthdays. I'm dragging myself around like a slave with a chain around his leg.

The letter captures the light in an other-worldly way like it might contain something more than just words. I bring it with me, devoid of expectations.

The building leans lazily on a construction site. The facade is under reconstruction, just as I should be. I follow the stairs to the top floor.

I knock on the door with discouragement. No one answers.

I hesitate briefly before touching the polished brass handle. The cold of the metal cuts through my bones. Inside, a single candle casts its irregular, orange glow on the dark furniture.

The uncanny, oppressive silence sends a shiver down my spine. I've stepped into a time warp. A pocket of time.

There's a birthday card on the dining table. I take a seat and take the card in my trembling hands, preparing myself to receive an omen.

The empty chairs shift in mockery. They stare at me, creaking, blaming me for my lack of substance.

The card is empty, and yet—

My void has never felt so full of dread.

*Lynn Thayer*

## **In Memoriam**

A procession of clouds  
edged in mist settles around us  
like a wall edged in barnacles,  
a fence edged in blackberry brambles.

Everything's a mouthful here;  
long verse of the past  
the present wailing her elegy,  
berries sweet enough to bleed.

A northern chill canters in  
on hooves of familiar horses  
& summer, like ancestry  
is laid to rest;

beasts lose their reins  
clouds loose their rains—  
yet still, silently,  
the stickered vines age

*Maia Brown-Jackson*

## On Running and Recovery: In Haiku

I think I might be  
mere fragile defiance at  
this point, and any

glancing blow might just  
shatter me. I've learned not  
let *anyone* in.

I let my ankles  
and wrists hang free, my fingers  
and toes dangle for

I know the monsters  
are more likely in my bed  
than underneath it.

(Darling, when they say  
*flirting with disaster*, they're  
talking about *me*.)

So again, I run.  
I flee the past  
but race straight into the fire;

I clutch at organs  
spilling out, refuse to let  
it happen *quite* yet—

for this cage of ribs  
still holding the heart, always  
fleeing, for once waits—

Or do I run once  
more, anywhere but here, to  
somewhere I'll find—*what?*

If I fall down the

rabbit hole, might I not be  
walking casualty?

I'm overcome with  
*longingyearningpining* for  
something I can't name.

Could I, one day, shine  
gold and turn my mistakes to  
art? Might I try and—

*Ray Kruger*

**Psychopomp Lover**

Kiss me, bleed me dry.  
Butcher my tongue,  
happily, I will die.

Touch me, feel me so.  
Bury my corpse,  
willingly I will go.

Love me, know me more.  
Witness my heart,  
blissfully I will soar.

Kill me, let me steep.  
Caress my soul,  
lovingly I will sleep.

*Sam Faith*

## **Blood Sacrifice**

“Home is where love lives.” My mother would tell me as she pressed mud onto the walls of our dwelling. Her hands were slick with its texture. The sun would creep round in the next hour and bake it on. She wiped the sweat from her forehead leaving a reddish smear behind.

I smiled at her and twisted a strand of my hair which was matting into a fine rat tail. I didn’t really get what she was talking about.

“We’ll have to cut your hair off if you keep doing that.” She commented.

I shrugged and kept twisting. I wanted my hair short anyway.

“You want a go?” she asked, holding some clay out to me.

I shook my head. Mud daubing was wife work, and I wasn’t interested in wife work. I wanted to run off with the village boys into the cool of the forest and try out my new arrows. And when the time came, I wanted to take a wife. I didn’t want to be one.

My mother continued with her work. “You’re like a being from the Time Before.” She laughed over her shoulder. “Or maybe one for the Time After... Go on, then. Go hunt.”

I charged off and found the boys gathering at the outskirts of the village where the Metal Relics and the Sacrifice Stones stood.

The boys were stripped to the waist in the heat, and had their salwar rolled high above their knees. Some carried spears. But for most, their hunting weapon of choice was a crossbow like mine. None of them could match me for skill though.

A couple of the village girls passed the Sacrifice Stones on their way from the well. Destiny was one of them. She put down her water bucket and wiped a hand across her forehead, then shook back her hair. A simple white shift clung to her body, and her skin glistened with exertion.

Her bright eyes bored into mine with a secret amusement as she placed a hand on her cocked hip. She was beautiful. I stopped and couldn’t help but stare at her.

The boys started to jeer at the girls. The only girl they tolerated was me, but that was because I could hunt. And I was only allowed to do that because my mother was the healer and for her child, allowances could be made. For a while.

“C’mon, Love!” Saloo, our undisputed leader bellowed. “Hurry up!”

