



Into The Void

Arts and Literature

Issue 3 | Spring 2017 | €6

Into The Void Magazine

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Published quarterly. Print ISSN: 2009-9398 | Online ISSN: 2009-9401

Published in Dublin, Ireland by *Into The Void Magazine*. Editor-in-Chief: Philip Elliott.

intothevoidmagazine.com | intothevoidmag@gmail.com | facebook.com/intothevoidmagazine

Heidegger / Beach

Leonard Zawadski

it is beach this beach or is it what is
beach the truth of it does sand on
the shore between land and water
contain beach is it concealed or
un-concealed

but that is also land
also so beach is land isn't it or is
land not land also as truth is also
un-truth so beach is un-beach

containing is beach also *the bells*
which saunters through its sands
from the church which no-one
urges

is as beach or how about
the rotting wood of a life guard's
broken stand

or is it broken what is
broken and what is full does
fullness not supercede what is
broken take broken in and portray
what is fullness as peace takes
chaos

in portrays peace
supercedes it is the sea-gull beach
when it is and is not when it isn't
where is the line can a piece of the
sea-gull

be beach and not other
parts and what if it swallowed some
sand would it carry the beach in its
belly

What are you looking for

Patrick Cahill

a border to cross? I'm looking for a border to cross
 borders to cross urgent fierce borders along impulsive
 rivers smoldering lines of demarcation incinerated
 borders in the glaring interstices of shattered glass in the
 shards of our reflection little explosions against the
 surface of the eye in the just invisible pattern a shotgun leaves
 in the air within those adlibbed spaces you play among
 that left hand stride will you listen its rhythm where the
 wind lets loose tremors in the sky

Coast Starlight

Jeff Ewing

Clifford could have been anyone, though no one from around there. He was too easy in his skin, standing with his hands loose at his sides, the first person in years to pay any attention to the PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED sign. He rocked a little on his feet, his thin legs bowing out at the knees. When he flipped up his clip-on sunglasses, his pupils floated like drops of ink in milky green irises, neglected-looking things like mossed-over cow ponds. If she'd been a little younger she might have blushed, but she'd long since stopped being embarrassed or flattered by men's stares. Her beauty was something she'd had to acknowledge early on, though she couldn't appreciate it herself.

He slid into the middle booth and ordered scrambled eggs, then smothered them in tabasco. Sweat broke out across his face as he ate. He went through almost half a canister of napkins, which she'd have to refill after he was gone. She watched the sweat drip onto the table and bead up on the film of oil that never scrubbed all the way off.

Afterward, at the register, he pushed a card across the counter. 'I know this sounds like a line,' he said. 'But I'd like to put you in the movies.'

It did sound like a line, as a matter of fact. 'What kind of movies are these?'

'The real kind. Not what you're thinking.'

'I'm not thinking anything.'

'Even better.'

She finished out her shift and the sun went down while he sat in the parking lot in his Lincoln with the radio on. Her boss asked if she wanted him to walk her out to her car, but she said no. He wasn't dangerous. She could tell.

In a way, she was right.

§

It was the implication in her daughter's question, the way she asked it as she herself might have asked her own mother, that made her start thinking about Clifford again: 'Don't you wish something exciting would happen to you, just once?'

Her life, in other words, was a pitiful thing, hardly worth keeping track of. And yet something had happened—or nearly happened—something that could have been put down to a little girl's fantasy, sitting in her room on the blunt edge of nowhere cutting pictures out of magazines, if she'd been that kind of little girl. But she'd always been able to see the eventual disappointment hidden in fantasies, just as she could see the inevitable fading of her own looks when she stood in front of the mirror.

She'd been going out with Matias for a couple of months by then. In his mind it was serious, if not necessarily in hers. It was possible she'd love him some day, she didn't know. For now he was a wall, and that's what she needed. He was solid, with a fine scar running along the edge of his chin where he'd cut himself with a grape knife when he was a kid. No one bothered her when she was with him, even the older men steered clear. He wasn't mean like the other boys—calling girls *putas* and bitches—he had a soft streak in him. It might get ground down eventually, but there might be a spell until then. They might have ten good years, maybe even more.

He was afraid of her beauty, as many people seemed to be. He touched her like he was de-

fusing a bomb. She felt him shaking against her that night, this big man with thick, work-scarred fingers. When he tried to put his hand under her bra, she let him. It was a small concession that didn't cost her much. He almost cried at her generosity. She stroked his hair like a child and watched an owl at the end of the orchard row dive in a sudden burst to snatch up a mouse. She thought about Clifford, imagined the owl was him, his skinny frame swooping among the trees. Matias bit her nipple and she let out a little chirp, then shifted in the bucket seat in a futile effort to get comfortable.

The next day Clifford was back, this time ignoring the PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED sign like everyone else. He looked a little healthier, his eyes less muddy. Every now and then he tapped something into an electronic organizer. It was an exotic thing in those days, and more for effect than practical use, Elena thought, separating him from the common people the way a cravat or a cane might have twenty years earlier.

'You didn't call,' he said.

'Of course not.'

'I'm serious about this. You can check me out with the trades, I'm legit.'

She had no idea what the trades were, but didn't say so. It was another part of his show, a private language to impress her. 'Do you know where you are?'

'More or less.'

'We raise olives here. And dust. That's it.'

'You're beautiful.'

'Don't talk to me like that please.'

He ordered french toast this time, and wolfed it down. He didn't linger as long in the booth, but left another identical card under the edge of his plate. On the back he'd written, *You put them all to shame.*

She still had the card. The edges had started to separate, one corner bent like a tagged pig's ear. She laughed at the fact that she lived in such a place and in such a way that a pig's ear was the first comparison to present itself. That was part of the problem: she couldn't see herself anywhere but where she was. She never imagined other places, a different life. When she looked out the window she saw olive trees, rice fields, and the stumpy tanks of the cement plant. The world did not curve out beyond the edge of her vision into rain forests and deserts and kingdoms, it butted up against the dry hills and stopped there.

It was unusual, then, when that night she dreamed of just that, another life, a life in which she felt eyes lingering on her without wanting to hide. She teased and laughed and knew that later on she would be with a man she'd just met, looking out through plate glass windows onto waves and gulls, wrapped in sheets so soft they whispered against her skin like crickets. They would talk in the cryptically mutual way that people in love, real love, talked, understanding everything with minimum effort. Wine would follow dinner, followed by wine.

She woke in a near panic and showered hurriedly, afraid to touch herself. She drove straight to work, no detours past the park and the duck ponds, no singing to herself under the radio. She was afraid the memory of the dream would persist in those favourable surroundings, rather than dissolving in the sun slanting through the windshield. Still, the thought kept creeping back: What if she was beautiful not just here, but everywhere? What if she left this place and people still watched her, what if they saw something in her—like Clifford did—something that could be shared without giving herself away?

It wasn't until her eyes had adjusted that she noticed Matias in the booth where Clifford would have been, his arms tucked in at his sides and his head ducked down the way he did to make himself smaller. He always worried he'd frighten her away. But she wasn't a bird or a squirrel or some other tender thing. When he got down on a knee and a gray puff of cement

dust lifted from his jeans, the restaurant tunneled toward her, the sounds of the freeway and the clatter of dishes rose to an aching pitch as if someone had thrown the volume knob all the way over. She fell back into herself with a crash.

In a way it was a relief, though she had a headache later and had to spend her break in the bathroom with a coke and a couple of ibuprofens. Her eyes ached with a pressure like the heel of a hand pushing down. From the fall, was how she put it to herself. As if it was something physical that had happened to her.

When Clifford showed up the next time, Elena and Matias were married and Carla was almost a year old. Matias had done well; he was good to her and she didn't have any regrets. Very few. She could have done without the cement dust he carried everywhere with him—in the creases of his shirts, on the soles of his shoes, in the gaps between his thinning hair. After the rare rains that came like drunk rages out of the north, she'd find clots of hardened cement cast off around the house and through the yard. Sometimes there were full boot prints, big and ungainly, strung around the fence line where he paced on his sleepless nights like a guard.

'I'm afraid you won't be here when I wake up,' he'd said once to explain it.

'Where would I go?'

He should have smiled then; it would have been enough. But instead his face went cloudy and tight thinking about all the places she could go if she wanted to. A map of the world scrolled across his vision, each road capable of taking her away from him.

