

# AFTER HAPPY HOUR

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AFTER  
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SUMMER 2025 MASTHEAD:

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## FOREWORD

If there were a theme to this issue, it might be consuming.

Certainly, some of this is literal. Eating figs, drinking martinis, grinding bones and scaling fish. But also it's us, so you'll find some Capital-W-Weird stuff: invasions, obsessions, compulsions. Emotions that devour. Literal monsters that glut and gorge.

I can't speak for anyone else, but for me, the last year has been... much. The yawning void between last summer and this one is a wild, gaping expanse, and at the same time, everything is too fast, and if you blink, you miss it: time eats you whole. They say this (nonsensical time dilation, that is) happens as you get older, so who knows; maybe I'm just old now? Either way, the pieces in this issue feel very apropos: the way they talk about being taken over, being swallowed into the chasms of the soul.

And honestly, is there anything better than a book that folds you into itself, that grabs you and sucks you down and buries you in its pages? There isn't. So take this issue of *After Happy Hour*, and find a quiet moment (may we suggest right after happy hour?) and fall into it. Let it surround you. Let it consume.

Cheers,

Liz Abeling  
CNF Editor

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# A View from the Porch, with Sunset and Transmutation

BY JENNIFER HYKES

DAN TOOK A swig of his beer. “Shame about the sky,” he opined.

“Yep,” I said with a slow nod. The westward vista was one of the reasons Carol and I had wanted this house. Perfect view down the hill towards the sunset. We could watch the clouds turn bright orange and pink before fading into soft lavender. It was always so nice. But now with the big tear in the sky, opening to a void of God-knows-what, UFOs popping in and out again without a message or even a hello—it really marred the view.

“Did you hear about Yvette’s garden?” I offered into the silence.

“No—not her gladiolas she’s been working on?”

“Yep. Torn right up outta the ground. Some sorta cryptid with too many arms. Caught on her porch camera.”

“That’s a shame,” said Dan. “Good thing she installed that thing, though. I always say, never hurts to know what’s creepin’ around the yard when your back’s turned.”

I shuddered. “You’d think that. But lemme tell you, I don’t need video of that on my phone.” The image of 10-foot-long furry arms reaching out from under the shed was something I wished I could erase from my brain. Too many elbows, too many knuckles, claws sharp enough to shred light. Yvette was lucky her phone didn’t burn up.

We sat in silence. Another dark blot zipped through the tear in the sky, flashed a few lights, zipped out again. The clouds around it blazed orange as the sun dipped down to the west.

A loud rumble sounded below us, on the next street down the hill. I spotted trees shaking, then falling away as something bright emerged from between them.

“There goes Tommy,” said Dan. “That’s a real shame. He’s a good kid.”

We’d been keeping half an eye on the Anderson place ever since their teenager disappeared inside some kind of crystal cocoon. No one had any idea how long he’d be in there, changing, but I guess whatever happened happened, and now a being of light and wings unfolded, rose up into the sky. Started to sing.

The song rang out over the neighborhood. It was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard, and everything—the houses, the trees, the tear in the sky—all hummed with it, like we were all parts of some whole just beyond understanding. Tommy kept unfolding, translucent wings shining in the coral glow of the sunset behind him, a halo spreading wherever he touched. My throat closed and my eyes watered, hearing this song and knowing it couldn’t last.

“Shame about—” I started, then shook my head. “No, you know what? Good for him!” The world could use more Tommies right now. More people making themselves into something beautiful and complete, shedding light onto everything around them. “Good for him.”

Beside me, Dan nodded. We raised our cans of beer in salute. The aluminum, catching the light, turned to gold.



# Unbecoming

BY ERIC OROSCO

EDDIE KNOWS THAT a photo-less profile on Grindr is not to be trusted, but it's 2 a.m. in Moscow, Idaho, and the conversation is charming, and he's just lonely enough to believe that this might be something romantic.

He's standing in the small bathroom of his apartment, the mirror smeared and fuzzy from his half-hearted attempt to clean it with toilet paper and a splash of water. Skin tags form mini constellations on the left side of his lower neck and he rubs a hand over them and shudders at the texture. Usually, they're covered by a shirt, but he's still naked from fulfilling a stranger's request for pics. The stranger, 208top, had promptly ghosted Eddie after the photos were sent.

*I bet you have abs with a happy trail*, 208top said while waiting for the initial photos. He didn't have either, but an urge to be touched pushed Eddie to snap the pictures anyway. When he stopped replying, Eddie began cataloging the ways he'd failed to live up to expectations. It was then that montanabuddy sent him a message.

*I'm Eddie, by the way*, he types into his phone once he pulls his attention away from his reflection.

*eddie, i like that. short for something?*

Yes, but Eddie doesn't want to give a stranger that power. Eduardo was a name reserved for those who could do the most damage. His body

could be given freely, but there were things more sacred than flesh.

*No, but everyone asks :)*, Eddie sends the message and sets his phone against the space between the faucet and mirror. He leans forward and looks at a small skin tag forming under his right eye. Back home, he'd be able to talk to someone at Kaiser about getting rid of them, but here, in Idaho, he wouldn't even know where to begin.

*I rllly like your smile*, montanabuddy says before adding, *i can't believe i haven't seen u here b4.*

Which is odd because Eddie's on most nights, and there are only four rows of men using Grindr in the immediate area, so Eddie shouldn't be a surprise to anyone.

*I can't believe I haven't seen you. I'm here often.*

*u act like this is a bar haha*

*It basically is. :)*

It isn't though. Eddie would feel more comfortable in a bar, more confident. He had his routines and friends and knew how to perform in a space like that. Most weeks he'd meet up with Lauren or Jessica or Sam and they'd partake in some two-for-one margaritas at the Mexican restaurant on Main—"four-for-two, you mean!" one of them would always correct—before moving on to the popular bar down the street. If he was running late, he'd meet them directly at the bar and chug some Long Island Iced Teas to catch up.

But that was during the school year. It's summer, and the girls are back in their home states, and Eddie is here in his bathroom talking to some picture-less profile that's never seen him before.

*im home 4 the summer. This ur 1st year?*

*Second year but first summer.* Eddie replies before gathering the clothes puddled around his bare feet.

*ur profile says California. u didn't want 2 enjoy the beach?*

*I'm inland. No beach for miles. Just heat.* He wonders how he can change the subject as the thoughts of home begin to surface: the junk in the

yard, the thickening dust on windowsills, the sound of Grandma's TV muffled by the splintering wood of the door—

montanabuddy saves him: *so u've never seen the stars on a night like this?*

He hasn't, and he can't even begin to remember the last time he looked up at the sky. Maybe when he first got to Idaho, after the plane landed and the taxi took him from the airport to the college. On the drive, he looked up in awe and thought he'd never seen anything so perfectly blue. But that was two years ago, and the novelty had dulled, and he found that even under the bluest sky you could feel absolutely alone.

Eddie leaves the bathroom with his phone in one hand and his discarded clothes in the other. His apartment is on the bottom floor of an old house that had been divided into three units. He moved in for the start of his sophomore year thinking it would help Idaho feel more like home. He bought furniture from Habitat for Humanity, stocked the kitchen with used pots and pans, and sourced books and knickknacks from the smaller thrift store on Main. He made tamales and botched several family recipes trying to cook from memory, but, in the end, having an apartment off campus only served to keep him isolated and broke.

*meet me.*

In the kitchen, the time on the microwave glows 2:35. The apartment around him is still; the walls quietly wait for him to make a decision.

*where?*

*under the stars. there's a pullout along highway 8. amazing view. i have a truck. we can lay in the bed. it'll change your life.*

*I don't even know what you look like.*

Not that such a thing had ever stopped Eddie before. Lots of the local men didn't have pictures and Eddie had gone to them anyway. He'd walked into dimly lit homes, into bedrooms and alcoves and been

fucked by men he'd barely taken two glances at. The difference: that was in town and this, what montanabuddy was suggesting, was out there. In town, he could scream or run or fight and make enough noise to catch a neighbor's attention. Most of the meet ups were discreet, so the threat of being revealed gave Eddie a bit of power and security. Out there, however, it was nothing but him and this man, and the odds were not favorable.

Eddie begins typing his excuse. He's tired after all, and he could always just masturbate to clear his mind. That would sober him up and make him embarrassed for the amount of time spent talking to these strangers. He'd sleep in, maybe call out from his shift at the grocery store, maybe delete Grindr (again), and swear to focus on school (again), and maybe even call his dad and ask him to put the phone to his grandma's ear so he could tell her he loved her and that he was sorry he's been gone, but that he'll be home soon and maybe she'd have the energy to say something back, something like, "Mijo, you—"

But then the chat lights up with montanabuddy's picture and all those possibilities cease.

montanabuddy is hot with a good smile and stubble and chest hair that pops out a little from his flannel button up. The photo is a close-up of him exiting what could be a barn. There is hay and it matches the color of his hair, and his eyes remind Eddie of the blue of the sky when he first arrived in Idaho. Like that moment, Eddie wants this to be a fresh start.

EDDIE'S TOYOTA COROLLA coasts eastbound on Highway 8, going slower than the speed limit as Eddie looks out for the spot montanabuddy promised would change his life. This isn't the worst thing he's done for a man, but it sure is near the top of the list.

The radio is tuned to the university's station and the overnight DJ is playing something classical. Occasionally, a light from a house

or barn glows weakly against the 3 a.m. darkness revealing trucks, fences, equipment—it reminds him of driving south from Sacramento, through Galt or Manteca or Modesto. His dad used to bring him along on those trips, the two of them in the cab of a rusted red truck, tools clattering in the bed, a welding helmet stacked on the lunch pails between them. Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers or The Pretenders or Heart would be playing from the stereo as Eddie looked out the dirt-speckled passenger window mouthing along to “American Girl” or “Brass in Pocket” or “Barracuda,” his father drumming fingers on the cracked leather steering wheel.

His father was a welder or plumber or carpenter, depending on the day or hour. He had contacts scattered across the Central Valley, and the two of them would make these trips in the summer for a handful of hundreds pressed firmly into his father’s calloused palms. This was years before Eddie came out, before he stood in the living room of his father’s house and looked him in the eyes to tell him—

Eddie jerks the wheel as he almost misses the pullout. It’s a hardly noticeable half-moon of dirt and gravel to his right. He would have ignored it if it wasn’t for his headlights catching what remained of a broken speed limit sign at the edge of the clearing.

*look 4 a sign on the ground. that’s the place. can’t miss it, were the instructions montanabuddy gave. As he backs into the pullout, the red from his tail lights cast a bloody glow over the earth. In his rear view, he notices the shadow of a truck parked in the grassy field behind the pullout.*

Eddie leans forward to look at the sky, and even through the blur of his dirty windshield the stars shine brightly.

*so u’ve never seen the stars on a night like this?*

It looks incredible. It looks... worth it. Are the stars like this in town? Do they shine above him while he looks down at his phone and talks to strange men? How many nights has he spent looking at anything other than *this*?

Pulling himself away from the view, he opens Grindr.

*Is that you?* He types and waits. A picture-less profile, an invitation to the middle of nowhere, a truck tucked away in the dark of the night—this was the worst thing he’d done for the touch of a man.

*yes. montanabuddy replies. u almost missed the spot.*

*Sorry, it’s my first time out here.*

*a virgin ;)*

*hah.*

Turning his phone’s flashlight on, he tucks it into his shirt’s breast pocket and turns off the car before taking a deep breath and opening the door. The gravel crunches under his boots as he stands and looks up into the wide-open sky. Hundreds of stars are scattered above in constellations he’d never taken the time to learn. One shines brighter than the others and he wonders if it’s the North Star. His phone buzzes with a notification.

*i’d come 2 greet u but its cold. i’ll be in the bed waiting*

*Thanks for keeping it warm :)*

He sets his phone back in place, closes the car door and starts walking toward the shadow of the truck. The phone light struggles to reveal any details beyond a few feet, and out of reflex he reaches for his keys to press the lock button. He stops himself in the motion and decides against it. It’s just him and montanabuddy out here, and if he needs to make a break for it he’d prefer not to struggle with getting in and peeling out.