The rest of the boys joined in, “Hurry up, hurry up!”

I got moving.

There was much back slapping as I reached them, then a little whooping as we tied our kerchiefs around our heads. The lure of the hunt beckoned. The heady, dank smells of the forest enveloped us. This was the place I felt most at home. This is where Love lives, I told myself.

Usually, our quarry would be the fat quail we’d flush out of burrows in the forest floor. We’d check our rabbit snares, and on some occasions take down a hare on the run. This time we were especially lucky. We found a litter of wild piglets, cosy and alone in their grass nest. We’d

dispatched most of them with our hip knives before the sow returned screaming in anguish and fury.

As she charged, the boys scattered, but I stood my ground.

Time seemed to slow as I held my breath, raised my cross bow and shot her right between the eyes. She continued for a pace or two, then dropped dead at my feet, a small trickle of blood running down her throat.

The boys emerged from their hiding places and gathered around me.

Saloo gripped me by the shoulders. "This is a good blood sacrifice. You're as good as a boy, Love." He crooned. "You really are like one of us."

The village fed well that night. Even the men were impressed as we marched into camp our kills. It was auspicious, they murmured. A good omen.

The men had been fasting for three days since the full moon and had abstained from hunting. They'd spent the days in the village shaping masks, fashioning clay pipes and sharpening tools for the boys' initiation rites which were to begin the next morning.

I lay on a woven mat after the feast, licking my fingers clean and noticed Destiny watching me through the flames of the cooking fire. I stared back at her until Saloo broke the spell as he flopped down beside me and tousled my rat-tailed hair.

"You can't come with us after tomorrow." He said ruefully. "Tomorrow, we go to the forest. Tomorrow, we become lost for ten days. When we come back, we will be men."

He lowered his voice and spoke in a whisper, hiding his mouth with his hand.

"We have to survive alone. We have to prove ourselves. We have to choose new names. They cut us—it's a blood sacrifice, too... I'm scared, Love. Things won't be the same when we come back. We won't be friends when I return."

I looked into his sad eyes. How could it be that they got to go and become men, and I could not. How could it be that I could not also go and prove myself. What could be so secret and so strange that only boys could go?

"Maybe when I come back, we can be betrothed. If I take you as my wife, that is still something isn't it? He asked.

I stood up abruptly. "No." I hissed. "Never." I kicked earth in his face and stomped away towards the newly daubed hut where my mother waited.

The next day, the girls and women of the village got up early to see the boys and men off. I stayed on my straw pallet with a flax coverlet pulled up to my eyes despite the heat. I told my mother I was sick.

"Mmmm," she said as she felt my forehead. "I'll make some lemon and ginger grass when I get back." But she didn't come back for a long while.

I crept over to the window slit and peeked out to see if I could spot her. Most of the women were by the fires making the day's soup and dumplings. My mother was not among them. I ventured out with reluctance. I kept to the shadows between the women's huts.



I spied her having a frantic conversation with Destiny's mother at the edge of the village among the Metal Relics. She slapped one of the larger relic's blade like protrusions and started crying. My mother rarely cried, and only then with rage and frustration.

I slipped back to our hut and back onto my pallet. I fell asleep.

I didn't wake again until nightfall when my mother finally returned home. She had various provisions with her. This was unusual as food was never to leave the cool of the stone house, the only stone-built dwelling in the village and like the Metal Relics, a leftover from the Time Before.

She re-wrapped the food; ryebread, apples and smoked dried meat and packed it into a hessian backpack. Next, she took some clean shifts of hers and chemise and salwar of mine and packed them into another bag. Again, this was all very unusual.

I cautiously moved my coverlet aside and sat up.

"Get your arrows and your crossbow ready," she said. "Tomorrow, we have to go..."

"Go?"

"Don't question me, Love. This can no longer be our home. For when the boys come back as men with new names, it will be time for the girls' initiation. There will be the cutting and...it's not like the boys' cutting. It's a blood sacrifice to take a part of you away that you will never get back. They leave it on the Sacrifice Stones for the hawks to peck. You will never feel joy and you will lose your name."

She looked at me with such sorrow and horror in her eyes that I recoiled and did as she requested.

I got my arrows and my crossbow ready. I sharpened my knife and set aside my best sandals.

We gathered at the Sacrifice Stones. Besides my mother and me, there was Destiny, Rainbow, Happiness and Brightbird as well as their mothers. Women who didn't have names. They'd lost them after their cutting. They were only known as wives and mothers of the children they'd birthed. If women bore no children, they were soon shed as wives and had no way of being identified at all. They were ghosts. They cleaned the latrines and buried the dead.