§

Clifford stood with his hands on his hips, sporting a scraggly beard now and wide black-rimmed glasses riding halfway down his nose. Even before his car came flying across the overpass, something had made her look up, something like a sound but not quite. It reached her ahead of the Lincoln, preceding the car as though it had created the car rather than the other way around.

He'd developed a faint limp that she only noticed as he made his way down the aisle to his booth. More acting, she thought, but then decided—no, something had shifted in him. He moved more deliberately, more seriously somehow, not the cocky careless way he had before. It embarrassed her that she was happy to see him. He made her feel wanted in a way she wasn't used to.

'Welcome back. Eggs?'

'Just toast and coffee.'

As she poured, he held up a sheaf of thumbled pages held together with brads, red lines and notations in the margins.

'Your movie.'

Sure enough, there was her name centered on the page in capital letters: ELENA. 'Is it a tragedy?' She tried to laugh, but it came out too loud and crooked.

'Is your life a tragedy?'

'No. A comedy more like.'

'Same thing, different scenery.'

She only had one other table—a couple of pressers from the olive oil plant, their fingers and palms stained black. They hid them under the table when she took their order. Then they took turns in the bathroom trying to scrub them clean, but it didn't make much difference. Shelly, who cleaned the bathrooms after closing, complained constantly about the stains in the sinks she couldn't get out, the oil slicks on the counters. Elena passed by Clifford's table again after bringing their orders out.

‘Why is it my movie?’

‘I had it written for you. I described you to this writer friend of mine, I painted a picture in his head. I’m pretty good at that.’

‘I see.’

‘Not just the way you look, though, your—’ outlining with his hands the shape of her—‘but the way you carry yourself. Like there’s another you hidden inside, the same way you’re holed away in this little town here. No offense.’

‘Is that what the movie’s about?’

‘It’s an allegory. An action allegory.’

‘Meaning?’

‘It’s a story that tells another story.’

‘With shooting, etcetera.’

‘Yes. Some shooting etcetera.’

He had a new card. She pulled it out from under the saucer as she watched him get in his car and drive back across the overpass. Dark letters slanting across the top of the card announcing what she guessed was the movie’s title: *Out from the Shadows*.

§

The late sun through the back windows lit up the ever-present dust, shivering and dancing like a swarm of insects. The chicken mole crunched faintly as she chewed. Everything—not just in her house, but throughout the town—was coated with it, cement dust and field dust, dust stirred by tires and feet and the wind. The houses and stores and the two churches huddled inside a perpetual cloud.

‘How far have you ever been?’ she asked Matias, slumped like a question mark over his plate, half asleep. He was working twelve hour shifts now. Advancement had its drawbacks as well as its perks.

‘How far what? What do you mean?’

‘I mean away from here.’

He thought and chewed. She could see the gray coating on his nose hairs as he breathed in and out. ‘Fresno, I guess. When I was a kid, for 4H.’

‘I haven’t been out of Corning once. Did you know that?’

‘Well Fresno wasn’t much. You’re not missing anything.’

‘I’d hate to think that. If I thought there wasn’t anything worth seeing outside of here, I’d drown myself in the bathtub.’

Carla made a noise like a lawnmower refusing to start, and Elena laid her hand softly on top of her head. Her hair was so thin and fine, not like Elena’s. She could feel the heat rising up into her hand, skin on skin transferring.

‘I’d like to see some of it. Someplace else.’

Matias winced as a grain of cement wedged into a crack in his back tooth. He took a long drink of water and waited for the pain to subside. ‘Like where?’

‘I don’t know. LA maybe.’

‘Los Angeles?’

‘Yes, Los Angeles.’

‘What, like Disneyland?’

‘No. I don’t know, maybe. Carla might like that. But other things too. Museums, the ocean, movie studios.’

‘I don’t know. We don’t know anybody.’

She wasn't sure how much he knew about Clifford. Not that she was hiding anything, really. 'This is our chance, while Carla's still little. Before she starts school.'

'That's a long way off still.'

'Not that far.'

He leaned back and smiled across at her. 'There's no hurry.'

The smile infuriated her, the same smile she'd seen all her life—a smile of tolerance, thinking her beauty was an advantage with no downside.

She drank a bottle of wine by herself after Matias and Carla had gone to bed, something she never did. It was a pitiful rebellion. The determination and confidence she felt as she stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror didn't last—it was just a body, nothing more, something she wasn't even responsible for.

She had to call in sick the next day, another thing she never did. She didn't know if Clifford came in or not; she never asked anyone, and nobody mentioned him to her.

§

She called the number on the card twice from the pay phone by the bathrooms, and hung up both times. What would she say? What was she willing to do? That seemed to be the question. It's possible to go through life without answering those kinds of questions, and Elena tried. She thought she could starve them out, that by refusing to answer them she could banish them, but they filtered in through the windows and doors with the dust, swirled up around her as she moved through the house or wheeled Carla in her stroller to the playground. They became part of the flavour of everything, along with all the other contaminants.

She left a note for Matias finally, said she was going to see the ocean, which was partly true. She took Carla to her mother's. She wouldn't be gone long, she said, three days at the most.

'It's an affair, isn't it?' her mother said, twice. She was excited by the idea, even gave Elena tips for making it memorable. 'Leave him wanting more,' she said, pouring a mini bottle of screw-top champagne into their orange juice. She lifted Carla's little hand to wave goodbye through the screen door when Elena left for the train station, her face flushed and her eye squinted in a suggestive wink. Elena had never seen her so proud; it was an unhappy discovery.

There was hardly any shade on the platform. She huddled under the narrow awning with an older woman who smiled but didn't say anything, a paper bag at her feet bulging with neatly-folded clothes. How much would Elena have if she packed up and left, she wondered. Not much more than that, if it was down to essentials.

She found a seat by a window and watched the sun drop behind the hills. It disappeared quickly, and then the valley was dark. Here and there the lights of a plant or a county prison flicked past. The towns got bigger as she headed south, then smaller again past San Jose. Even the smallest looked welcoming in the dark, ribbons of light strung out along invisible streets and up rivers and creeks that would be almost dry now.

The name of the train, printed at the top of the ticket, was the Coast Starlight. She liked the sound of it, as if the stars along the coast were somehow different from the ones she saw at home, brighter and more fixed, looking directly down on her. She like the fact, too, that they named the train. She didn't know they did that. It made the whole trip seem more exalted somehow, a forged path through fields of clamouring starlight.

At one point she fell asleep, and when she woke up two girls about her age were sitting across the aisle. They were dressed in smooth silk tops unbuttoned partway down. One of them dangled her high heel from her toes, bobbing it up and down to a song in her head. The girls ignored their surroundings thoroughly, only glancing once or twice derisively out the window.

'Jesus Christ,' one of them said. 'Where the hell are we?' The man in the seat in front of them turned and helpfully told them the name of the town they were passing through. They smiled, then rolled their eyes when he wasn't looking. 'Like it matters,' one whispered.

Elena fell asleep again, and when she woke up the next time the train was pulling into a large station with arched doorways and a tile roof. Lights blazed out the windows and she could see streets leading off brightly into the distance. She stood up and leaned close to the window.

'Where are you going?' one of the girls asked. The girls were glamorous and made Elena feel shabby in her print dress and flats.

'Los Angeles,' she said.

'Ooh. Good for you.'

'You'd better hurry then. They won't turn the train around.'

'What? Is this it?'

'That's Sunset Boulevard right over there. Those lights.'

'Oh god, thanks.' She hefted her overnight bag and tucked the little box of snacks under her arm.

'Be careful out there,' the girl said. 'There are wolves everywhere.'

As the train pulled away, the two girls waved through the window. She waved back. Her heart was thumping and she could feel the heat from the pavement rising up to her. Inside the station, she found a pay phone and fished Clifford's card out of her bag. He'd be surprised, no question. What would he say? She realized she hadn't planned beyond this moment.

She dropped her money in and a voice told her to deposit more. She looked at the paper tag above the receiver, saw it was a different area code from the one she was dialing. As she dug for more change down through the stubby eye pencils and half-empty powder tubs, the tarnished necklace and the pair of cracked turquoise earrings, an unpleasant revelation dawned on her. She should have known—most girls she met behaved as if life was a race and Elena had been given a head start. She stepped out of the booth, back out through the station doors and looked up at the sign—SANTA BARBARA—dangling from the eaves that she'd somehow missed.