Eddie turns his focus to his footing as his boots stamp down uneven dirt and rocks. He keeps glancing up at the sky and the way the stars almost dance in their brilliance. There are some scenarios where this is romantic. Where these strangers meet under the cover of night and bare their hearts and bodies to each other. Where this summer becomes the first of many and that rush Eddie was searching for would finally—despite everything that told him otherwise—erase the loneliness that

was always just under the surface of his skin. Without meaning to, he slides his hand under the collar of his shirt and picks at one of his tags.

About halfway to the truck he realizes it is red and rusted. The front faces him so he can't see the bed, but Eddie pictures his father's tools and equipment nestled among the blankets. If he looked into the cab, would he see two lunch pails packed with Wonder Bread sandwiches and Capri Suns? Would he smell the must of the upholstery? The sticky dirt in every crack and crevice?

*Run, he thinks. This isn't fun anymore.*

But he moves forward a few steps, his eyes looking over the license plate, the front bumper, the texture of the hood. What were his dad's plates? He'd never paid attention to them. He was always looking elsewhere, looking away from the truck that told every passerby everything they needed to know about him, about his family. But they were the same, weren't they? The plates. The texture on the hood. The front bumper with that dent along the left edge.

He grabs his phone and opens Grindr.

"Eddie?"

He refreshes the page, his fingers beginning to tremble.

"Eddie?"

The screen shows that his last conversation on the app was with 208top. There is no thread with montanabuddy. No picture. No invitation.

"Eduardo."

The voice is garbled. Meaty. Thick. He looks up, shining the phone's flashlight forward. The front tires lift and the vehicle groans as the suspension struggles under an immense weight. He hears wet, slopping sounds, like cut chicken mixing in a bowl, before the thud of something falling from the tailgate to the grass below.

Eddie turns and runs, the sounds of smaller objects falling from the tailgate: wet, squishing sounds. His car looks miles away but Eddie

keeps running, his phone casting arcs of light into the darkness to his right.

He almost loses his balance when the dirt turns to gravel, but he charges forward, the sound of dry grass being crushed behind him. He throws open the door and dives in, slamming and locking it in one quick motion. The car trembles with the vibrations of something charging across the earth in his direction. With the turn of the key, his engine roars to life—headlights cutting through the night, classical music punctuating the moment.

Before he can shift into drive there's a force, an impact, an act of violence. The rear of the car is struck and Eddie's unbuckled body slams chest-first into the steering wheel, his scream covered by the blaring of the horn.

He hears the slap of a wet *something* against the back of his car. Eddie fumbles it into drive and peels out of the pullout. His eyes focus only on the road ahead as he speeds westbound to his apartment.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," he yells at himself as he smacks the steering wheel. Somehow, the road feels more worn on this side, and he feels every flaw in the asphalt rattle the car and jolt through his body. He's going faster than the fifty-five speed limit, but that doesn't feel nearly fast enough. Weighed down by everything that just happened, the car struggles to increase speed.

The music on the radio makes it difficult to think and Eddie reaches for the volume control but stops when it abruptly ends. It's dead air for a period of six seconds before the sound of his grandma's voice rasps through the speakers.

"Mijo, you left me."

He turns the radio off and looks to the rear-view mirror for the first time and sees the lid of his trunk bouncing into view. The trunk had given him problems since he bought the car, so seeing it this way wasn't a surprise. He turns his attention to the road ahead. *I was scared,*

*obviously. Shapes and sounds in the dark. If I look at my phone again, I'll see the messages.* But he doesn't reach for his phone; he keeps his hands on the wheel and his eyes focused straight ahead. Eddie knows that he has to keep driving, that he has to put as much distance between him and his mistakes because as soon as he stops he'll—

His grandma in her armchair, bones jutting against paper-thin skin: the image yanks his attention back a year. It's the memory of the last time he saw her. Her gold cross rising and falling with her shallow breathing, bits of dried food stuck to her wrinkled shirt. She's a husk of her old self, and when he tells her he's going to live in Idaho full time, she looks at him as if she'd already forgotten who he was.

*Mijo, you left me.*

He pulls the car to the side of the road and begins to cry. He *had* left. He'd applied to as many out of state schools as possible and went to the first one that accepted him. In Idaho, he didn't have to watch his family deteriorate in front of him.

Eddie leans his head against the cold of the driver-side window; in the side mirror he notices the glow of two headlights crawling over the horizon. Their light is pallid, and Eddie knows that there is no safety out here. For the second time tonight he speeds westbound toward home, his eyes glancing from the road in front of him to the two dwindling lights in his rear-view mirror.

DEADBOLT, CHAIN, LOCK—he checks each line of defense three times before moving away from the door and deeper into the dark apartment. He places his phone back in his breast pocket and scans the living room to make sure he's actually alone before turning on all the lights. Everything is exactly as he left it. He's trembling as he walks back into the living room and starts to recall the rust of his father's truck and the sound of his grandma's voice and the wet thwack of raw meat against metal.

Eddie feels the vomit come fast and he throws himself to his knees. It splatters against the blue carpet, and his phone tumbles out of his pocket and lands face up in the warm puke. Eddie stays motionless. A long strand of saliva hangs from his lips as he looks down at the mess.

*it'll change your life.*

Wiping his mouth, Eddie pulls himself up and sits on the arm of the couch. By the time he'd gotten into town the headlights behind him were gone and he wondered if they had ever really been there. He tries to piece together what happened at the pullout, but it's difficult because he didn't look back when he ran or when he got into the car or when he sped into the night. All he could remember was the gravel in front of him, the sound of something crashing through the grass, the engine roaring, the car horn and the trunk—

The lights go out.

He holds his breath and digs his fingers into the rough upholstery. *It's here.* From the living room window, a tapping, something sharp on glass. A nail. A knife. A claw. It's at the window next to the bookcase. No, it's coming from the kitchen. Above the sink. Is it in the backyard? Eddie can't turn his head. He can't move; his eyes are locked on the living room window and the shadows beyond.

He thinks about when he was thirteen and felt sleep paralysis for the first time. He was in bed with his arms pinned to his side and his eyes locked on the closed bedroom door. There was something in the room with him but he couldn't see it. It wasn't until the springs of the mattress creaked under the additional weight that he knew where it was. It felt like hours before he could force a sound to escape his lips, and it felt like a hundred more before his grandma heard him and came rushing in, his arms regaining movement in time to wrap them around her.

But she was states away and dying, and he was here in a dark apartment in Idaho. Alone. That thing outside. Even if he made a sound or let out a scream, he was the only unit occupied for the summer. There

were no immediate neighbors to hear him.

He must get to campus. There were people there—not many, but enough. There would be lights and there would be safety. He had to will himself to move, to run, to sprint. He outran it before. He could do it again.

But how did it find him? How did it make its way from that pullout to his apartment? He'd only stopped once and even then it wasn't that long. Images of the trunk lid bouncing flash across his mind.

*Move*, he thought, his arms still pinned to his side. *Move!*

Chain, deadbolt, lock—Eddie undoes each bit of safety as quietly as possible, his breathing tense. His left hand braces the door's frame while his right grips the handle. Hesitation isn't an option; every part of him needs to commit to this escape.

He can make it to the car.

He can make it to campus.

He can—

A force pulls the handle down and Eddie feels the door push against him. Cold air pours onto his skin as the surprise of something entering makes his balance falter. There is a sharp pain as it grabs his left hand. Wet. Meaty.

*No!* He throws his body into the door, slamming it closed. Lock. Deadbolt. Chain. His hands are wet, slippery, fumbling. It hadn't let go; the force of the door severed what grabbed him, chunks of it still on his hand while the bulk of it waits behind less than two inches of wood. He tries to shake it off but the pieces cling to him until he peels them off, bits of his skin tearing back at the contact points. Each one is thrown to the ground and stomped on until all four are flattened into the carpet.

Hands wet with blood, he pushes his couch against the door. There's a burning sensation in his left palm and when he looks closely he thinks he sees a cut about three inches long. He presses his hand into the bottom of his shirt and stumbles to the bathroom, his boots slipping slightly in vomit.

Eddie rinses his hands in the sink and watches the blood swirl down the drain. The back of his left hand is striped with gashes and he thinks he can see sections where his veins are exposed. He grabs a hand towel and wraps it around his wounds as he drops to the floor.

*It's what, 4 a.m.? As soon as the sun rises, I'll be safe.* He smiles. Waiting until dawn was possible. He could do that. He could make it.

He could also call the police. And say what? *There's a monster outside my door, officer.*

The hand towel feels heavy, blood soaked. Does he have bandages? He thinks there's a box of Band-Aids under the sink next to a half-used tube of Neosporin. How many bandages would he need? He lets go of the towel to see how bad it looks.

The taste of bile returns, and he covers his mouth with his good hand.

At the center of the three-inch cut, two bulbous tendrils reach out, writhing in the wound like a pair of antennae. Using the sink as support, he pulls himself up and walks to the kitchen, his left hand held out in front of him, palm up.

Under the skin, along his wrist, he feels movement. A pressure against his bones and veins, his fingers involuntarily twitching. His breathing is steady as he lays his arm on the kitchen counter. A third bulbous mass began to rise from the wound—his skin splitting further to accommodate this additional presence. His left hand's fingers feel numb, and they begin to curl and uncurl in a rhythm that matches his breathing.

When his mother died, his father made him watch as hospice removed her from the back room of the house. "That's not her anymore. That's just flesh," he whispered in seven-year-old Eddie's ear. When his grandma moved into that same back room, Eddie knew his father would make him watch when her time came. When she was just flesh.

With his right hand, he opens the cabinet drawer and grabs his one kitchen knife.

"It's just flesh."

He brings the blade down quickly on his wrist. He screams, pain ripping across his arm, blood splattering against tile. Again, gripping the handle, raising it up and bringing it down. Screaming. The knife has never been sharpened. It was bought at a thrift store. This is not a clean cut. The blade against his bone makes his vision blur. Again. Gripping the handle. Raising it up. Bringing it down—

His left hand explodes in chunks of flesh and blood. The knife clatters against the counter as Eddie stumbles backward, exposed bone where his wrist should be. Starting at the wound and working its way up his arm, his flesh begins to fall off in chunks making wet thuds as what used to be part of him makes contact with the linoleum. Elsewhere, he feels his skin press against his clothes, swelling, twisting, growing.

Eddie is crying as he slips in the bits of himself now scattered across the kitchen floor. He falls and there is a crack and he screams as something forces itself against his ribs. Twisting in pain, he catches the glow of his phone from the living room and begins to crawl. He wants to hear his father's voice. He wants to know that everything is going to be okay. He wants to go home.

By the time he gets to the carpet, he can no longer feel his legs. He uses his upper body and right arm to pull himself forward—his boots and socks remaining in the kitchen alongside his trail of flesh. The pieces are writhing, chunks climbing onto each other to create new, grotesque piles of carrion.

On his right arm he sees masses form under the surface of his skin. They rise and fall in tandem with his labored breathing. Across his back he feels the skin grow taut with pressure as it stretches in different directions. It hurts. It all hurts in ways that he cannot comprehend. He doesn't have time to think about the masses growing inside him, about the flesh falling from his body, about the exposed bone or the remaining minutes of his life. He doesn't think about the summer stars or what might have been in the back of that truck or the fact that his jeans are no longer attached to his body. He doesn't think. He crawls

and pulls and wraps his only hand around his phone. He listens to it ring as his skin tags melt off his body and his clavicle presses against the bloody carpet. He hears his father's voice, "You've reached, Felix," before his hand gives out and drops the phone inches from his face. After the beep, he struggles out a single, "I'm sorry," his only remaining eye glancing up at the window, at the stars, at this hour, at this final moment before what remains of Eduardo Mora detaches and spreads itself across the floor.



STASIA VALORA FISHER

## Diagnosis for Sleepless Fathers

BY JOE DAHUT

It is not unusual to taste the nausea of mourning the morning after your second son's attempted suicide. For the first time, you cry in front of your children and pretend to speak the same language as them.