We left before the birds sang. The women hesitated at the edge of the forest. Women did not have any business to go in there. Among us, only I knew it and I knew it better than anyone, any man.

We walked for days. Weeks.

We walked along a long stone road. Through a new weirder forest. We walked through places where the trees twisted, and the plants were so mutated from things that happened in the Time Before we could barely recognise them. We saw strange birds and large fanged creatures with stripes chasing boar what were huger than any I'd ever seen.

We walked along a winding river of such wild boiling water; we were afraid to drink from it. We walked in untamed rain and under baking sun.

My best sandals wore a hole in them. And still we walked on.

Then we came upon a clearing with many stone houses and different Metal Relics from the Time Before. But no Sacrifice Stones. It was cool and shaded, but near an open meadow of fine grass and delicate flowers through which a mild sweet-watered river flowed. It was clear that no one had lived there for a very, very long time.

“This place will do,” my mother said. She took a house on the outskirts for herself and got back to the business of healing.

One day, some other mothers from another place joined us, and they brought their sons with them. Young men keen to take wives.

Destiny sneered at the boys when they arrived and moved into my dwelling with me. In fact, many girls sneered at the young men, for although they were happy to lie with them, most didn't want to be their wives. And there were some of the young men who didn't want to hunt and much preferred wife work. There was also those who wanted to do all things. And those who invented new things to do.

“Let everyone do what they want,” my mother said. “The old rules don't apply here for this is now the Time After. Things will settle... It will all work out...”

And because my mother was a leader of sorts as well as the healer, everyone listened.

And so, our community grew.

A community where we all have names, and we can do any job we like. Any of us can go into the forest if we want. There is hunting in the forest, but there is no cutting. The only blood sacrifice is the one the animals give us... and the one when children are born. For both, we are always grateful as both give us life.

In the day, I take Destiny into the forest and show her the use of knife and arrow, teach her the way of the hunt. She's good, but not as good as me. Neither of us are wife, and yet, we both are, for each other.

At night, I watch her skin glisten by the flicking light of a tallow candle as she undresses and comes to me. She is beautiful.

Afterwards we lie in each other's arms. She runs her fingers through my short hair.

“This is where love lives.” She whispers and touches her heart.

I smile and place a hand above my own and know I have come home.

*Tomas Zandir*

## Uncle Hiram

When I woke up this morning, I had a good idea for a story. It did not come to me in a dream as they sometimes do, but popped into my head as I was squinting at the shaft of sunlight piercing the blind that did not quite cover the window—the one with the piece of cardboard fitted into the space where years ago a pane was broken.

I hurried through my cereal, brushed my teeth, and sat down at the old laptop. I was inspired and ready to write. But then from the master bedroom I heard the familiar hacking cough. Uncle Hiram was awake. I closed the laptop.

Uncle Hiram was never easy to get along with. In five years, they didn't leave the house except to go to the funerals of their old Army buddies. All day, they sat in their rocking chair smoking Luckies and swigging from a jug of some kind of rotgut liquor delivered by their pal Zack, who lived down Route 50 next to the high-tension tower, one of a line that marched over the golden fields from Goshen to Batavia.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Uncle Hiram bathed infrequently (they said hot water was bad for their impetigo) and they shaved by touch, refusing to use a mirror, so that most days their face looked like they suffered with mange. They favored a ratty plaid shirt and a pair of old Levi's and it was all I could do to convince them to give them to me once a week to wash. During the hour and a half of the wash and dry cycles they would sit in their chair wrapped in a towel, which ensured that I would pay close attention to the washing process and return their shirt and pants to them as quickly as possible.

They took their meals on a tray I brought from the kitchen so they could eat while watching our small television set: the Today show at eight in the morning, One Life to Live at one in the afternoon, and Entertainment Tonight at seven-thirty in the evening.

All of these things made life with Uncle Hiram difficult, but not unbearable. I managed to take care of them and also make a good living at the Exxon station, which was fortunately located less than a mile from our apartment so that I could run home at lunchtime and then return to the station before Sylvia, the franchisee owner's wife, came in at two, expecting me to be busy with oil changes and brake jobs.

No, what drove me crazy was that Uncle Hiram had literary pretensions. Of course, they never wrote a word, but they were a voracious reader of anything they could get their hands on—tabloid papers, magazines, pulp novels, literary fiction—you name it, they wanted to read it. They sent me to the library every Saturday with a heap of books to return and a list of titles that they wanted. They'd work through the stack all week and then the following Saturday they'd assemble the books into a pile and hand them to me with their new list.