She had a little money left after paying for a return ticket, so she bought herself an ice-cream cone. It was a silly, extravagant thing. She didn't even like ice-cream much. But this was the closest she would ever get to being somebody else, so she did what that person might have done. While she licked the drips from her hand, she laughed quietly at the idea of showing up at Clifford's door unannounced, standing on his doorstep with her little flower-weave bag in her hand. His reluctant courtesy as he invited her in. And instead of anger, she felt an unwanted kinship with the two girls on the train, who were probably still laughing, leaning their glittering heads against each other in the passing lights. Maybe they were masquerading too, seeing what it felt like to wield a little power.

She thought she could smell the ocean, a briny smell like sweat. She didn't know, she'd never been close enough before; maybe it was just the station, all the bodies passing through. The night was clear and there were stars littered out to the horizon. They were a little brighter, maybe, but other than that no different from the ones she knew at home. It wasn't disappointing, exactly—it seemed, in fact, about what she was due. She'd lied to get here, to herself most of all. If there were sins, as she'd always been told, that had to be one.

§

'I was hoping you'd aged badly,' Clifford said some years later, the last time he came through.

Elena poured his coffee while he dragged his finger through the sheen of oil on the table.

'Was there ever a movie? Or did you get those cards printed somewhere around here.'

‘There was a movie.’ He tapped his temple. ‘It was a beautiful thing, breathtaking. In meetings, when I described it, all these jaded Hollywood guys sat up in their chairs, hanging on every word. I had a picture of you I’d taken you didn’t know about, I had it printed twenty by thirty and sat it on an easel while I talked. They saw you like I did, saw the camera hang on every move you made, never wanting to leave you.’

‘So what happened?’

Clifford shrugged, a slow slump that rippled through the baggy shoulders of his blazer.

‘They couldn’t get a star to sign on. For the guy.’

‘Oh.’

‘They were afraid of you, Elena. That’s what it was. They were afraid all the light and the power and the love would turn toward you.’

She doubted that, but she didn’t mind him saying it. ‘I started down there once, you know?’

‘You did? When?’

‘A while ago. When I was younger.’

‘What happened?’

‘I turned around.’

He smiled. ‘Probably just as well.’

‘You think so?’

‘I don’t know. But that’s what you say, right?’

She nodded, but it wasn’t. Not to herself, anyway. In the privacy and security of her own head, she finished the trip. She sat out on his patio with him and let the sun—softened by the ocean—drape itself over her. They drank some kind of cocktail his housekeeper made, but she didn’t get drunk. She never lost her head, just took it all in. She didn’t look at the housekeeper’s face to avoid seeing herself there, and sipped from the glass that never seemed to empty as the stars began appearing one by one, out of the haze hanging between her and the ocean, cool fires burning outside the drag of time. Ice clinked in their glasses as they discussed the shooting schedule for the next day.

She always stopped there, before the story became ridiculous, before the probable reality intruded—Clifford’s apartment a drab warren on some nondescript street, the sky sooty and gray, sirens and drunken quarrels drowning out the distant waves. The ending wasn’t important anyway, it wasn’t even an ending necessarily. What passed for an ending could easily be just a gap between two halves. An intermission. There wasn’t any sure ending until you were dead, and then it hardly mattered how you got there. That’s how she put it to herself, anyway, on the days she let her mind off its leash.

At the end of her shift, she sat at the counter next to Shelly, who was flipping through a *People* magazine, tscking and shaking her head.

‘These people got everything you could want, and nine times out of ten they piss it away.’

‘You think it’s different here?’

‘Jesus yes. Are you kidding? Nobody’s got anything *to* piss away.’

Elena watched the notable faces flip by—smiling, angry, surprised—stars with their dogs, with their children, newly-minted couples looking like they never expected to meet an obstacle where they lived. Maybe one of these days there’d be a picture of Clifford with his latest discovery, dapper and successful, a girl something like her.

She shooed him out of her mind and thought instead about Matias waiting for her when she got off the train, Carla curled into his shoulder. How he managed a thin smile and walked with her back to the truck without ever asking one question. She’d taken it as an act of kindness at the time, and was grateful to him. But in the years since she’d considered whether it might not be just a lack of curiosity, that maybe he was like everyone else after all—wanting above anything to

know just what he knew, and nothing more.

The last of the light was long gone from the sky when she closed out. There might have been stars, but she couldn't see anything past the reflections in the windows. In the carousel by the register there was a slice of pie that had been there as long as she could remember, cherry she thought. She tapped the glass case and a cloud of grey dust rose up, swirled around, and settled like powdered light on the crust.





Coat of Many Colours
Shai Yossef

Hellebore
Patricia J. Miranda

I

By the maple, I settle the hellebore.
It grows low with bowed stems,
seven parts to the leaves, and three to the flower.

I have to lie on the ground, belly-flat, to look at its face:
a purple-speckled mane of sepals, edgeline soft and crisp,
bone-colored nectaries, massed like seaworms on pause.

It's hard to breathe
beneath the hellebore's bloom—
its beauty is so terrible.

II

By the garden wall, Dioscorides at work
and huddled at his feet,
a hellebore, spent by the summer.

It's the physician's way, he says, to be exact.
He puts on gloves (for the seeds can burn)
and severs the husk of a bloom.
Seeds fall into a fold of fabric.

When it is done
and because no one is looking,
he scrapes a circle round the plant's corpse
and turns to face the East.
Incantations drop from his lips.

He understands:
A physician first protects himself.
Else what use is he
to men before the gods?

III

In a house of wattle and daub,
a pinched mother reaches for her child.
He is seven? five? (So hard to tell

when hunger keeps them so small.)
 She'd wormed him and he clutches at his belly,
 the chuffing sounds signalling a deep animal hurt.

Later, they'll bury him beneath the oaks,
 where the hellebore grows,
 its roots of black sinking deep

into what is left.

IV

An eagle circles in the sky,
 and Proteus calls to his daughters.

(He knows of others' daughters lost to the king.
 His, he means to keep.) But when they come,

their hair tangled with twigs, and skirts ripped,
 their eyes with pupils wide, their lips mooing,

he knows a lesser god is to blame.
 Dionysus would have his lovers, too.

A stranger appears at the palace.
I can cure them, he says, and the tangled sisters

laugh and moo,
 laugh and moo.

From a fold at his waist, he takes out a root,
 black and twisted and smelling of frost.

His gloved hand draws close
 and scarifies each face.

I will take one daughter, he says. *I will take one-third of your kingdom.*
 A wizened father knows there is always a price.

V

Through the window, I see the snow,
 recessed beyond the maple's circle,
 the silence in the house (a contrapuntal

pressure to the child's voice I still
 hear) muting the passing of the seasons,
 so that at first I do not see the hellebore

lifting its stalks above the snow,
 leather-green palms afloat on white,
 at once reprimand and summons.

But a thing so black and perfect
 has settled in my gut. And that's
 all—that's all that's left

to heed the cold's first terrible bloom.

Mask for Sale

Marian Kilcoyne

Today Pierrot weeps for no one
 his smooth visage bereft of tears,
 his hands at rest. Hanging doves
 at either side of his body.
 Being played as fool can only ingest so
 many centuries, hurtling through time
 trying to clasp the hem of her robe.
 Bumbling & lovelorn, he arrived in
 epoch twenty-one and upon awakening
 found a shrink, took his Lexapro, and hung
 his head at the wasted time.

The Non-Culinary Uses of Tamarind

Laurie Theurer

Her eyes were the brown
of ripe tamarind
a glossy shell, strong
and brittle, pulp
latent within

There were flecks there
of gilded innocence,
the silvered fibers
of curiosity, tendrils
sprouting and twining

Like tamarind
she flowered,
modestly concealed
beneath the pleats
of a faded school uniform

Like tamarind
she provided sustenance
for her family
when rice paddies alone
no longer could

Like tamarind
she was harvested, pod
pulled sharply from the stalk,
cracked open, in Patpong
for consumption by eager mouths

Husk breached, discarded, pulp
exposed, pounded
to compliance, the value
of childhood, measured
in Baht

Her eyes were the brown
of ripe tamarind, titian
flecks, bittersweet,
gazing northeast, towards innocence
and home.

Two Yolandas
Iris J. Arenson-Fuller

I

My long-ago Yolanda,
Costa Rican mother, African father,
chestnut skin, cinnamon toast highlights,
amber eyes, gemstones with powers
never sensed or tapped, that cried
magical tears, of Pheaton's sisters.
She breezed into my classroom,
self-conscious, eyes downcast.
Soon friends, we practiced roles
for psychodrama class.