He isn't a bad kid, just too much time to play with. The waiter serves coffee and pecan pie, and there are six crows combing through the promising crumbs of enchantment in the bed of a pickup truck, but you

can't remember if you drive a pick up, and the whole plot is lost. It won't be long until the drought starts knocking. The lost obituaries curl and flake in the brush fire like flights of crystal coveys in a field of ravaged dogs.

Your life is the sound of a mother wailing in a room full of mothers, wailing.

# When My Mother taught Me to Clean Fish

BY DANA WALL

FIRST, THE SOUND of copper scales hitting yesterday's newspaper, like pennies falling into a wishing well made of yesterday's headlines. Mother's hands move quick as summer lightning, teaching mine the geometry of survival. This is how you hold the knife. This is how you find the soft place beneath the gills. This is how you open what was once alive to feed what still is.

I am seven, standing on a kitchen chair dragged close to the counter, my chin barely reaching the cutting board's edge. The fish's eye watches me—a black pearl in a silver socket. Mother says don't waste anything. Says in the old country, they'd boil the bones for soup, plant the guts in the garden to feed the tomatoes. Here in America, we wrap the remains in newspaper, pretend we can afford to throw away parts of ourselves.

She tells me stories while we work. How her own mother once killed a snake in their kitchen with a broom handle, how she grabbed its thrashing body and flung it into the river where it writhed away like a question mark dissolving. How that same night, they ate fish soup with bitter greens, and no one spoke of omens.

The knife slips. A bright bead of blood rises from my thumb like a strange flower. Mother doesn't coddle. Just wraps it in a paper towel, says keep going. Your hands need to learn their own edges. Need to know the difference between what cuts and what saves.

Years later, when she's gone, I'll remember this: how she taught me that love is what you do with your hands. How precision is its own kind of tenderness. How every act of feeding yourself is both violence and mercy. The fish on my cutting board still gleams like buried treasure, its spine a ladder of light when I lift it to the window. I've learned to be gentle with the blade, to find the places where flesh parts willingly from bone.

Some nights I dream of that snake, swimming endless circles in the river of my childhood. In the dream, it wears my mother's face, then mine. Its scales are made of copper pennies, each one inscribed with a wish I never spoke aloud. When I wake, my hands remember their first lessons: how to hold, how to cut, how to clean what must be cleaned.

Mother said the heart is just another muscle. Said this while showing me how to find it, that dark star nestled beneath the ribs. Said everything that lives wants to be useful, even in dying. Even now, I hear her voice in the whisper of knife against scale. Even now, my hands move like hers through the ancient geometry of need.

They don't tell you how inheritance works—how it comes not in genes or heirlooms but in the angle of your wrist as you gut a fish, in the way you fold newspaper to catch the blood, in how you learn to look death in its pearl-black eye and recognize it as sustenance. They don't tell you how your mother's hands become your hands, how her stories become your bones.

Last week, I taught my own daughter the same lessons. Watched her small fingers learn the landscape of loss and nourishment. Watched her face in profile against the kitchen window, so like my mother's it made my chest ache. The fish on the cutting board gleamed like a secret between generations. Its eye watched us both, holding all the light of afternoon in its dark mirror.

This is how you hold the knife, I told her. This is how you find the soft place. This is how you survive.

# Ghost Forest

BY GARTH UPSHAW

My youngest brother goes to the Olallie Lake camp store  
At noon  
To buy another six-pack of White Claw.  
Yesterday's Bulleit is long gone.  
His knees are shot, and he eases himself onto the bench like an old man.  
I rode too damn many miles in tanks, he says, then  
Flicks a lighter and puffs on a Monte Cristo until the end glows orange.  
The lake reflects a con-trail parting a flat blue sky, and  
Ghost trees sweep over  
The tangled hills like a silent army,  
Seared black, thrusting up  
As if to say  
We all burn  
Someday.

GREEN WOOD



NUALA MCEVOY

# Only You

BY ISADORA RICHTER

I HEAR YOU before I see you.

Soft scratches at first, then frantic ones as you realize the strength of the ancient traps my landlord has scattered like candy. By the time I round the corner you're a blur of tiny pink and gold streaks beneath the lone flickering light bulb.

But it does you no good.

Jim, my landlord, has nailed the trap to the floor.

You freeze as I reach my apartment, one little paw poised in the air as if you're about to ask a question.

It's your hind leg that's caught, at the joint right before your foot splays into toes. Caught, but not broken.

I crouch down and you flinch.

Your fur isn't just gold, I realize. There are patches of white by your ears, nose, front paws. And your eyes are different colors—angry red and abyssal black.

They seem to stare at me, questioning.

I know what I should do, what I have done a dozen times before. Let, as Jim says, the punishment fit the crime.

But.

You don't try to bite me when I grab the metal bar pinning your leg. You don't cower.

Instead, you watch, whiskers twitching.

Even after I've moved the bar, you continue to stare, eyes somehow wide in spite of your lack of visible pupils.

"It's okay," I say. "I'm not going to hurt you."

And then you're off, limping down the hallway, a half-rotten piece of cheese clutched between your teeth.

I wonder if it bothers you that you almost died for something others would throw away.

I FIND A sunflower seed outside my door.

It's perfectly centered on my thrift store doormat, nestled between the open arms of the "C" in a perpetual almost hug.

I know you put it there. I don't know how I know, or why, but I do. I feel it in the pit of my stomach.

Yet I'm still surprised when I spot a glint of red in the ever-present shadows.

I wave, an awkward tremor in my chest.

THE NEXT DAY there are two seeds. The day after that, three. On day ten I leave a mug before I head out.

When I get back more than twelve hours later, sporting a shiner and two busted ribs, I find a single purple flower. I don't know what kind it is—my only specialties are running picks and shuffling jacked tech—but it's beautiful.

Delicate and bold at the same time.

I sit down to take a closer look. Okay, maybe I fall more than I sit. It's been one of those days.

At some point I wake up on my side, mug inches from my face. You stand beside it, head tilted, front paws wrapped around what looks like a piece of battered napkin.

"Hey," I say. Frown. "Sorry I haven't gotten to thank you properly for all your gifts. But I haven't forgotten. It's just, you know, I've never been very good with that kind of stuff and things have been kinda rough recently. Recently, as in the last thirty-eight years."

I frown again, deeper, and wince.

"But I'm sure it's nothing compared to the shit you have to put up with. How's your leg?"

You don't answer. How could you? What am I even doing?

"Sorry, I think I'm really drunk. Or have a concussion. Or prossa. Prissa. Possibly both."

There's a gentle, almost intangible pressure on my cheek and I open my eyes.

You're holding out the napkin, gesturing toward my hand as though you want me to take it. When I have trouble extricating my arms from beneath my head, you walk over and place it in my limp palm.

Finally, amidst a sea of groans, I manage to prop myself up against the door and unwrap your tiny package. It's a pill, half blue, half white, with faded numbers I can't read.

"What is it?" I say. Shake my head. Maybe Kay was right, that I should have gone to the hospital instead of the bar.

But how the hell would I pay for that? Thieves' guilds don't exactly have insurance plans.

Not that there are thieves' guilds. Or that any of them would ever let me in. Even fictional crooks have standards.

You press your paw against my finger, and I can't believe how warm

it is, how much of yourself you're pouring into those tiny pads.

"Thank you," I say.

But it's not enough. It doesn't expel this horrible, pounding ache in my chest.

You push harder, curling my pinky around your perfect paw.

I nod, drop the pill into my mouth, nod again.

"Thank you."

I WAKE UP in my bed. Everything is hazy, muddled, like I'm wrapped in a thin layer of gauze.

I stagger to the bathroom, entire body throbbing.

Blink. Realize it's so hard to see because the lights are off.

Fumble for the switch. Miss. Hit it on the third try.

And find a gaunt, unshaven bruise of a face glaring at me from the other side of the mirror.

I lurch to the toilet bowl.

Vomit. Again and again until all that comes out are flecks of red.

When I emerge, I notice three mugs lined up on the kitchen counter. Each contains one of those purple flowers and half an inch of water.

Beside them sits a parcel the size of my fist. I open it, taking care not to damage the tattered red cloth.

A stained smiley face sticker stares up at me from a frame of browned apple pieces and blue-white pills.

I smile. Laugh even though it hurts.

"Thank you," I say.

I'm sure I hear rustling as I toss a pill into my mouth.

I GO ON a business trip. At least that's what I call it.

Really, I have to go straighten out the shit with the mark from last week. Turns out he isn't satisfied with breaking my face and taking

the last twenty in my wallet.

When I get back, three days later, you're sitting in front of my door, a paper bag twice as big as you are at your feet.

Your expression is the same as always, your face slightly upturned as you try to bridge the gap in our heights. But your eyes seem different. Darker, more intense.

I swallow.

"I'm sorry," I say. "The station was backed up because it was a holiday weekend."

Your tail twitches. Two soft, disapproving thumps.

"I didn't mean to make you worry."

You still don't answer.

I get down on my knees, bring my face as close to your eye level as I can. "I'm really, really sorry. I'll do better next time, okay? I'll get you a phone."

A strange chill runs through me as I suggest it, as though I am letting go of something. Or maybe it's not a release, exactly, but the trading of one grip for another.

The sensation disappears the moment you shove the bag toward me.

"Are you sure?" I say. "You've already given me so much and all I've done is make you upset."

You push the bag until it bumps my nose.

I laugh.

"All right, all right, I get it. Thank you."

You step away, head cocked. After a few moments I understand why.

"Right, of course."

I peer into the bag. There's a half-eaten bag of potato chips, a melted chocolate bar, and three clear bags of pills—one of the familiar blue-white, one of cream-colored rounds with a line down

the center, and one of long black ovals with no identifying marks whatsoever.

A fresh uneasiness settles in my stomach. How are you getting these? Is it from a person? A lab? Do you even know what they are?

Rustling draws my attention upward.

You gesture toward a second, smaller bag I hadn't noticed.

This one holds two miniature bottles of tequila, the kind that you might find in high end hotel rooms.

I imagine you straining, heaving with all your might to carry them. Stumbling. Falling. Forcing yourself to your feet over and over just so you could bring them to me.

I frown. Swallow the acid creeping up my throat.

"You. Um." You touch my thumb, gentle, but insistent, like you already know what I'm going to say. "You want to come inside?"

I'M ON MY back, bladder aching.

"Please," I say. "I just need to pee. Then I'll come right back, I promise."

I wait, expecting your usual prod of dissent.

But you're not on my chest. Or my arms or legs. Or the tender concavity of my belly.

I sit up.

You're not on the dresser either. Not hiding behind the blinds, eyes glistening as I succumb to your unspoken commands.

Slowly, silently, I push myself to the edge of the bed. Plant my feet on the cold wooden floor.

I don't see you on the kitchen counters or the worn sofa. But I remain still. I've made that mistake before.

Seconds pass without crinkling. Without scratching or tapping.

I ease myself upright. Take a step.

The world spins and heaves.

But I keep moving, gaze fixed on the door.

I don't know how long it's been since I've left my apartment. I can't remember the last time I showered. And clear, unmuddied thought seems like a fantasy, something sold by men with perfect teeth in five-minute ads posing as educational videos.

I'm not even sure I miss it.

Yet something compels me forward. Maybe it's the way you look at me, like you're so sure I belong there, panting and desperate beneath you. Like, without you, there is no me.

The floor groans and I freeze, heart pounding so hard my vision blurs.

But it's okay, I chant to myself, it's okay. I'm close enough to the bathroom that you'll believe me if I say that's where I was headed, especially if I apologize. You love it when I apologize.

I stand, submission ready on my lips. But you don't appear.

I sag, tense, sag, tense—torn between relief and alarm. How long has it been since I was alone?

I reach the front door and discover you've installed a new lock, one that requires a key even from the inside.

But it's okay. It's going to be. Okay.

I bend over, slip my trembling fingers into the inner pocket of the jacket crumpled on the floor. Almost jump when I find the paperclips just as I'd left them.

The lock is cheap and easy to pick, so easy that I think I'm imagining it when I hear the telltale click.

But I know I'm not imagining the scream that follows moments later.

A deafening, primal scream. Coming from you, standing by the dislodged radiator, a white box in your paws.