I was the one who was the writer. Well, I tried to be a writer. Trouble was that Uncle Hiram knew I was a writer, and they would watch me from the corner of their eye while I sat at the old roll top desk that Grandma—Hiram's aunt—had left me when they died of emphysema

ten years ago. I had told them to quit smoking, but they didn't listen, and despite my persistent entreaties neither did Uncle Hiram.

There I'd sit, pecking away at the keyboard. Inevitably, just as my story was starting to emerge, Uncle Hiram would take a swig from the jug and bellow, "What'cha writing about?"

Dutifully, I would tell them. "It's a story about a guy who kills their neighbor and buries the body under the floorboards," or "A woman sees an old boyfriend on the street and pretends she doesn't know them."

Uncle Hiram would snort in disgust. "Sounds just like Raymond Carver!" or "Are you ripping off Steve Almond again? Pathetic!"

I would stare at my laptop. The juicy, wisdom-laden words I had happily set down would suddenly seem tasteless and dull, like soda that had been sitting open too long and lost its fizz. Yes—the characters were unoriginal, the prose tedious, the plot shopworn.

"Hey, do what you want," shrugged Uncle Hiram. "I'm just doing you a favor. You'd feel like an idiot trying to publish something that was just a pale imitation of somebody else's stuff."

Sometimes I would try to re-work the characters—I'd make the traveling salesman a pro basketball player. Sometimes a change of setting seemed better—I'd move the action from a cabin in the woods to a fishing shack on the harbor. But these efforts inevitably made the damned things worse and more derivative. Like it says in Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. I proved it every day.

Out of sheer frustration and shame, I would close the laptop and go watch television in the kitchen. Eventually I'd come back, sit down, and complete the tedious story. After writing a couple of thousand words I'd send it off to whatever literary magazine was accepting submissions. Invariably, a few months later I'd receive the polite notice of refusal. "After careful consideration, we're sorry we must decline...." So far, my so-called literary career consisted of hundreds of rejections and zero acceptances.

On this particular morning, as usual, I heard the hacking cough. I attended to Uncle Hiram and got them dressed and fed and I found their Luckies. They settled into their chair with a copy of *The Goldfinch*. I returned to the old rolltop desk and opened the laptop.

Five minutes later Uncle Hiram set their book on their lap, took a slug from the jug, turned to me, and said, "What'cha writing about?"

But this time I was ready. I would throw them off the scent. I would lie. I would tell them a ridiculous parody of a story idea, one that had nothing to do with what I was writing. They'd make their usual pronouncement, I'd nod and look thoughtful, they'd be satisfied, and I'd be able to continue without the cancer of doubt eating at my brain.

"It's about person named Dannie who has two heads. The heads always disagree because one head is a dog's head while the other head is a cat's head. They're always fighting like—you know, cats and dogs."

"Feline and canine heads on the same body?"

"That's what I said."

“And they live like this?”

“Yes. For many years.”

“Where?”

I looked at Uncle Hiram. I was not prepared for this. I hadn't gotten that far in my fake story, because I assumed my Luckies-smokin' critic would have already shot it down. “Um... they live in Washington, D.C.”

“Why our nation's capital?”

I wanted to tell them that I chose the district because it was the most absurd location I could think of. But that would spoil the joke.

“Because it's a parable about government. The guy with two heads has to live in Washington because it's the center of American politics.”

“How so?”

I was becoming exasperated. This was not going as planned. I had a story to write, and it was not about a person with two heads.

“Because the dog head is a Republican and the cat head is a Democrat. You can imagine the tension between them. Always bickering. It's very dark humor.”

Uncle Hiram guffawed and slapped his knee. “That's rich! The dog head and the cat head arguing about politics! Kid, I think you've got something! May I read it?”

I swallowed hard. This had never happened before. Uncle Hiram had never once asked to read one of my stories.

“Um, sure.”

“When?”

“As soon as I get it done. Today, maybe tomorrow.”

Uncle Hiram nodded thoughtfully and picked up *The Goldfinch*. They took a drag from a Luckie and began to read. I heard them say to themselves, “Dog head and cat head. Republican and Democrat. Don't that beat all.” They chuckled softly.

I stared at the laptop and wrote the opening line:

“Election day came bright and clear. Dannie finished breakfast, put on their usual disguise, and drove to the voting station at the public library. Because the bickering between the dog head and the cat head had been nonstop for weeks, Dannie had been putting off deciding which candidate would get their vote. But now the moment of truth had arrived and there was no way to avoid it.”

I knew that Uncle Hiram was going to love this story.