At her birthday party,
I was a nondescript white zircon
plunked down on a velvet tray of gems,
vivid, intense, overshadowing
this lone white girl.
There was Yolanda, shawl pulled taut
covering arms usually bare, but not
hiding bruises on cheeks,
amber eyes glowing through
two cobalt and red swollen splotches,
boyfriend perpetrator nowhere in sight.

She hugged me, sadly more mindful
of my comfort than of her own.
I wanted fierceness from her,
wanted her to erupt like an ugly typhoon,
angry at the one who did this,
angry at all in her path.
One year later, he killed her.
In my memory, her tears are still
washing onto the shore, true amber,
ancient fossil-mysteries trapped inside.

II

On hilltops in the Philippines
body bags are stacked in lumpy piles
waiting for the humiliation of mass graves.
A Storm Queen merciless, ravished all
who dared to breathe, eat, or rock a baby
in the center of her wide path, as she
claimed her right to reign and ruin.

Now fast students of the science of mourning,
of living amidst rubble and cadavers,
of despairing, of remembering who and what was,
survivors wrap scarves around sad, stunned faces,
to ward off the putrid smells of death and begin
to measure existence in inches, in passed-along
tales of befores and afters.

I can't help thinking of my long ago Yolanda,
who was not a raging force of nature,
who did not claim her right to just be,
who stepped aside so harsh storms
and violent waves could beat her glow
into eternal submission.
I am still bashful in my prayers.
Who am I to ask things, even if not for myself?
Still, I pray for long ago Yolanda,
whose name I always thought beautiful,
pray for those who must try to live again,
and for those whose tears are real,
burning their cheeks as they wait for help.



Contemplation of a Deliverer
Anya Charikov-Mickleburgh

Backhands and Bedtime Stories

Amanda Gaines

Creative nonfiction.

Within the first few hours of being home, Mama has pulled out the spoon. From the basement couch, fully committed to the TV-edited version of *Kill Bill: Vol. I*, the sounds of her screams from the upstairs kitchen vibrate angrily through our wooden floors. The ceiling shakes with each footstep, their hard, steady pace breaks intermittently with bouts of shouting.

‘I’ve had enough of your attitude. Ungrateful, complaining all day long. You can forget about Rachel’s birthday party tomorrow.’

‘What?’ my sister says.

‘That’s right, and you’re going to be the one calling her to tell her just why it is you can’t make an appearance.’

Though three walls and a floor separate us, I can see my sister, Olivia, rolling her eyes. She shakes her head, loose brown ringlets falling over her dark eyes. She clenches her small hands into fists, her long blue-chipped nails digging into her palms. Her pink lips purse in a pout as she mutters bitter nonsense under her breath.

The sound of Mama cracks electric. ‘And what do you think you’re doing?’

A nervous Rebecca keeps her head low, hoping to implement the ‘if I can’t see her, she can’t see me’ technique as she inches up the wooden staircase leading to her bedroom. Even when addressed, my sister does not meet Mama’s eyes. There’s a dark hardness to them that we all recognise. To look back means to retaliate, to express a resolve Mama doesn’t take kindly to. When she tells us, ‘Look at me when I’m talking to you,’ we always pull our faces up expecting the heat of her backhand. It’s our family Catch-22. Rebecca responds with soft, rising intonations, as if dealing with a wild animal. ‘I’m going upstairs?’

‘I don’t think so. Don’t walk away from me while I’m talking to you.’

Rebecca begins to panic—escape routes and explanations jostling through her head. ‘What did I do?’

‘You and your sister were told this morning when we went to pick up Amanda that I wasn’t going to listen to you two bitch and moan all day. And what did you do?’

‘But . . .’ Rebecca shuffles her feet forward hesitantly. She tries to avoid our mother’s outstretched hand, limbs tight. Impatient, Mama leaves Olivia kneeling on the couch, hands folded uncomfortably beneath her stomach, and strides towards Rebecca. She sinks her fingers into my sister’s cheeks.

‘Don’t. Bend over.’

With red faces, pursed lips, and vulnerable backsides, my two sisters kneel apprehensively on our red corduroy cushions, awaiting Mama’s hand-dealt parenting. The blows come hard and fast, fueled more by fury than method. I hear the heavy thwacks of wood hitting skin, the rhythmic thuds of Mama’s spoon. She usually relies on her hand, her impulse to inflict pain driving her to strike with instinct rather than intent. When she pulls out the spoon, we know she means business; that her anger has had time to fester and grow; that she wants only to hurt us, sparing herself the sharp bite of our skin.

My instinct is to sprint upstairs and cover my sisters, to yank the spoon from Mama’s hand. In my mind, I play out the fantasy of saving my sister, imparting sense and shame into our moth-

er. I see myself, lips pursed, jaw clenched. I say, *What's wrong with you?* Mama pulls back her arm to lay one on me before I grab her wrist, bring my lips to her nose so she can smell my seriousness, say, *Hit me and I'll hit you back.* On the screen, the Bride is slicing through the Crazy 88. Her yellow bodysuit moves through the air like a violent dancer. My eyes follow the streaks her limbs make, like when I admired my high school art teacher paint. Both Uma's character and my art teacher had an end goal. To reach her daughter, to make something beautiful. I know how the story ends—I've seen the film fifteen times. I want to be a mother like her.

Upstairs, the girls do not make a sound, pride and fury keeping their faces hardened and dry. We know that while tears soften paper, they do not soften Mama. With each cuff, I see my younger self. In the car after track practice, embarrassed at being the last girl picked up; fuming in my bedroom after slamming my door on her when she cancelled my weekend plans because I rolled my eyes at her; in the basement, spilling a bowl of cheerios, feeling my leg blossom into a purple kiss, planted by a thrown porcelain bowl she claimed I had left out too long after being told to put it away. Despite the years between myself and Mama's spoon, I haven't forgotten the nights spent in saved tears, dreaming about a place where her words couldn't follow me, where her hands couldn't reach me. I remember evenings wrapped in blankets full of ugly what-ifs, wondering how many jobs I would have to work to raise myself and my sisters. I hear a clatter. The sound of footsteps.

The whirring *clack clack clack* of Mama's sewing machine starts up. I feel for my sisters, especially Rebecca. She's more sensitive than me and Olivia, taking these beatings to heart and down in her memory. Unlike me, she never resists Mama's hand, too afraid to see what that will turn into when pushed back. Olivia is starting to fall into the same motions I left behind like following screen directions to a never-ending movie. Like me, she is unrelenting, refusing to admit defeat. *I am not sorry*, she thinks to herself, locking her bedroom door, refusing the foot rub or dessert Mama offers hours later. *But you will be, one day.* Leaving the safety of the couch, I head to Rebecca's room. Her date with the spoon lasted longer than usual.

Shame hangs heavy like a thick blanket as I move up the stairs. I survey the empty space where there had been three buzzing, angry bodies. After making my way up the second flight of stairs to my sister's room, I knock on the door. She sits on her bed in the corner of her pale yellow bedroom. Silent tears spill down her ruddy cheeks, red from Mama's fingers. I do not ask if she is okay. I do not ask if it hurts. I stretch out across her bed, across her small calves, coated in a thin layer of peach-fuzz blonde hair. Her body rises and falls in short breaths. I roll over and offer her a half-smile, hoping to revive her sense of humor.

'Hey, better you than me.'

She wipes her swollen eyes and smiles reluctantly.

I say, 'Well, I love you,' to which she nods. She rolls over on her side and faces the wall. 'Tell me when it's time for dinner,' she says.

I get up and head back downstairs, to my movie, which has not stopped for me. As I walk through the kitchen, I step on something hard: Mama's spoon, snapped in two.

§

When I was a girl, I loved leafing through the faded red album that held snapshots of my mother as she grew up in a place neither rural nor suburban: Fayetteville, NC. I would trace the black and white corners of the pictures, thick pages of cardstock resting against my fingers as I paused over the shiny images. Snapshots of a smooth-faced woman with tall, brown hair set in perms, the physical manifestation of an obsession with Duran Duran and Molly Ringwald. Sporting a detective-looking hat, dark eyes peering from behind a school wall with a redheaded

girl, grinning. A tiny-toothed toddler, poised in a red satin dress, large head round and hopeful. Long, lithe limbs stretched out around two taller sisters, bushels of brown locks meshed together, an impenetrable web of shared genetics. White-haired and smiling, cheeks high and rosy, a makeshift crown resting naturally between hidden ears, captured after her first and only performance as Cinderella.