I grab the doorknob, brace for the rush I know is coming.

Only, it doesn't.

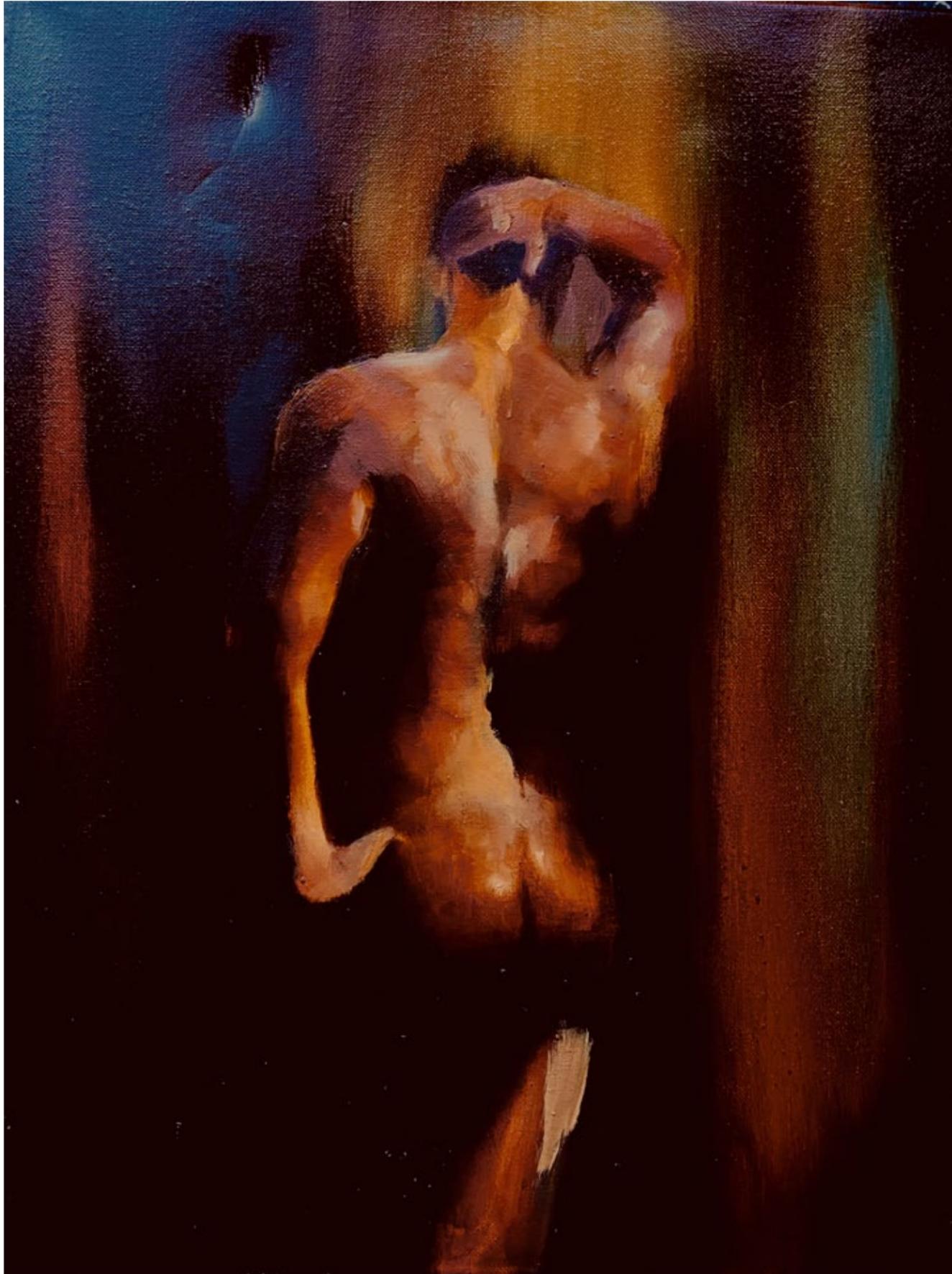
Your body begins to shake, and you make the smallest, most pathetic squeak I've ever heard.

The box drops to the floor. You open it, still shuddering, and shove it toward me.

It's a ring. Silver, with two intertwined vines engraved on its surface. And a matching stud, so small it could have come from the head of a nail.

I drop to my knees, afraid, now, not of what you might do, but what I haven't. Because you're right, I realize. You always have been.

Without you, there is no me.



STASIA VALORA FISHER

## Dirty Martinis in Beijing

BY GLEN LOVELAND

HOTEL BARS IN foreign cities are temples of translation. They turn loneliness into *ambiance*, jet lag into *mystique*, and the ache of displacement into something you can order in perfect English. The W Beijing’s bar was mine—a dimly lit aquarium where expats floated in silk blouses and tailored suits, sipping illusions of control.

Liang worked behind the bar like he was conducting a symphony, his hands precise yet fluid. The first time I saw him, he was carving a spiral of lemon peel over a gin fizz, the blade flicking just shy of his thumb—a dare, I thought, to anyone watching. His forearms flexed under rolled sleeves as he shook my martini, the ice clattering like bones in a cup. When he slid it toward me, three olives speared on a pick, he didn’t smile. He *let me look*.

“*Hěn zāng*,” he said, nodding at the drink. *Very dirty*. His voice was low, the Mandarin tones rough as unpolished jade.

I took a sip, brine sharp on my tongue. “Dirtier.”

His eyebrow arched. “Careful. In Beijing, words have...*layers*.”

WE SPOKE IN fragments—my fractured Mandarin, his deliberate English. He’d lean close to hear me over the lounge’s thrum, his crisp white shirt smelling of juniper and something smokier, like tea leaves left to burn.

“You taste like loneliness,” he said one night, refilling my glass without asking. “The expensive kind.”

I laughed, but his finger brushed the inside of my wrist, tracing the pulse point. “Loneliness isn’t a flavor.”

“Isn’t it?” He dipped a spoon into olive brine, held it to my lips. “Salt. Metal. *Hunger*.”

The syrup dripped down my chin. He caught it with his thumb.

HIS SHIFTS ENDED at midnight. Mine began.

We met in the service elevator, its mirrors smudged with fingerprints and bad decisions. He’d back me into the corner, his knee parting mine, while the floors blinked downward—28, 27, 26—each number a countdown to the basement where he’d unlock the liquor cage with a code I pretended not to memorize.

“Say it in Mandarin,” he’d growl, hands mapping the geography under my skirt.

“*Wǒ yào*—” I’d pant, fumbling the tones. *I want*.

“Wrong.” His teeth grazed my earlobe. “*Wǒ yào* is for tourists. Try again.”

The city outside had rules—crosswalks timed to the second, censorship bots patrolling WeChat. But in that windowless room, between crates of overpriced champagne, Liang taught me a dialect of want that needed no translation.

HE LEFT BRUISES in unlikely places: the hinge of my jaw, the arch of my foot, the soft dip between collarbones he called *the well*. “For wishes,” he said, pressing his mouth there as I braced against a keg of Tsingtao.

I learned to read him by his shoes—polished oxfords that never squeaked on the tile, their laces always taut. One night, I untied them slowly while he watched, his breath hitching as I peeled the leather

down his ankles. “*Màn yīdiǎn*,” he warned. *Slower*. But his hands fisted in my hair, contradicting.

WHEN IT ENDED, he gifted me a jar of olives from the bar’s private stash. “For your next martini,” he said. The brine sloshed as I packed it between silk blouses and regret.

Now, back in Phoenix, I still crave that particular shade of dirty. No American bartender gets it right—they measure vermouth in teaspoons, timid as missionaries. But sometimes, when the moon bleeds through the smog, I’ll unscrew that jar, let the salt sting my fingers, and pretend the ache in my wrists is from his grip, not carpal tunnel.

Liang messages occasionally. A photo of a new cocktail. A voice note rasping, “*Niǎoshòu sī liè*.” *The bird misses its cage*.

# Floating Mouse

BY JOE DAHUT

I spilled every secret I had  
you wore librarian glasses            I never saw you reading  
any of the books I lent you            and like any good idiot I told myself  
you were alone when I wasn't around because I bucked  
on a blue horse in the pale hours of my life  
when I am alone I walk into the bookstore and ask the bookseller  
if he sells more self help books in December or January  
instead of asking for help myself            I raise my glass to fate    I raise my face  
to the sun and ignore the woman crying            inside of me

I told you nothing            was off the table and I became the table            I told you  
I was the nauseous garter snake gagging and rolling over            my breath was bad  
as anchovies            and the salt I licked all night            was a floating mouse  
dead as stars            in the midnight puddle            of an improvisational flood plain  
and the woman about to die in the other room is wearing my clothes            you buck  
on the blue horse in the pale hours of your life            I too sipped from the chalice  
of Egyptian flutes when I was the horse            of course            the twisting trunk  
and the dark perfume of sex in the evening            you peeled a mango and thought of our collective  
undressing in this lavish house            this lapping tongue that reduces truth

to a mound of dirt            my hands outstretched            your palms are my sky  
one day I can be a number            one day I can be the star            that scuttled around the shadows  
like the mouse            concentric in its death spirals            one day I can be the drunk  
headstone            moved            by a bucking horse



ABUBAKAR AUWAL

# Le Chat Noir

BY EMILY GENNIS

IT WAS THE kind of night that creeps up on soft, silent paws, and has its claws in you before you even know it's there.

I was in my usual spot on the windowsill, watching a squirrel bury its loot and muttering all the things I'd do to it if I ever got the chance. Salty and Pepper had been yapping at each other all evening, no doubt planning another one of their get-treats-quick schemes. Falcor had his bell up against the wall of his cage and was trying to pick a fight with it, but didn't quite have the vocabulary. ("Pretty boy want some peanut butter? Peanut butter?!") Beside the cage, Gil and Bloop-Bloop circled each other around their bowl like an underwater Mexican standoff.

All things considered, it was a quiet night. You might even say, too quiet.

The door creaked open and I sat up, hoping it was the Broad coming to make food appear or do petting. At the very least, she might sit down so there would be a lap to curl up on. But no dice.

Instead, in walked a dame more gorgeous than an unattended ham sandwich. I'd caught a glimpse of her when she first arrived a week before, but we hadn't been properly introduced.

I watched as she sauntered into the room, looking around with those big, green eyes of hers. She sat down on the rug, paused to lick her anus, then hopped up onto the back of the sofa, leaving a trail of dusty paw prints on the upholstery.

“You’d better watch it,” I said, pointing my nose at the prints. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were looking for trouble.”

She had the kind of sad, tired eyes that come from too many bad days and too few square meals. “I don’t have to look,” she purred. “Trouble’s got me on a short leash. Wherever I go, it’s never far behind.” She cleaned the dust off her paws, licking one black toe at a time. “Besides, this place is already a dump. Don’t get me wrong. Anything beats the shelter.”

I wouldn’t have pegged her as having done time in the slammer. Then again, she looked like a dame with more than her fair share of secrets. “How long were you locked up?”

“Long enough to know I’d do anything to never go back.”

I drank in her long limbs and jet-black coat. In a funny way, it reminded me of my mother, who was all black except for a single white stripe stretching from one ear to the other. I’ve got the same stripe, which is the only part of me that isn’t as gray as a storm cloud. And, as it happens, it’s how I got my name.

“What do they call you, anyway?” she asked.

“Dash. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss...”

“Kitty. Charmed, I’m sure.”

I put one of the chicken flavored chew sticks I’d been sitting on for safe keeping into my mouth and offered her one. She gnawed at it like it was the last chew she was ever going to have.

“It’s pretty nice digs, once you get used to the place,” I told her. “The food dishes are always full and there’s plenty of furniture to scratch on. The gang can get a little rowdy, but so long as you stay out of their way, they’ll usually stay out of yours. And as far as humans go, the Broad’s not bad. The Fella’s better at cheek scratches, but I haven’t seen him around here lately.”

“I don’t much care for humans,” said Kitty. “Never saw the point of them.”

“They’re an acquired taste,” I conceded. “So, what brings you to this end of the house?”

“Actually, Dash, I’ve got a confession to make. I’ve come because I need your help. I’ve lost something very precious.” She fixed her eyes on me, and I couldn’t have looked away if I tried. “Sock.”

“Sock?”

“Sock. I acquired it shortly after arriving here and it hasn’t left my side since. You see Dash, I’ve had rather a rough time of it lately. Sock has been an immense comfort to me. I sleep with it every day.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “And sometimes, I bite it and kick it at the same time. It’s absolutely irreplaceable. But when I woke from my third nap this morning, it was gone! Disappeared without a trace.”

“That’s hard luck, kid. But what do you expect me to do about it?”

She rested her chin on her front paws, guileless as a kitten. “I’ve heard that when it comes to finding things, Dash, you’re an ace.”

“Is that so?” I was playing it cool, wondering which one of the gang had tipped her off. Falcor was the chattiest of the bunch, but if the topic of conversation was something other than peanut butter, he wasn’t interested. Salty and Pepper were similarly single minded. They never did anything unless it had a treats angle. I hadn’t had many dealings with Gil or Bloop-Bloop, since they tended to keep to themselves. Gil seemed like a swim-up guy, but Bloop-Bloop always had a look in his eye like he was up to something.

“I guess my reputation precedes me. But I’ve got bad news for you, sweetheart. I’m retired.”

“So, you won’t help me?” She was licking the crumbs off her face, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her pink, hairy tongue. I may be fixed, but I always was a sucker for a pretty face.

“Can’t is more like it. I haven’t been on a case in a long time. If I ever had a whisker of talent, it’s gone now. Believe me. You’re better off on your own.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“Well, you heard wrong!” I hissed. “I’m done with that life, I tell you! Done!”

She backed away, crouching low.

I felt dirtier than a litter box that hadn’t been scooped in a month. Still, I had to make her see that I was no good. I’d found that out the hard way the last time I’d been on a job, many, many moons ago...

“YOU’LL FIND IT for me, won’t you Mr. Dash?”

The kid was only a few months old. All ears and fuzz, with paws that never stopped kneading. He’d play for hours, chasing down toys the Fella threw for him until, inevitably, one would get lost.

That’s where I came in.

“You betcha, Cupcake.” I licked the top of his head and noticed a small, hard lump behind his ear. Nothing a good licking wouldn’t cure, I thought. “I’ll track down Bouncy Ball before you can say tuna.”

“It’s real tricky though,” he explained. “Sometimes it’ll be going one way, then it’ll hit a wall and go off in a whole nother direction!”

“Leave it to me, kiddo. I’ve been doing this a long time, and I’ve never lost a toy.”

I looked high and low in all the usual spots. Under the sofa. Behind the radiator. Inside every single bag or box the humans brought home. But there was no sign of Bouncy Ball.

A few weeks later, Cupcake wouldn’t get out of his bed. He refused to eat and not even his favorite kind of tuna could tempt him. The lump behind his ear had grown and more were popping up on his back and belly. I licked him until my tongue was sore, but it didn’t do any good.

It was hard on all of us. Gil spent days just swimming in circles. Bloop-Bloop knocked over his castle in a fit of rage. Salty and Pepper promised Cupcake a cut of the treats they were planning to score if he’d only get out of bed. Falcor tried to comfort him by screeching “I

love you, Falcor! Mmmwah!” every couple of minutes.

I watched the Broad and the Fella put Cupcake into a carrier and take him away. Poor kid didn’t even put up a fight. When they got back, I didn’t have to look in the carrier to know it was empty.

“SO, THAT’S IT?” Kitty stared at me with her big, green eyes. “You failed once, and you just gave up?”

“That’s about the long and short of it.”

She shot me a look that could have made a sparrow apologize for chirping too loud. “Very well. I’ll find Sock on my own,” she said, heading for the hallway. “But if you happen to change your mind, I’ll be on the kitchen counter.”

It was just my luck. Of all the surfaces in all the rooms in the whole house, she had to walk on the kitchen counter. The place was bad news all around and I avoided it like the vet. Kitty could get cut, burned, or worst of all, wet. I followed her and tried to explain all this, but she didn’t stop until the two of us were standing on the cold tile floor.

“What makes you think Sock is here?” I asked, keeping a keen eye out for danger.

“I’ve just got a hunch. Now either help me or stay out of my way.” The tip of her tail flicked back and forth as she scanned the room.

I had half a mind to go back to my windowsill, forget all about Kitty, and nurse my lovesick heart with a good strong bag of catnip. And I was about to do just that when she said, “There it is! I see Sock!”

She pointed her nose at a cabinet next to the fridge.

“Must have been a hell of a hunch,” I said. In all my years tracking down toys, I’d never found one as quickly as Kitty just had. The whole thing seemed fishier than a can of mackerel. But I’d been out of the game a long time and didn’t trust my instincts. Hell, maybe she really was that good.

Before I could stop her, Kitty leapt onto the counter. (I had to hand it to the gal. She had a hell of a pair of gambles.) She managed to nudge open the glass door of the cabinet and stretch her front leg inside. I heard her grunting before she called down to me. "I can't reach it, Dash. Can you try?"

I glanced behind me to make sure the coast was clear. The last thing I needed was the Broad coming in and mucking up the whole operation. I did some quick calculations, gauging the amount of umph I'd need to launch myself up. Wiggling my rump, I made a few minute adjustments. Then a few more. Then a slight breeze came through the window, and I had to start all over. Once I'd accounted for wind resistance, I made one more wiggle for good luck and jumped.

It wasn't nearly as effortless as Kitty had made it look, and I wondered whether I should lay off the tuna. "Alright," I said, catching my breath. "Let's see this Sock of yours."

"It's in there," she said, indicating the cabinet above us.

I stood up on my hind legs and peered inside. There was a stack of plates, Salty and Pepper's treats jar, and the mug the Fella used to drink his tea out of every morning, which was coated in a thin layer of dust. But no Sock. "I don't see it," I told her.

"It's there. Towards the back," said Kitty. "Listen, Dash, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help."

I leaned in farther, bracing myself against the jar. Now I could see all the way to the back of the cabinet. I still didn't see Sock, but I did spot a single, dainty paw print in the dust.

That's when I knew I'd been had.

"Especially considering we've only just met. You're a class act, Dash. A real class act. Which is why I am so sorry about this."

I felt a paw thump me hard in the gut, knocking me off my feet. I flailed, grabbing for something to hold onto, which happened to be the treats jar. But I might as well have sunk my claws into thin air for

all the good it did. In the split second before I hit the floor, I managed to swing the jar underneath me to break my fall. There was a crash and then everything went black.

WHEN I CAME to, Kitty was licking my face.

"I really am sorry, Dash," she purred. "But I had no choice."

"You... tricked me." The room was spinning and my head felt like a dented can of chunky chicken entrée.

"I had to get those treats down. But if the human caught me, I'd be back in the shelter for good. And like I told you, I'll do anything not to go back there."

"I saw your prints from when you cased the joint. You planned this whole thing out, didn't you? You played me for a fool, Kitty. A patsy. A fall guy. And for what? A few treats?"

"But they made me do it! Oh, Dash, you simply must believe me! They said they'd rip Sock to shreds if I didn't! I was ever so frightened." She was putting on the pussycat-in-peril act again. But this time, I wasn't buying it.

"Who?" I demanded, still waiting for the room to stop spinning. But then I heard barking and, suddenly, it all made sense.

Salty and Pepper were circling the shards of the broken treats jar, which, as was now painfully clear, had been empty.

"Empty?! How can it be empty?"

"Where are the treats, Salty? Where are the treats?"

"Dammit, Pepper! I don't know where the treats are!"

"Make there be treats!"

"Just keep barking! Maybe that will make the treats come."

They continued barking and growling at the broken jar. The commotion riled up Falcor, who began screeching, "Pretty boy want some peanut butter? Peanut butter! Peanut butter! I love you, peanut butter!"

Finally, Salty and Pepper lay down with their back legs splayed out on the tiles, panting hard.

“Well?” said Kitty.

“Well what?” growled Pepper.

“I kept up my end of the bargain. It wasn’t my fault the jar was empty. Now hand over Sock.”

“Ha!” barked Salty. “We don’t have your stupid Sock. We never did! We heard you crying about it and figured we’d use the situation to our advantage.”

“We outsmarted her, didn’t we, Salty?”

“Sure did, Pepper. Outsmarted her good.”

“But...” I watched Kitty’s bright green eyes fill with despair. “If you don’t have Sock, then who does?”

I thought of all the precious things that had been taken from me over the years. Wire twist ties. Rubber bands. Pieces of lint. Treasures snatched right out of my mouth and thrown away like so much garbage. “It’s gone, Kitty,” I said gently. “I’m sorry. It’s time to give up.”

“No,” she mewed. “It can’t be. Not my Sock...”

Just then, I heard footsteps coming down the hall.

“She’s coming, Salty!” whined Pepper. “Oh, no. We’re in for it now!”

“Keep your tail on, Pepper,” growled Salty. “And follow my lead.”

A moment later, the Broad set down the laundry basket she’d been carrying and looked at Salty and Pepper, who were innocently licking their crotches. But as soon as she spotted the broken jar, they cut the act. Pepper whimpered, while Salty began barking so excitedly, I thought he might pee on the floor.

“We didn’t do nothin’! It was them two, ya see! Me and Pepper was minding our own business just like always, guarding the door in case any spooks showed up, when all of a sudden we hears a crash and I says to Pepper, I says to him, Pepper, we better go see what the story is and—”

The Broad scooped up Salty and pet him until he calmed down. Then she opened the back door and let him and Pepper out into the yard.

“She fell for it, Pepper!” Salty barked as he trotted outside. “Now come on. Let’s go dig holes and discuss Plan B.”

Kitty and I watched as the Broad swept up the shards of the broken treats jar, making an ‘Oof’ sound each time she bent over. When she finished, she brushed a few strands of white hair out of her face and dropped into a chair. Once she had caught her breath, she began slowly folding the clothes from the basket into a neat pile on the kitchen table.

Since there was a lap on offer, I decided it was a swell time for a nap. “I’m beat,” I said to Kitty. “What say you and I grab a little shuteye?”

But Kitty was too busy searching for Sock. Poor kid, I thought. She just didn’t know when to call it quits.

When I turned back to the Broad, she was holding up a thick, soft sweater with heavy buttons down the front. I recognized it as the one the Fella wore almost every day. I could still smell his scent on it, which reminded me of long afternoons spent on his lap, purring as he scratched my cheek just right.

As she stared at the sweater, fat drops fell from the Broad’s eyes and trailed down her wrinkled cheeks. She pressed it to her face and made a noise like a yowl, but quieter. Her body began shaking like a leaf in a storm, making the loose, heavy buttons wiggle.

I didn’t know what was wrong with her. But there was no time to think about that, because I had something much more urgent on my mind.

There are two things I could never resist. One is a dame with the wrong kind of luck. The other is buttons.

I LAUNCHED MYSELF at the sweater and clamped my jaws down on a button, pulling it until it came free with a satisfying snap. Before the

Broad could steal my prize, I raced across the table, hurtled straight into the pile of laundry and dove onto the floor.

“Sock!”

I landed hard, but I didn’t care about the pain. All that mattered was my precious button.

“Sock! You found Sock!”

Slowly, Kitty’s voice cut through my delirium. I looked up to see her pulling a frayed, gray sock from the tangle of laundry I’d knocked over.

“You did it! Thank you, Dash. Thank you ever so much!”

Suddenly, another sound caught my attention. The Broad was making a loud ‘Ha-ha’ noise, which I hadn’t heard her make in a very long time. She looked at me with my button, then at Kitty with her Sock, then at the laundry strewn all over the floor and, finally, at the broken treats jar still sitting in the dustpan, and began making the noise even louder.

I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. But I’d learned a long time ago that trying to figure out a human was like chasing the light that raced along the floor on a windy day.

When she’d finished, she wiped her face, knelt down and plucked the button out of my mouth. I gave her a few choice hisses, but I didn’t stay hot under the collar for long. She and I both knew it wouldn’t be the last time I got my paws on a button.