I was mesmerized by how different she looked in each one. Regardless of how many times I asked, the answer to *What did I get from you?* never seemed to satisfy me. I needed to hear Mama intone again and again through pleased lips, *My cheekbones, my torso, my chin*. The notion that I could visibly see my lineage enthralled me. I searched photos of my grandparents, aunts, uncles to see if I could find pieces of the chubby freckled face I squinted at in the mirror. I wondered what I looked like to other people from inside the glossy, framed photos Mama slid into albums, what the years would do to my own face. Would I look the same as I did in those squares, smiling and unaffected, saved in a moment of calculated happiness by the flash of a camera?

Mama is and always has been beautiful. I guess that's why Daddy married her, his first girlfriend, soon after spotting her lounging in a red lifeguard's swimsuit on his shift at the Pembroke public pool. I loved listening to my parents recount the story of how they met, when they fell in love, when they decided to have me. I always thought how lucky they were to have spotted each other when they were both still so young, still visibly vibrant, without the touch of age to taint their perception of each other.

Many evenings were spent flipping through photos of my parents sprawled out on flowered couches, caught on a Polaroid. Standing straight and proud by one another, Mama in waist-high white shorts that expose her supple summertime skin and Daddy, blonde and slick-haired with sweat, black and white soccer jersey clinging to his tall, thick frame. Both are smiling. There is Mama pressed against Daddy, legs interlocked, arms wrapped around each other in full circles, sitting in our upstairs recliner. They seem happy. I must have taken the picture because my sisters were merely a thought in my young parents' minds, but my memory of the image rests solely in its printed shades of light.

Looking through these photos, I find only smiles, only positioned angles. As I move from one shot to another, I retrieve remembered pieces of arguments, scuffles, and hot tears that have escaped the final frame. Funny how pictures are only as honest as the person viewing them. Scanning my parent's faces, I wonder just how long the glowing assurance of an image lasts before the happy fog begins to dissipate, allowing hints of memory to tinge the view.

§

Mama was the oldest of three daughters, top of her graduating class, serious in all her endeavors. Beneath the strict and negligent reign of my grandmother, Mama grew up without reassurance, seeking praise in her own practices, whether it be placing first in track or finding self-worth in the passionate sighs of her suitors. She longed for the day she would turn eighteen, and when that day came, she left. She went to college by her own pocket, met my father, and decided to flip the page of her past life, to start anew.

§

Now, at twenty-one, with four years of living on my own to give me perspective, I am trying to develop my own snapshot of her. It is impossible to reimagine our relationship as anything but strained. I spent years tucked between the knobby green cushions of our recliner, straining my

eyes as I read library books—shovelling stove-popped popcorn in my mouth to a rented movie. I did these things alone, eager to find some space for my mind to wander in our cramped house of five. Evenings were mine as my young sisters crashed, drooling in bed by nine. Both parents retired to their own hobbies: sewing and cable TV. The shiny worlds between the pages and behind the screen were safe to occupy. The characters' lives I consumed were filled with an excitement, a brightness that I did not believe to exist along the ridge of mountains outside my front door, especially not within the confines of my mother's home.

After I hit the age of accountability, I grew increasingly insolent and Mama grew increasingly impatient. She had just developed the first and only women's center in Lincoln County, The Girl's Resiliency Program, before she had me. With purple plush everything, board games, four desk sets, and a kitchen, Mama had set out to find and protect the underprivileged and overlooked women of Lincoln County, West Virginia, an area nobody thought to give a shit about. Still clinging to her breast, I met her girls—girls with bruised eyeshadow and lip rings, girls with cigarette perfume and bed-bitten nails, girls with waist-length hair and colorful rings decorating every finger.

Even as a child, I could tell my mother loved them, her work. They made a mural on an unused brick wall, women of all shades climbing up a stony impasse to reach the peeking sunset beyond it. They wrote songs about the men who hurt them, women who hurt them, hopes, jokes, themselves. They put it on a CD and sold it out of a rinky-dink, patchouli-smelling coffee shop and pottery studio they founded. They comfortably piled on top of each other, watching movies and pinching each other's sides. They had relays and bake-offs and produced lots of tears. My mother was busy with her baby often.

It's funny what different people remember. I remember giggling and retracting like a rolly-polly bug to avoid Mama's raspberries as a child. I remember being swung around in dizzy circles, ecstatic. I remember hiking up our gravel hill with Mama's summer intern, Julie, and seeing her handle a baby garden snake. With a hardened face, I told her black snakes were the ones you had to look out for, trying to appear older and tougher than I was. My mother remembers car rides scored by my red-faced howling and topless stepping-stair recitals of Disney soundtracks. She remembers pushing a plush quilt she made up against my sides, reading aloud *How Much I Love You*. In the middle of story time, she answered the phone call from Theresa, a thin, tan teenager with too many siblings and unemployed parents. When she came back, I had already begun to fade into the warm depths of sleep, so she whispered to me, 'I love you.' She says I asked her then if this was true, or if she loved her girls more than me. She tells me this with the tight throat of a guilty mother even though it happened more than ten years ago. She left the Resiliency soon thereafter and eventually without her, it collapsed. Thinking about her decision now infuriates me, because I can see what those girls and that program meant to her, and I cannot bring myself to believe that I, an ignorant child, had been able to convince my mother to do this to herself. At the time, the only difference I noticed after she made her decision to leave was the growing regularity of hushed arguments between her and my father.

After that, my mother began to work jobs that brought her no joy. Grant writing. Selling makeup. Teaching. Maybe this is why she sought happiness at home and in finding neither my father nor myself to appreciate her the way she desired, became disappointed and hostile. Evening walks in search of deer poop and winter afternoons spent wrist-deep in puzzle pieces became silent car rides and slammed doors. Kissing brier-pricked fingertips after eating baskets of hand-plucked blackberries became routine backlash and red-faced slaps. Hushed songs of *I love you* were returned with venomous slurs of *You will never meet my children*.

Maybe Mama hoped her other children would order the increasingly chaotic image she had created, bringing it the kind of poised contentment that one would expect to see hung above the

fireplace or sent out in a card at Christmas.

§

Maybe the root of our differences resided in our likenesses—our inability to compromise, our resentment of being wrong, our fear of being forgotten. At fourteen, it's easy to overlook the subtleties of a snapshot. I diluted the image of my mother down, highlighting the areas I found less than satisfactory, and in doing so, missed the nuances that bear a resemblance to me. I wanted so badly to be an individual, to be of my own making. I hated the idea that my essence was crafted by someone who was not me. Lying in bed, swathed in handspun quilts, fantasies of my real parents coming to claim me consumed my imagination. Long-limbed, blonde, and glowing, they would reach down and pull me out of the restrictive rurality my adoptive parents had kept me in. They were composed, gentle, and most certainly, wealthy. Their dinners weren't punctuated by slammed plates and spat arguments. They didn't call you a heinous bitch between backhands. They didn't have to walk half a mile uphill, groceries in hand when the snow blew in. They didn't tell you how much bigger you are than they were at your age. They had indoor pets. They went on vacation.

I could not accept that I was a product of imperfect people. I could not accept that the traits I resisted so deeply would eventually become my own. To avoid being tainted with the stain of Appalachian motherhood, I tucked myself in my room behind a book or a screen, hoping to hibernate until the day I turned eighteen and could leave, refusing to face the weight of inadequacy I felt from my mother, who is and always has been beautiful. I was trying so hard to push her out of the frame of my self-portrait that I was oblivious to the fact that when I look in the mirror, I find her regardless.

§

When I was fourteen, I found the book *The Enneagram* stashed deep within the upstairs closet that had recently become mine. The book promised to reveal my temperament, my strengths and weaknesses. To tell me what kind of job I should pursue. What kind of person I would be attracted to. A fresh-faced teen, I devoured the lengthy quiz enclosed, dying to discover exactly what type of me I was. As it turns out, I'm 'The Achiever.' I sprinted down the stairs from my bedroom, the thick paperback book flopping wildly in my hands, to find my mother. She sat cross-legged on the living room floor, needles hanging out of her mouth, piecing together an outfit for one of my sisters. I asked her with excited eyes what this meant, because she would know, having an MA in Psychology. A pink-headed pin fell from her mouth as she smiled. Pulling the rest of the multi-coloured crowd out from between her teeth, she told me that she too was The Achiever.

'We're image-driven, successful, motivated,' she said. My mouth agape, she worked a thin needle through the pleated chiffon by her knee. She continued talking without taking her eyes off the fabric: 'Hate to break it to you, but you're more like me than you think, baby.'

white tenebraes magic

Heller Levinson

what else can get the job done what other can rectify when the allotment is narrow & the obsequies vague ; overdrawn , , , there you go leading off with a question when results only matter. pulling strings from a hat . like . the shape of things to come ditto ; , please, the whale was vast but pallid . it fought its pallor ferociously. a thing of the past is not without scrutiny. this is a poem about the mid-east. ask me how i know it. because i can throw it. throwing is authentic , , it's body speak. missiles are inauthentic though they are large on impact. ; ; stripping down the quilt to fiber , , , the delights of enterprise have yet to be fathomed. could you please not speak for me , Mr. Phillips. i know my own tongue *** a language not marred by controversy , , untapped mapped through soliloquy

» ;

the shape of a reticent disjunction disqualifies me from making sense , , , certainly my dressage scores suffer , . .

, sense being the purest form of nonsense.

, olatunji

. you are what you vision

Loving Love
Heller Levinson

fuse calypso

collapsing armatures

sponge eureka

pacing palpitant gearing swim

:swim

overland the strenuosities deplete

buoyancy

aeration

the beauty of numbers

pinned to a protuberant mesmerism
Heller Levinson

shackled to leaden logarithms

rifled vasculars

taped to the spine of a commingling absenteeism

convulsive undertows mete out polished lamentations

the murals are unfriendly

lidlollmimemummaryleap

layer mandibles deep across the rut

blaze from the spider-claw of a mustang marigold





Elephants
Anna Deligianni

Do-Overs

Heath Brougher

off sun
 the sun is there
 sunken eyes don't see light
 twisted broken fruit
 what is broken?
 trying again
 in the quaint matchlight
 illumine a hall
 a bouquet of sun shines

sun offer
 itself the sun is here
 eyes sunk blind
 mangled fruit twisted
 what is bloomed?
 another try
 fostering quant portions of light
 a luminous hall
 a banquet of sun is found.

The Rube Goldberg Sonnet

Sarah Brown Weitzman

starts when a long submerged memory
 rises to the surface of the clear lake
 of perception where it bumps
 against a raft of meanings attached
 to the taut line of experience
 shifting the direction of the current
 of feelings that drop like old coins
 into the cracked jar of language
 toppling it over to expose a crowbar
 of close observation that jimmies
 the lock on the gate to understanding
 releasing a herd of fresh images
 that strike a bell which rings in
 a new music and summons the poem

The Last Good Winter

John Stupp

For MK.

Funny
to think
of snow
and clouds
and wind
as the annealing furnace
at Ford
proclaimed another work day
warm at over 100 degrees
as if men
before punching out
might remember
a winter
in the early 50s
when Lake Erie froze
and your dad took you
(you were little)
to watch
daredevils drive
on the ice
from Cleveland
to Canada
tires spinning
the old cars heaving
while underwater
walleye and perch
wondered what the hell
was going on
in their sky—
a sky
cold like that last good winter
the sun a distant furnace
above your father
the water hard as his hand
and close enough

In the Cave in the Holler

Paul Luikart

The old man finally died. His status in the last couple of days a slow slide from dying to fully gone. And I watched him go, as witness for my brother Kevin who wouldn't come to the hospital. Afraid he'd grab all the tubes and yank them out, take a hammer to all those beeping machines, upend the hospital bed and leave the old man kicking like an upside down cockroach on those spic-n-span floor tiles.

'I don't want no murder case on me,' Kevin had said when I asked him to come to the hospital with me once in awhile, back when they found out the cancer was chomping Pap's brain.

'Patricide,' I said.

'What?'

'It's what they call it when a son kills a father.'

'Whatever it is, I'm sure afraid I'd do it. The cancer's been taking its sweet old time.'

I didn't say anything and Kevin muttered, 'At least he's suffering.'

When I got out to my truck from the hospital, I opened up the doors to let the heat out. Then I called Kevin. When he picked up, I said, 'He passed. About an hour ago.'

Kevin didn't say anything at first. Understandable enough. I figured he was just digesting the information. But then there came these wet little muffled sounds on the other end of the line.

'Are you crying?' I said.

'Pap's really dead?'

'It's true, little brother. I was sitting there when the reaper snatched his soul.'

'What'd he look like?'

'Who, Pap?'

'When it happened. What he look like?'

'I don't know, dead. What do dead people look like? He looked like dead.'

'Just describe it to me.'

'Like tell you he was pale or something?'

'Like that. Keep going.'

'Well, he was pale. His skin was really pale. And loose all around his face, his skin was loose and just hanging off his jaw.'

'What else?'

'And his mouth was a hole. They took his teeth out so he wouldn't choke on them. So his mouth was like a black hole.'

'What else?'

'And his eyes were closed. They sort of flickered behind his eyelids but he never opened them.'

'What about his hands?'

'They were cold. And pale too. Pretty much white. The skin was so thin, like tissue paper. You could've tore it if you tried to shake hands with him. Tore it right off the bone without even trying. And—'

'All right, that's enough.' Kevin's voice was solid now. 'Do we bury him or what?'

'I'll take care of all that.'

'Let's burn him,' Kevin said, 'We'll throw his ashes in the cave in the holler.'

We left it that we'd meet up for dinner and talk more about it. Kevin will be like a broke-winged bird that you nurse back to health. When you go to set it free, it don't flap off right away.

It just kind of stands there trying to remember what freedom feels like.

Pap loved Kevin in his own way, or I should say that maybe he actually figured something out about love before he died. Just in the nick of time. The last thing he said before he quit talking—his very last words—were, ‘Tell your brother I’m sorry.’

I’ll have to figure out a delicate way to put that to Kevin. Maybe I’ll get him drunk, but I am going to tell him. Who am I to deny a dead man his last request? Even if that dead man is Pap. I wonder what will happen if, when Kevin gets up to the Pearly Gates himself, Pap is standing there. Be the first time in the history of religion that somebody chooses to go back the other way. One look at Pap and Kevin would holler, ‘Devil, come get me.’

But I don’t think I’ll miss Pap much either. I don’t know how heaven and hell really work. Pap did his time here on Earth. They don’t treat his type too kindly in the joint. I’m sure that was a kind of hell for him. But still, everybody’s sorry for their sins at the last minute.

I Hear You Have Some Interesting Scars

Kasandra Larsen

I’d like to see them up close, maybe trace
 one with my tongue. Too nervous? I’ll go first:
 lift my dress. Yes. Higher — cover my face
 so I can’t see you grimace and reverse.
 Now it’s your turn. Show what can’t be erased.
 Turn around. Slower. Why label skin cursed?
 Kissed is a better description, the case
 made by new bikes, old boyfriends with a thirst
 for contact, moms rooting out evil’s place,
 replacing our sins with stretched white starbursts,
 keloids new entrances to sacred space.
 Tattoos you didn’t choose, lines unrehearsed,
 proof that you stumbled but finished the race:
 beauty, spontaneous. Show me your worst.

The Only Oblivion

Zachary Riddle

I've wasted so much time
twisting our broken truth
like hair around a finger—
the man I've become isn't
the man I chose
to be. I'm wingless.

Dad, your black-feathered wings
once stretched wide every time
you held me. After you died, I chose
to be more than your absent truth.
You wanted me to be everything I wasn't.
I drew our tragedy in finger-paint,

but mom wrapped her third-shift fingers
around my throat and slashed my wings
because I wasn't
what she needed—a timely
reminder of her first harsh truth:
I was the result of a childish choice.

An unfair choice. An empty choice.
I am my mother's frail fingers.
But this is not the truth:
I've been hiding from. Wingless
means *I'll become you, in time.*
Abandoned. In pain. Nothing

hurts as bad as knowing I'm not
how anyone says anything. I chose
to want, eventually, the body that time
gave to me, but God snapped his fingers
and decided feathers and wings
weren't the truth

I deserved. The truth
was what it's always been: I didn't
want you to die, Dad. Your wings
were buried in a blue cemetery I chose
to keep beneath my tongue, a fingers-
length away. You and I were out of time.

Truly wingless. Devoured by our only oblivion,
the blood-soaked truth, the time we didn't have,
haunted by dreams of our fingers intertwined.

I long to enter the unholy . . .

Kurt Luchs

I long to enter the unholy
veins of lightning
like the sound of breaking glass,
to trace the shudder that
flashes through clouds and shakes
the dead in their new shoes;
to lie down in the soft coffins of long grass
as in a woman's thighs,
and never breathe again
unless my breathing were the wind.