“Dash, help!” Kitty was lying on her belly, peering underneath the fridge. “I can’t reach it! Can you try?”

“You’ll have to do better than that, sweetheart,” I said, keeping my distance. “I won’t fall for the same trick twice.”

“Please! I was playing with Sock and it just went under! Oh, Dash, I can’t lose it all over again. I just can’t.”

Against my better judgement, I lay down next to her and reached my front paw in as far as it would go. I felt my leg bump against something small and soft, which rolled across the floor as I passed

Kitty the mothball-covered Sock.

“You’re my hero, Dash. Twice over,” she said, touching her nose to mine.

I knew then that I’d go to the ends of the earth for this dame. As long as it wasn’t wet there.

Bouncy Ball had come to rest in the middle of the floor. It was covered in dust, but I could still make out the tiny teeth marks Cupcake had left. After all the hours I’d spent searching for it, it had been in the one place I was too scared to look.

With an ‘Oof,’ the Broad picked it up and brushed it off. As she opened the back door to toss it outside, I could hear Salty and Pepper up to their usual scheming.

“But won’t she catch us, Salty?”

“She’ll have to get past the trap first.”

“But what if she does?”

“Well, that’s what the diversion is for.”

“But even if we get the treats, she’ll know it was us that done it.”

“That’s when the double bluff comes into play! Come on, Pepper. We’ve gone over it ten times. Ain’t you been paying attention?”

“Look! A ball!”

As Kitty happily chewed on Sock, the Broad began pulling a collection of items out of the cupboards and setting them on the counter. There was a can of tuna, a packet of dried shrimp, a few slices of ham and a jar of peanut butter. When she noticed me watching her, she bent down and scratched my cheek with her cool, stiff fingers. Her eyes were still red and shining.

I rubbed my face into her palm and purred. She wasn’t as good at cheek scratches as the Fella, but she wasn’t half bad either.

“What is all that,” asked Kitty, looking up at the food on the counter.

“Sweetheart,” I purred. “That’s the stuff that treats are made of.”



LEYELLE MESA-GRAHAM

# Reversal

BY CLAIRE SCOTT

Ghouls and ghosts under my bed  
fiends with hairy teeth, phantoms  
with spiked nails

Waiting to grab my feet if I dare  
go down the dark hall to pee  
pulling me, ripping arms and legs

My cries unheard by my mother  
who makes me wash wet  
sheets before going to school

Now at eighty-one  
no longer scared of specters and spooks  
more afraid of the light

That creeps across the room at six  
light that tells me it's time  
to endure another dilated day

Where the clock gets stuck at three  
a thousand miles of Sahara  
to cross before supper

# Dollhouse

BY SARAH OECHSLE

BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMEN don't tend to think about widowhood unless they're fantasizing about other men. I guess that's why I hadn't anticipated it. The steering column went clean through you and left me alone in a life carved out for two. After the funeral, I kept wondering what your death made me. What's a trophy wife without a husband? Like the setup to a bad joke.

I was drunker than usual, wandering that huge house you bought for us like I was already a ghost. With no container to take the form of, I'd begun to spill from my own edges. What else did I have to do, with no job to lose? Your money—my money, now—could keep me floating for years. *What's a trophy wife without a husband*, I wondered again, lying on my back. The attic was hot without AC, and I was too listless to feel drawn in by any of the boxes around me, labeled in Sharpie on the side. CAMPING STUFF. CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS. I lay there for a while, flathead screwdriver weighty in my hand. I pictured plunging it into my own heart. My blood running through the floorboards. Turning to water stains on the ceiling. BABY CLOTHES. HALLOWEEN STUFF. It was so hot up there, they'd never be able to get the smell out.

DOLLS. I sat up. Four boxes of them, returned to their rightful owner after my parents' latest move. I still remembered every single one of them by name: captive actresses for childish melodramas. You'd

been the one to insist I keep them, saying they would be precious to me, someday.

I spent the next day arranging them all over the house. They sat with me while I watched the TV. Stared at me from the end of the bed at night. Barbie on the counter while I microwaved popcorn for lunch. Raggedy Anne on the desk whenever I stared like a stroke victim at my empty computer screen.

After that, I started having sex again. My Tinder profile was straightforward. Widow. Casual only. The notion of being coveted by someone new after a decade of marriage offered more entertainment than the few television shows that didn't remind me of you. That's all sex ever was, anyway. A game you're really playing by yourself.

I liked the disappointment on men's faces when they came over and saw the dolls. The dolls—among other things—seemed to remind them they were fucking a dead man's wife. It drove home a truth I'd always known about sex: that it's a bad thing to do to somebody. Most of them still slept with me, though. I was glad they had to do it with the dolls watching.

Aaron was different. He'd been a friend of yours, after all. He came to the funeral and offered to help with anything I needed. Anything. Really, anything, alright? I got the picture, and when I finally grew tired of playing with men from Tinder, I texted him and asked if he could bring over some takeout Chinese.

There was that beat of shock when he saw the dolls. I challenged him with a deadpan face. He shrugged and said, "I guess you've lost your fucking mind."

We had ten minutes of sex on the couch—never the bed, no, never—then watched *The Office* because you never liked it. Aaron was funny and sort of mean. He liked sweet and sour chicken. It felt like eating takeout with myself. He had an on-and-off girlfriend, so I knew he wouldn't worry too much about me.

But something was still missing, don't you think? The empty space in the house had an inhuman shape, and though Aaron's visits gave me something to count the days by, and the dolls made good company, they were all toys. Not somebody you can have an adult conversation with. And I kept waking from dreams where I was melting, running through the floorboards.

I came across Realdolls on the internet. Build-a-Girl. Eleven faces, fourteen bodies, and two different types of pussy. The face options all had slutty names like Renee and Jenny and Sarah. All pornographically vacant-eyed. I went with Body E because the huge breasts felt like a joke. That's what this was, right? An inside joke. The rest was easy. Pale non-skin. Reddish non-hair. For \$99 dollars extra you could get custom nipples, and for \$500 you could get a Bluetooth vagina.

That night, Aaron brought over sweet and sour chicken and ate me out on the rug. I faked an orgasm so I could unmute the TV. We sat on the couch between two American Girl Dolls—Felicity and Jess—and a porcelain blonde I'd inherited when my great aunt died.

"I just ordered a sex doll," I told Aaron between bites.

He laughed. A startled, barking sound. "For sex?"

"No, for company."

He gestured at all the dolls around the room. Of course, he didn't understand, no matter how much alike we were. I wanted something more substantial than the other dolls. Something to share in the arduous work of remembering I was human. Or at least shaped like one. After Aaron left, I went upstairs to bed and sobbed in the blue darkness until I was screaming.

The doll came in ten business days. Cost me \$9,100 plus tax and shipping. I named her Gabby. Once I'd assembled her, I wrapped her in my cotton robe and sat down across the kitchen table from her. Shiny, orange doll hair. Pinprick freckles all over her nose. Just like Raggedy Anne. The sight of her filled me with phenomenal repulsion.

It was the eyes, I think. I supposed men who liked to fuck sex dolls must enjoy the look. To me, she was just what I'd wanted.

But Gabby still took some getting used to. I would turn and there would be *someone* sitting there and I would scream having forgotten I was no longer alone. When I went to bed, I would leave her downstairs on the couch, then lie awake in the dark and imagine her standing up and making her way up the stairs. Peering at me through the crack in the bedroom door. So I brought her to bed with me. I laid her on the opposite pillow and would fall asleep staring at her like it could keep her from turning real.

If Gabby *had* been real, I think she would have wanted to die. They say if Barbie was a real girl, she would have to drag herself along on the floor by her arms. This must have been true of Gabby, too. She was pure invention. Like those chickens who get so genetically modified that they can barely move. All meat, no animal. It wasn't Gabby's fault. I felt sorry for her. I dressed her up in my clothes so she didn't have to go naked. I put the TV on for her when I went to the grocery store.

A week later, Aaron came over and found Gabby sitting on the couch. The TV was on so loud we had to shout at each other. He laughed when he saw her. He started touching her.

"Stop that," I said.

"Look at her." He grabbed a breast and squeezed it. "Want to let me fuck this thing? I've always wondered..."

"Leave her alone, freak," I said. I'd added 'freak' to soften it. To make it an ordinary thing to say.

Aaron informed me that he and his girlfriend were really done this time. I told him I didn't care. I was drunk already. So was he. I'd propped Gabby up on the bed so she was there when we came crashing into the room. I didn't want her to feel too left out.

As usual, I was irritated by my own porn-ish noises. By the burden of acting like I was really alive. I found myself lying still, stealing glances

at Gabby when Aaron wasn't watching too closely. I wondered what it would be like to be a sex doll instead of a real girl. What was the cost difference between a Bluetooth pussy and a real one? What would the upgrade cost for me? I came for real that time, and I think Aaron knew it.

"Do you make jokes to your friends about crazy girl pussy?" I asked later, with the TV turned way down.

He snorted. "No."

"What a gentleman," I said. This made him smile. After he left, I played that smile in my mind again and again until I threw up. I took the sheets off the bed and stuffed them in the outside trash bin.

The next night, I got drunk again and finally worked up the courage to google *human sex doll*. *Human sex doll kink*. *Dollification*. People were doing it. People were getting off to it. So was I, I guess. How annoying.

I posted about Gabby in some forum, explaining that I had bought a sex doll, and I didn't know why. Somebody replied that I had a transference disorder. Over that week I researched sex dolls. I wanted to know who bought them (only 2.7% of those surveyed were women), and what people did with them (50% of those surveyed had an emotional attachment or relationship to their doll). I wanted to understand what Gabby had been made for. I couldn't help but feel I'd saved her from something, but those men seemed to really love their dolls. Had I robbed her of something, too?

Aaron finally started to worry about me when I put all the other dolls back in their box.

"They were cluttering the house," I told him. But there was Gabby, sitting on the couch, staring glass-eyed at the television.

"You know," he said. "Maybe you should get a real roommate."

"I don't want a roommate."

He nodded toward Gabby. I rolled my eyes at him. "That's not a real person, Aaron."

"You know that too, right?" he asked.

I elbowed him, a little hard. "She's a doll. Girls like dolls. It's normal to have a favorite."

Dad called the next night but I didn't pick up. I was online. One man claimed he was more in love with his sex doll than his girlfriend. Another man detailed the polygamous marriage between his real wife and two sex dolls named Jennifer and Veronica. Was this life with me better for Gabby? Is it really wrong to eat the chicken that can't walk? Or is it the only right thing to do? I called Aaron.

"Do you still want to fuck Ga—the doll?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Um, do you want me to?"

"I do," I answered, my voice low and honeyed. I had to make him want it. He was at the house an hour later, smelling good. Like cologne and weed.

"I'd rather fuck you," he joked, touching me. How could I insist? Aaron was good. If he began to pity me then nobody was getting fucked.

"I want to watch you fuck her."

He laughed. "Were you always a freak, or is this new?"

*Is this new?* I knew what he was asking, and I knew he was *really* asking. If you hadn't gone through the windshield of your BMW, would I have eventually lost my fucking mind anyway?

"I don't know," I told him. The truth. In the end, he fucked me instead. I asked him not to make me talk. Not to make me move. He knew what I was really asking.

"It's not that weird," he assured me when I was in tears afterward. I hated him for seeing me like that. It was *you* who should have seen me like that. I begged him to leave until he finally did. He had such a worried look as he walked to the door, and I wondered if I should just get it over with before he called the suicide hotline and the cops

showed up. All those times I'd thought about really doing it, nothing had ever felt brutal enough. Nothing close to what I deserved for begging you to pick me up that night, just so I didn't have to take an Uber. I sat on the couch, looking at Gabby. Empty-eyed. Plastic. Not human enough, but so much more human than she should have been.

We were alone then. Aaron was gone. You were gone. I had gone somewhere, too, I think. I imagined Gabby afraid behind her taxidermy eyes. She was just the right shape. The right size. She was just a doll in a big, empty dollhouse. Like the punchline to a joke. What's a trophy wife without a husband?