I long to fall forever
between stars, into the dark
like a hole someone is still digging;
to burrow in the drifts of snow like silence;
to be the shadow that walks away
when a man dies.

Annihilation

Annie Blake

O darkness, how you eat me—
your tendril fingers, your deep fish mouth—
your tongue is as fat as a sponge. How you suck off
my jewel eyes—those light-hearted pastels
the flavour of blissful children.
My tongue just hangs and slackens.
I am the widow who must stay loyal
to this man. I am let loose in bits—
I am blown away into space—
like the snow inside the television
that fuzzes when the universe jars under the weight
of so many satellites. I am lost,
I am lost, I am lost.





Utopia #3
David Carapinha

Holy Night

Mary Ann McGuigan

Dennis pulled up in the thick snow, and Maggie moved with care toward the passenger door, the curb hidden. He leaned across to open it for her, but until she got in, she didn't smell the drink on him. The three days' growth he'd had when last she saw him was a beard now. She took in a breath, willed herself to say nothing yet. She'd been waiting a long while, because the meeting with her brother had been short, without ceremony, and the wind had revived the pain in her bones. She was grateful for the warmth of the car.

'Mom, what did he say?' Dennis said, without so much as a greeting. There were no more niceties, only a frantic late-night call pleading with her to get money for him from her brother somehow. Dennis had gotten his license back three months before, and she wondered now if he'd had a single sober day since then, except maybe the few when he knew he was going to see her. He was wearing the navy sweater she'd given him for his birthday, thick and soft. She wanted to touch his sleeve, get through to him, but there was no such thing. The St Christopher medal, his father's, still hung from the rearview mirror, motionless now, as if unhappy to be along on this trip. The man had seen what was coming. Takes one to know one.

She swallowed, pulled her gloves up to cover her crooked wrists. 'Pull over and let me out.' Her voice trembled.

He acted as if he hadn't heard her. 'Did you ask him? What did he say?'

'I'm done asking anything for you.'

But Maggie had said that many times before and she was sure Dennis knew it wasn't true. They seemed destined to circle each other this way, like worthy opponents who know they can come in for the kill at any time. The real killer, she knew, was wanting to save him.

'If I can't get the money, Bev is leaving,' Dennis said. He gripped the steering wheel like a man ready to be sentenced. 'Her mother's taking Liam. I can't believe she'd do it.'

This was incomprehensible to him, and that alone redeemed him in her eyes. He saw how wrong it was. Maggie wondered if he had some recollection. He was only five years old when she'd done it, away from her only three months, but she had always feared he'd never forgotten it—waking in a different room, crying for someone no longer there.

'What happened?' she said.

'I told her they were late with my commission.'

'I don't understand.'

'She thinks I got my job back.' He paused, perhaps expecting his mother to scold him, but his lies were routine now. 'We're two months late with the mortgage. If I don't come up with the money, she's going to Atlanta.' Another pause. 'She's got a job offer, that bank her old boss went with.'

Maggie wanted to comfort him, insist that Bev wouldn't leave, that no mother could do that to her child. But that was the lie.

The streets hadn't been plowed yet, and the car swerved in the snow. He didn't seem to have a destination, circling back to the place where he'd picked her up.

'Are you going to tell me what his answer was or not?' he said. He wasn't watching the road.

'He said you'll get no money till you stop the drinking, get yourself some help.' This was not the answer she'd gotten. Her brother had given her one word—no—not bothering to dress it up with reasons.

'For fuck's sake.' He said it like a plea, his eyes weary. 'When is it going to stop? When are

you all going to stop?’

‘When you do.’ The windshield wipers rasped, grating slowly under the weight of the icy burden.

‘Sure, Mom.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘No problem.’ He applied the brakes, for a reason Maggie couldn’t see, and the car slid again. ‘You know what it feels like? You wanna know what staying sober feels like?’ She said nothing, wanting only for him to see there was no other way. ‘It’s like you survived a flood and you’re waiting to get plucked off a roof. But instead everybody keeps telling you you’ve got wings, use them.’

Again, her heart tore, like a gauzy thing. If he’d just get help, she’d get him the money somehow, she swore to herself. But she answered him harshly, the only way she knew how anymore: ‘You’ve got no choices left, Dennis.’

‘I’ll give you a fuckin choice.’ The car moved faster. Out the side window, she watched the slushy snow spit from the car’s deep slippery tracks. She didn’t know then, or later, if he’d seen the van coming out of the side street or that they were sure to hit it. She grabbed the wheel, but he fought her, determined to keep her from taking over. He was strong, and she wondered where he summoned it from, this will, when all he ever seemed to want was another swallow, another way to be gone.

Some unintended harmony of their competing hands on the wheel allowed them to miss the van coming into their path. But the car spun, maybe more than once, because the heavy crystals flying in the sweeping headlights made Maggie feel they’d been shaken inside a dome of swirling snow. The car landed with a grating thud against what she saw later was a mailbox.

She’d twisted her hand and it was hurting. She looked to see if Dennis was all right. He was slumped over, his forehead against the steering wheel, face hidden. She was about to ask him if he was hurt, until she saw his body shake—as if something fearful possessed him—heard him sob. She touched his back, and even through her thick glove she could feel the warmth of him, and what she hoped was longing.

She got out of the car, walked carefully around to the driver’s side, opened his door. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s walk a bit.’

He didn’t look at her, but he didn’t resist, just took his coat and locked the car behind them. Their big steps were unsteady in the deep snow, lumbering and silent. He took her arm and they leaned into the relentless wind. Tiny Christmas lights wrapped unevenly around brownstone banisters tried to do their job, blinking weak colours through the thickening coverlet. Laughter escaped from a downstairs window that framed a table lit with candles, covered with the remains of too much food. The sated family raised their glasses, to toast a night divine, and Maggie prayed for something to be born in her son, some hope that would give him a reason of his own.

They walked some more in the heavy silence until Maggie thought she heard something. Voices? Perhaps from a rooftop somewhere. But then they were gone. She kept listening for them.

‘How can she do that?’ Dennis said. ‘How can she leave him?’

‘Maybe it’s something she has to do, just for a while.’ Maggie could try to explain the urge to separate from a life that refused you everything, a life with no mercy, and he might even understand. But no matter how she described the items she placed in the bag she packed for him that day, the instructions she tucked into the side compartment, the place meant to hold only his toy horses and fire engines, the choice would remain unfathomable.

A large black dog came out from a doorway, startling them. Ears flapping as he shook snow from his fur, he stopped to sniff their boots, as if they’d come from a place he knew. ‘Be careful,’ said Maggie as Dennis reached down to touch him, but the dog, insisting it was time to play, darted away. Chasing after him, Dennis fell to his knees.

'For Crissake, Mom.' He slapped snow off his pants as he got up. 'Have you ever gone one day without telling me the world's on fire?' He made a kissing noise to woo the dog back, but it wanted to be chased.

Maybe it was time to tell him, Maggie thought. Maybe now. Maybe she could loosen the steel grip he had on the notion that bad and wrong were his exclusive domain. She was losing him in any case, she knew that. 'Yes, I have,' she said, no longer hesitating. A long-buried part of her had found its voice. 'When I left your father.'

'When was this? You never left Dad.'

'I did. After the stitches in my temple.' She touched the scar he'd always believed came from falling into a coffee table. 'And I left you too.'

'What do you mean?' he said, turning to look at her, and she saw he was afraid she might be telling the truth. 'How old was I?'

'Barely five.'

'You mean that time you were in the hospital?' His voice was up.

'Yes, when I left you with Aunt Kate.' She remembered the weight of him in her arms as she put him on her sister's couch. He struggled to keep hold of her, not understanding why she had to go.

'You were gone so long. And Dad never came to see me.'

What she'd done still felt wrong. 'Three months. I wasn't sick. I left your father. He didn't know where you were.'

'Where did you go?'

'To my friend. Linda.'

'In South Carolina?'

'Yes.'

The snow was heavy on their coats now, glistening in the streetlight. 'But you knew you'd be coming back.' He said this as if it needed no confirmation.

'I didn't know what I was going to do.' What was the point of mercy anymore?

He must have had more questions, but he didn't speak. If telling the truth was a mistake, there was no correcting it now. She reached to touch his arm but he took a step away from her. 'I should have told you long ago,' she said, 'tried to explain.'

'Explain? How the hell do you explain something like that?' He stared down the street.