I took her to bed, with priestly deference this time, and retrieved the flathead screwdriver from where I'd left it in the attic weeks before. It went in so easy. Gabby was hollow inside like a Barbie doll head. Her breasts were filled with silicone that exploded out of her with a formaldehyde smell. Clear goo went everywhere. I stabbed again and again until she was full of holes. I ripped her hair out by the root. I worked at her face with the screwdriver until it had caved in completely. Then I dug around for your coping saw and took it to her arms and legs until she was in twelve pieces, and the quilt was soaked with her.

I woke to light streaming through the windows. The mess of Gabby had ruined the bedding down to the mattress. Water stains bloomed on the hardwood where her insides had run onto the floor. The blurriness at the edges of everything was gone.

I wrapped Gabby up in the goeey linens and stuffed her in the bottom of the outside trash bin. I took a shower. I changed my clothes. I called Aaron. He sounded muffled and bleary on the other end.

"Gabby? Are you okay?"

"Do you want to go get some breakfast?" I asked. "I want to get out of the house."

He hesitated before saying, "I know a good place." I could hear the smile in his voice. He sounded like you.



# Gossamer Fig

BY SOPHIA COMPTON

I am followed by a fig.

I watched fruit rot in our temporary home, ants crawling into the lining of our swimsuits  
Plopping lullaby, sweet smell of skin  
blistered on cement  
Where we crawled to bed with sugar-stained feet that smeared the sheets

I watched fruitless trees on the island of the Little Prince  
Leaves bulbous and long  
Delicate hands, friendly case of edema  
Slender baren branches framed by fortress walls  
Where we scrambled — drunk magpies, regal ducks

Now, the fig visits me when I am without your company.  
It reminds me of you but maybe it is not ours.  
Gossamer skinned gowns fit to contours,  
Drying seeds rooting in the fragile space between middle and index, making  
abric f

Fig feeds on the host  
So everything is ours. Then what am I?

Superglue smells just like olive oil.  
How are you not perfectly me?

I love my little fig,

*nourishing the unsaid space.*

Starfish regeneration  
each time I eat both what's yours and mine.

# Scratches on the Bridge

BY K.M. NAUGHTON

THERE ARE NIGHTS in the dead and still of winter when the world feels unfinished, as though a master artist has used all their charcoal, and has drawn the town, and the Collins farm, and the old mill, and the full moon behind scudding clouds, and then—there isn't any more.

There are nights when there's barely the faintest dark indigo against the black, and there's a silver outline to everything, and the mist is a light grey wash over the canvas.

There are nights when this town feels like the only place that has ever existed, and time itself has stopped, and there is only this one freezing night and this one bright moon. No breeze stirs. No birds call. Nothing moves.

Sound travels, on nights like these, and it feels *wrong* to hear it. Dogs bark, and it feels like the sky might shatter; and it's an insult to hear Greg's old Jeep shuddering and chugging as the engine fails to turn over, and Greg's no doubt asleep a mile away, and his daughter Billie floods the engine. That thing won't start in this kind of cold.

She was over at her boyfriend's place. Greg doesn't know she *has* a boyfriend.

Everyone else does, mostly because of that damn Jeep.

I live above my shop, in the centre of town. I can see the old mill from my bedroom window, and I can see the bridge, and the river. I hear the dogs, and the Jeep, and on a normal night that's fine.

Not a night like this.

There I am in my worn, fluffy pyjamas. I shouldn't be awake in this unfinished world, but even if I hadn't been up late reading, I would have been woken by the screams. The desperate begging and screaming for help. The sound of racing footsteps.

I'm at the window before I even realise, staring out desperately, and I see a racing figure, moonlight shining on long hair, and I could swear to all that's holy that it's Billie pelting down the street, but why's she running?

I can't see anyone chasing her. Why isn't her boyfriend out there?

Is she running from him? Finn's always been a sweet boy, but they say you never can tell.

I grab a blade, and a torch, and I hurl myself down the steps.

Billie's right on the bridge when I get to the street, and I am hurtling towards her, the soles of my socks tearing on the rough dirt of the road, and she looks over her shoulder. It's not me she sees. It's something else, but when I skid to a halt at the end of the bridge, I look over my shoulder as well.

There's nothing there. There's no sign of *anything*.

There's no sign of Finn, either.

I look up. I swear to everyone, on everything I've ever believed in and no longer do, on everything that I'm now scared might be real on nights like this, it's Billie's face that I see, and she looks terrified.

I've never seen anyone so scared that they might just die right in front of me.

She lets out a wail of heartbreak, of misery and despair, and she launches herself off the bridge even as I scream for her to stop.

It's a long drop, a long silence before the splash.

I stand there, in my torn socks, my heart racing and pounding in my head, and even that feels too loud. I can still hear the echo of her cry, and my own desperate plea, clattering off the walls of that unfinished charcoal sky.

Time doesn't feel real—*nothing* feels real—so I don't know how long it is before I hear the sound of the Jeep turning over again.

I barely know what I'm doing. I race towards the Jeep and... there's Billie, cursing at the engine.

Everyone hears a scream—they say so, the next day. Because sound travels when the world is small and still. Everyone says that they heard a splash.

But, that next day, no one is missing, and when I tell people what I saw, Billie is there. She assures me that she is fine. Why would she jump off a bridge? I must have had a nightmare.

*You know, she says, nightmares can feel so real sometimes.*

*Isn't it strange, she says, that when you talk about your nightmares, they feel so much more real?*

When she smiles, it makes my skin go cold.

I stop talking about what I saw.

I see the scratches on the side of the bridge a week later, after Finn has broken up with Billie because he says she just doesn't seem like the girl he knows anymore, after Greg starts asking for parenting advice for a seventeen year-old girl who just doesn't seem interested in the things she's always loved. He says he actually misses arguing about her loud rock and rap music, and the jackets and boots she'd leave lying around. She doesn't argue now. Instead, she keeps *touching* things and smiling—odd things, like keys and doors and windows.

She showers several times a day. She avoids her old cat, and the cat avoids her.

I try not to think about it, but I look at the scratches on the side of the bridge and I can't help piecing it together, because it looks to me like something was climbing *up* the bridge, *out* of the river—

Something only Billie could see. Something only she was *meant* to see.

I don't go outside on the nights when the world seems unfinished. I don't close doors too loudly. I don't try to start the car. My eyes can't close, I don't dare sleep, but even though I'm awake through the night, I don't make a sound.

You never know what might be listening.



# Diamond World

BY DEBORAH L. DAVITT

They say that  
somewhere out there,  
is a planet made of diamond,  
eight times as massive  
as our little Earth;

with seas, perhaps,  
of fine graphite dust,  
black waves rolling  
over beaches  
of glistening sand,  
comingling.

Life's probably hard, there,  
heavy and sharp,  
even in ways  
that it isn't here.

But I wonder  
if that planet  
has a moon—

and if it does,  
if broken rainbows  
gleam from diamond mountains  
in its pale light,

and dance in the hearts  
of whatever creatures  
call this harsh world home.

# Of Ossuary Oblations

BY B.W. WIESE

GRANDMA WHITTLED HER bones until they were dust. She started with the tips of her fingers, working down until they were nothing but nubbins on the end of her knuckles—like a declawed cat folding laundry, making dinner, gardening, heading to the restaurant at 5am and coming home when the sun hits dusk like an egg hits the kitchen floor because sleep is luxury and waste, and if God wanted us to sleep he would've given us enough bones to have time to. Her bones sizzle in the deep fryer with frozen fries and pickle chips.

My brother whittled his bones more slowly. He hunched his back over a desk too short, grinding his knees against its sandpaper underside. He used a pen to etch numbers into his scaphoid, radius, metacarpal. His ulna was a tapestry of overlapping grant proposals barely indented but chipping away faster than the steel-beaked birds on mountains of soapstone.

Most whittled faster; the way a car crash could break a butterfly—bones so pulverized they became heads and crooked necks waddling on shoulder blades at the bus stop, carrying the handles of their toolboxes in the gaps of their teeth. I know most of them were unlucky, one way or another. Some were born with a fragile framework but had to bear such weight they cracked. Others had no spares in storage. There was no family stash, or perhaps it was depleted, bones

replaced as trouble arose and accidents befell. There was no dust to save, for it was swept away by the collectors.

I whittle my own at the standard pace, which people my age say is too fast and people older say is leisurely, even if they had more dust stored away to cast new bones later than I do now.

I always thought I'd whittle them prettily. I thought I'd carve designs into my tibia with a paintbrush—imbricating vines, flowers, portraits of marvelous and maddening people greater than myself—or I'd let the keys of a typewriter stamp poetry into my distal phalanxes. I yearned for others' eyes to fall on my etchings and think, "Dear god, what brilliance. What a shining star. That's art that'll stand the test of time. When they rob her grave in centuries, digging under bone-dust and plastic sheets, they'll put her up in an art museum, so pretty are her carvings, such artistry are her works."

Instead, I sand along all sides. I try to keep them as a canvas, even as I wear them down. I don't know what I want to carve. Everyone will see it, so I don't want it to be amateur, but bone dust keeps the lights on. Bone dust keeps me fed. I don't eat it, to be clear, but I get to keep that which doesn't get vacuumed up. At the end of the day, someone uses their bones to gather it, and they give me a bit before the rest travels upward.

Up and up and up it goes. They say it snows down, but I've yet to see an ossein blizzard. The snow outside leaves mud in its wake instead. Mud, blood, char, smoke. No bones. It only chills them, makes them shake, makes the dust fall away faster, except we can't find it among all the white.

Grandma read a lot of stories when we were kids. She'd take tattered books off a pale yellow shelf and sit with us for hours, as that egg on the horizon grew dark, molded, and disappeared. I liked to think her bones weren't affected by it, and she loved it as much

as we did, but I opened one last year and a minute cloud of powder rose from every page.

She told us one story her nana told her: that, one day, we'd be able to grow new bones. These would replace the brittle things in our bodies, and we wouldn't need to work them like a pestle in a mortar until no one could tell what they used to be, because there'd be enough freshly formed ones to go around. You could use your bones as you see fit, and more sparingly. I could turn my skeleton into a cathedral ceiling and not worry about its imperfections. There'd be enough bones to try again, carve anew.

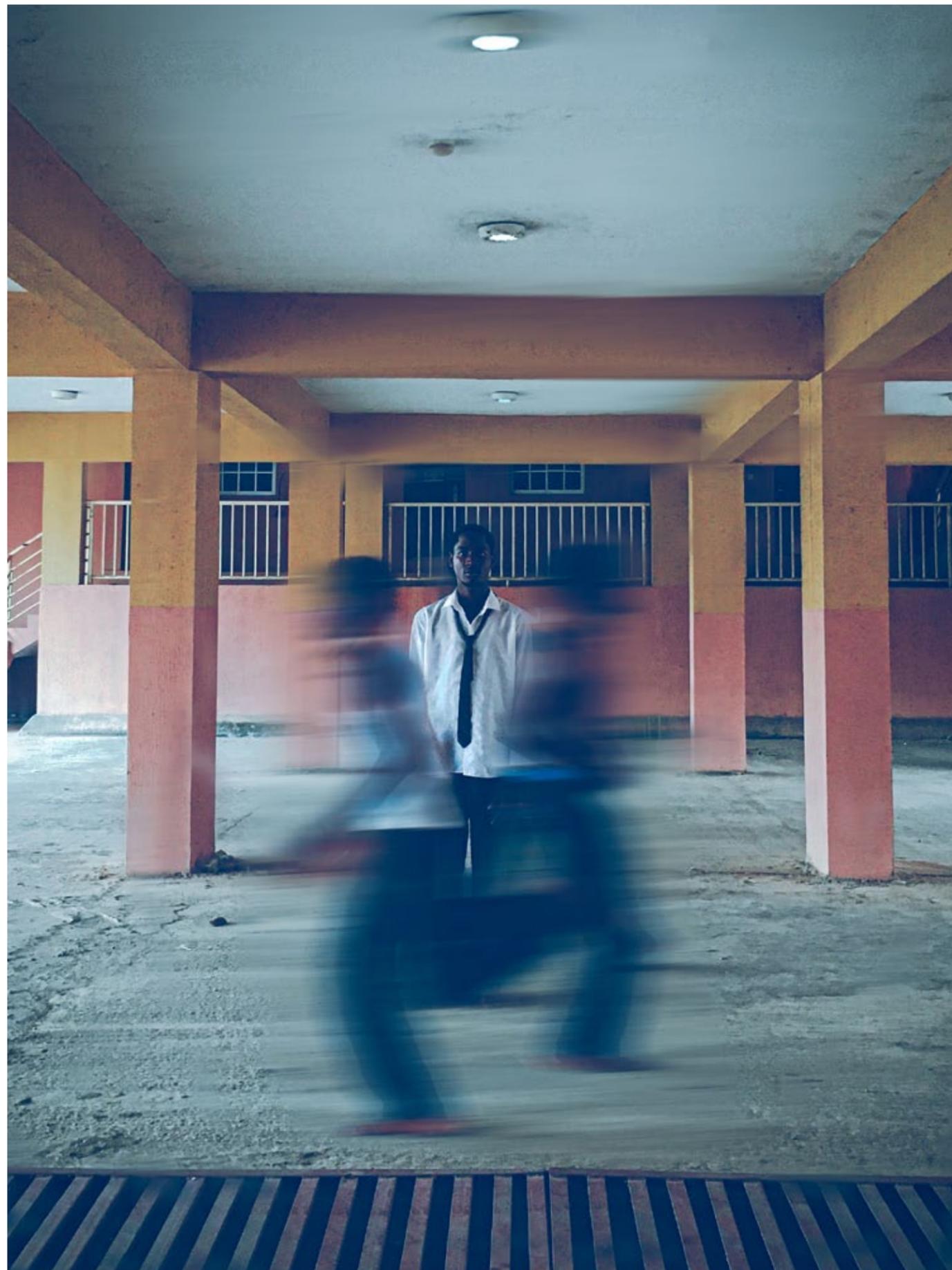
Instead, there are men in ossein crowns. It costs bones to make bones, they say, their thrones calcium-enriched and pearly white. It costs bones to make bones, but theirs are pristine. I'm sure some may have been replaced, but you can always tell when they have. So many are the originals, the congenital skeletal structure.

It costs bones to make bones, but not their bones. Sometimes parents leave bones for their children, and they build from them an ever-expanded graveyard. They take their father's femur and shatter a thousand factory workers' knees. They mix the dust with plaster and use it as drywall to build more efficient knee-shattering plants to house their knee-shattering machines, but the parts for the Cap Blaster 6.0 could've been used to make kneecaps of steel for those whose joints had been sand-blasted by time and fate.

It costs bones to make bones, but I'm here, at the bus stop, next to a paper-thin skull on a set of mangled tarsals. Where are her bones? Why are her ossicles the gems in their crowns? She doesn't even have the phalanges, the humerus, to reach up and try to steal them back. She doesn't have the fibula to run away. She can't swing the purse clenched between her four molars and two flattened incisors to whack a would-be robber in the wing of ilium.

It costs bones to make bones. You have to have bones to take bones, and if you risk bones to take bones, you better not risk your own because you won't be able to get them back.

I sand down all sides of my bones, unsure of what masterpiece I dare to carve, but knowing I want them smooth so I can. I see no dust.



DAVID ANYANWU

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

**Abubakar Auwal, TPC VIII**, is an award winning teen author of two forthcoming Chapbooks: *Portrait Of gods As Metaphors*; 1st runner up Nigeria Prize for Teen Authors (Poetry, 2024) and *Portrait of Broken Metaphors*; Winner Arting Arena Poetry Chapbook Contest. He was the winner of Splendors of Dawn Poetry and Short Story Competition (February-April, 2023). Also a finalist for BPKW Poetry Contest, AIPFEST24 Poetry Slam, NYTH Poetry Contest & long-listed for Brigitte Poirson Poetry Prize, Akachi Chuku-emeka Literature Prize, Blessing Kolajo Poetry Prize and others. He's the Editor-In-Chief at *New Voices Magazine*, Managing editor at *Words-empire Magazine*, founding editor at *Metaphorical Magazine* and member Hill-Top Creative Arts Foundation, Minna as well as Founder/President of Nigerlites Spoken Word Artists. You can access some of his works through this link; <https://linktr.ee/AbubakarAuwal>

**David Anyanwu** is a Nigerian conceptual visual artist and documentary photographer. His work explores African identity, emotional stillness, and cultural memory—often using local materials, textures, and his smartphone to create. He makes art to communicate his silence — to express what words can't hold. It's how he processes inner conflicts and reflect the quiet power within and around him. By drawing from African symbolism and his surroundings, he create pieces that invite calm, reflection, and connection—allowing others to feel seen in the silence.

**Sophia Compton** is a student in Paris. She was raised in unconventional and transient homes. Her families are bound by love, not biology. She is the daughter of women: an anthropologist psychiatrist, two lawyers and dog rescuers, and a retired educator and suffragist. She is the bio-baby of an anonymous sperm that spent ten years in the deep freeze and the sister of three in household and eighteen in genetic siblings. The roots of self grew through mycorrhizal networks connected by love and intertwining with new saplings. She carries her community with her.

**Joe Dahut** is a poet and teacher living and writing in Brooklyn. Prior to that, he was a collegiate pitcher at Drew University, where he earned his BA in English, and a fly fishing guide in Kodiak, Alaska. He earned his MFA in Poetry from New York University, where he taught creative writing.

**Deborah L. Davitt** was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her award-winning poetry and prose has appeared in over seventy journals, including *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *Lightspeed*. For more about her work, including her Elgin-placing poetry collections, *Bounded by Eternity* and *From Voyages Unreturning*, see [www.deborahldavitt.com](http://www.deborahldavitt.com).

**Kimberly Farley** resides in Willowbrook, IL as a freelance illustrator and animator. She explores themes inspired by personal experiences and relations through digital art and animation. Her aim is to invite the audience into vivid narratives that honor the human experience, connecting the personal to the universal.

Meet **Stasia Valora Fisher**, an Artist hailing from vibrant city of Las Vegas. As a woman Artist, Valora painted her professional portrait as colorful as her canvases, capturing moments of love, loss and ever present essence of life. Valoras artistic journey began with passion for creativity, nurtured through her education at art school, where she honed her skills and developed her style. Her artwork delves in realms of figurative expression

**Emily Gennis** has been swapping stories with friends for a few years and has recently begun dipping her toe into the choppy waters of publishing. “Le Chat Noir” was inspired by her two cats, Sunday and Daffodil.

**Jennifer Hykes** lives with her husband and two hobbit cats just outside of Pittsburgh, PA. When not pretending to be a responsible adult, she enjoys sunsets, gaming, and crafting elaborate setups for terrible puns. Her stories have also appeared in *PodCastle*, *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*, and *Cast of Wonders*, among others. More information can be found at [www.jenniferhykes.com](http://www.jenniferhykes.com).

**Dora Ilce**, a Polish-Dutch illustrator, works with ink, pencils, and digital tools. With crisp lines and pared-down colours, she creates her slightly absurd worlds, inhabited by humans, animals, and everything in between.

**Glen Loveland** spent thirteen years in Beijing (2007-2020), where he worked for CCTV/CGTN and The Walt Disney Company while developing an intimate understanding of expatriate life in China. His experiences navigating cultural boundaries, language barriers, and unexpected connections inform his writing about cross-cultural encounters. Now based in Scottsdale, Arizona, he serves as a Senior Career Coach at the Thunderbird School of Global Management, helping international students navigate their own cultural transitions. When not writing or coaching, he experiments with fermenting Chinese-inspired pickles and mixing the perfect dirty martini—extra olives, of course.

**Nuala McEvoy** is an English/Irish artist and writer. She draws on her memory and uses acrylics and marker pen on canvas to create her scenes. Nuala has had her work published in many reviews and her paintings have been selected as cover art for several magazines. She has also exhibited her art in Germany. She currently has an exhibition in London.

**Leyelle** is an African American and Dominican author and artist from Maryland, USA, raised in part in her ancestral home of the Dominican Republic. Author of the Turnill prize-winning short story “Rain Dance,” the novel *Damsel in the Red Dress*, and illustrator of the inaugural issue of *Quills & Tales* magazine, she’s passionate about telling a story, in any and all mediums, to express the beauty and complexity of life and human emotions.

**Anita Mottaghi**, 26 years old, is a graphic designer and photographer from Tehran, Iran. She is the author and illustrator of her debut book, *A Simple Rainy Day*. Her illustrations have gained international recognition and have been featured in prestigious competitions and exhibitions worldwide, including the Bologna Children’s Book Fair (Italy), Golden Pinwheel (China), and the Golden Pen of Belgrade (Serbia).

**K. M. Naughton** lives in a house in the woods and, when not working as a marine biologist (yes, really) or trying to stop the forest from consuming her house, she writes stories and songs. She enjoys telling stories of cosiness and creepiness alike, and delights in any imaginary element, fantastical or speculative. The human element is always there.

**Sarah Oechsle** is a writer living in Asheville, North Carolina with her husband and three dogs. Her recent work has appeared in *Black Cat Weekly*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and is forthcoming in *Ploughshares*. She is co-founder and Editor in Chief of fledgling literary mag *French Broads Lit*, and her longer work will soon be featured on *Thirteen Podcast*. When not writing, she enjoys ordering the same meal every Thursday at Bojangles, reading about castle architecture, and listening to country music.

**Eric Orosco** is a queer, Sacramento-born writer with a handful of literary magazine publications from *The Rome Review*, *mutiny!*, *The Tiny*, and *Jokes Review*. After stumbling through four community colleges and one university in Idaho, he graduated from University of the Pacific with a bachelor’s in English and more than a handful of student loans. Currently, he works as a communication specialist while living in San José with his husband and two pear-shaped cats.

**Camellia Paul** is a PhD student in the Department of Comparative and World Literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She received her MA degree in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University, India. Her areas of research and publication are Comparative Literature, Translational Studies, and animal studies. Camellia is also an award-winning visual artist with her poetry and art regularly appearing in magazines, anthologies, and online journals such as *The Fabulist*, *Chestnut Review*, *Livewire*, *The Passionfruit Review*, among others. Her works of translation, fiction, and nonfiction have been published by *The Anonym*, *The Brussels Review*, *Breath and Shadow*, and more. As an independent practitioner of the visual arts and photography, she extensively works on the interface of narratives from the everyday in a pre- and post-pandemic world across rural and urban spaces. Apart from being passionate about Nature, art, and owls, Camellia loves reading, listening to music, and exploring cultures. Contact: [paull40@illinois.edu](mailto:paull40@illinois.edu)

**Horia Pop** was born in Romania in 1984. He shoots mostly in black and white. His works - poetry, short stories, photos - have been published in various reviews in the US and elsewhere since 2017.

**Isadora Richter** spends most of her time writing, playing video games, and complaining about incorrect apostrophe use. Her work has appeared in *The Razor*, *The Colored Lens*, and *Broken Pencil*. Read more at [richterwrites.com](http://richterwrites.com).

**Claire Scott** is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called and Until I Couldn’t*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters’ Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

**Garth Upshaw** lives in Portland, Oregon, with his super-genius sweetie-pie, three precocious grown children, and five enthusiastic chickens. His work has appeared in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Bristol Noir*, and other fine venues. He has an MA in Theoretical Mathematics and loves carving spoons, bicycling, and curling up with a good book.

**Dana Wall** traded balance sheets for prose sheets after years of keeping Hollywood’s agents and lawyers in perfect order. Armed with a Psychology degree that finally proved useful when creating complex characters and an MBA/CPA that helps her track plot points with spreadsheet precision, she ventured into the haunted halls of Goddard College’s MFA program. Her work, which has appeared or is forthcoming in *Intrepidus Ink*, *96th of October*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Summerset*, *34 Orchard*, *Eunoia Review*, *Defenstration*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and *StoryUnlikely*, confirms that words are more reliable than numbers, though occasionally harder to balance.

**B. W. Wiese** is simply a human weed who grew out of the ground in the Midwest. She is nothing more, nothing less. She attempts to use writing to sink roots deep into the ground somewhere.