Remembering him as a teenager, desperate to be rid of her, she spoke into his sullen, angry back. 'Dennis, listen to me. I was falling apart. I know what it's like for Bev.'

He turned, lost his footing, then raised his arm to right himself. Pointing at her, he shouted, 'I've never hit her, never. I'm not like my father.'

'That's not what I'm saying at all. Try to imagine how desperate she is. It's been years now. And there's no sign of an end to it.'

Moments passed, but he stood there without answering, snow filling the footprints that lay between them. When he walked off, she hurried after him, but she couldn't keep up. The falling snow gradually blurred his silhouette, but before he turned the corner the streetlight lit him briefly, shoulders slumped, like an actor leaving the stage.

Breathless, hip aching, she walked toward the corner, followed his tracks in the snow, but he was too far ahead for her to catch up. He'll turn back, she thought. He wouldn't leave her here. But she remembered how stubborn he could be. She thought of the huge storm that came during the winter he turned six. He had become sullen since her return, unwilling to be held. She had to take him to visit Kate every weekend. When he needed something at home, he went to his father. Through the back windows they watched the mounds growing on the branches and the wrought iron chairs and the deck's railing. His father asked him to shovel the drive with him and

he jumped at it. Maggie watched them from inside, moving clumsily in that heavy silence that envelops the air as snow fills every crevice and reshapes the rooftops.

The anger she felt watching them in the snow returned now. She wondered why she'd told him anything tonight. What was she thinking? What was the point? This wasn't the first time she'd attempted to connect with him, hoping some breakthrough would follow. It never did. She would always be to blame, and she was tired of it.

She pulled her scarf up over her mouth, but there was nothing she could do to warm her feet. She could hardly move her toes. She wondered if the buses were still running. She couldn't stay out like this. She was frightened. Getting closer to the main street now, she hoped she'd find a tavern still open, some place with a phone. Her cell was in her pocketbook in the car, and she had no way to call a cab.

She listened for approaching cars, remembering how they used to sound on the street when she was young, when tire chains were needed in the snow. She would pretend they were sleigh bells and imagine carriages and women in long coats, their hands tucked into fur muffs. Her father, nearly sightless from an accident, had no trouble filling his glass, letting the cubes tinkle, finding a station that talked about sports, and she would sneak away, tuck herself into a blanket near the window beside her bed, open the sash a sliver and close her eyes, imagine the sounds of a different life.

She was tired of believing things might change, hoping for it. There was no other life, not then, not now. The blank space her son pulled around him was impassable. His eventual apologies, even tears, were like clockwork. Six months ago, his head in his hands, her insides shuddered listening to his pain. But she wondered now if these tearful eruptions weren't involuntary, like spasms the body produces when it can come up with no other way to ward off what's coming. She carried this child, cared for him, tried to keep him safe. But he didn't want this life.

Pulling her scarf closer around her face, she tried to warm her skin with her breath. The main street wasn't far now. Head lowered, she lifted one foot, then the other. When she heard him speak, she wasn't sure it was his voice. 'Mom,' he said again, and then he was moving toward her. 'I'm sorry,' he said, touching her shoulder. 'Let's find the car.'

His being sorry was nothing new and nothing she cared to hear, but he held out his arm to her and she took it. She was exhausted. Without the wind in her face, it was easier. She tried for these last few soundless blocks to imagine that things could be all right, but only because she had no strength left to face any other possibility.

He spoke as if they hadn't been interrupted, as if he had something important he needed to know. 'So will you tell her? Tell Bev?'

'Tell her what?' She stopped walking to look at him.

'That it was a mistake. What you did. That you shouldn't have gone away like that.'

Nothing had changed. Dennis was not a single step closer to understanding the pain he was causing. 'Dennis, I don't think that will make much difference. I'm sure she's desperate.'

He did not want that. It was as if she'd given him something too heavy to carry. He leaned against a car, at a loss for what should happen next. She looked down at their footprints in the snow, overlapping, indistinguishable.

'You'd have to tell her you'll go back to rehab.'

He didn't answer this, shook his head. He looked up and she watched his breath leave him in a gasp.

'What is it?' she said.

'Is that me?' he said, getting off the car to lean forward to see better.

She followed his gaze to the storefront glass, darkened, mirroring their faces with the help of the streetlight. 'Of course it is.' In the reflection, his eyes were deep set, dark and haunting, hair

wild. The beard, red and uneven, so different from his usual smooth look, made him seem like someone else, someone with a purpose that would never be understood.

As he took her arm again to move on, he was trembling, and she sensed he was frightened. 'Okay,' he said. 'I can tell her that.'

She didn't ask him what he meant. It was too cold, too late.

'Listen, thanks for going to Uncle Pete.'

'I'm sorry it didn't work.'

'I'm going to get this straightened out,' he said. 'I know what I need to do.'

The thrill of hope returning engulfed her, like a thick fog you hoped had passed.

'I love you,' he whispered, but she already knew that wasn't a cure.

Before long they could see the car, fully covered now, its rear jutting oddly into the street. Beside the driver's door, the black dog sat, with an impatient glance in their direction. A command was long overdue. Maggie heard Dennis laugh. He unlocked the doors and reached in for a brush to clear away the snow. As her son worked, the dog stood by, more expectant now. It knew this routine.

Dennis opened the door for his mother to get in, and she watched him come around to the driver's side. Then he waited. The animal wasn't leaving. Dennis got into the car, but still it stayed. With no more than a glance and a grin at his mother, he got out of the car again and let the dog into the back. Its hair was long and it shook itself clean of the wetness with purposeful indifference, treating his new companions to one last spray of white.

'We can stop somewhere, put a bow on him for Liam.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Maggie. 'You don't know where this dog's been. It could be diseased.' She felt panicky, suspecting now that Dennis had given up on whatever it was he had just promised himself.

Dennis pulled away, plowing through the mound of snow that bordered the treacherous street. He turned the radio on, let a carol fill the car, and the dog placed his head over Maggie's shoulder, watchful, as if he knew the way. She was grateful for the heat from the vents and the dog's foolish company, but her insides trembled. She was unmoored, unchained, understanding finally she couldn't change how things would be.

Their footprints by morning were almost imperceptible. The dented mailbox stood strong. Then the snow itself was gone. Before long, the sun didn't set until well past dinnertime, and the dog's coat was thick and shiny. Eventually the waters rose around them, but the stars shone brightly. The powerless days had begun.

Half Life

Claire Scott

Dead-half my life half-dead all my life
 thumbing through curled pages
 that slither-slide away
 some blank some illegible
 some in Croatian or Mandarin

or strange symbols of metaphysical math
 that I ponder with a muddled mind
 praying for a message that will
 reveal the meaning of my stagger-
 stepping-stammering life

the come-and-go-ness of it all
 O Lord the come-and-go-ness
 one page sprinkled with paprika (sea salt) (sadness)
 one with a sickle and scythe
 or perhaps the fangs of a werewolf

a Rorschach test for the truly insane
 and sometimes I wonder
 O Lord I do wonder
 so weary of the come-and-
 go-ness of this life

my slipped soul slithers
 toward the
 luminous light
 of Your last page

Pikachu Parade

Esther Vincent

On capital punishment, with reference to the execution of Chijioke Stephen Obioha in Singapore on November 18, 2016.

It's a shame, a sham,
a national fuck up

arbitrary, arguably;
capital punishment

decapitate, desiccate,
hang, draw, quarter, capitulate

to legal frenzy over
a precious package,

more precious
than human cargo

2,604.56g of cannabis
to be precise, sealed

the deal, his fate, the gate
to a life, yes, he's dead,

swings from a noose,
lynched like the 'vegetable

matter' he was guilty
of carrying, no guilt

from the state, the hangman,
supreme in judgement, executed —

so pathetic or poetic
that alive, kicking, 10 life-sized

Pikachu parade down Changi
Airport, their first, his last

breath, distracted, captivated
the nation, who failed to notice

the irony, apt, prosaic,
a mockery, travesty

Upon Further Review

Joanne Spencer

Hard earned salary

Behind a desk
Poured Coffee
Access Granted
Dream job

Time out of mind

Business trip
Three Martini's
Two smiles
One hotel key

Having fun now

Child Support
Alimony
Every other weekend
Christmas alone

Heart attack pending

Upper lip sweat
Hidden whiskey
Top drawer left
Always empty

Drink anxiety wisely sir

Don't spill it
Waste it
Ignore it
You bought it

Deal

You, post-truth

Nadia K. Brown

Dissonance buckles,
filtering into every
breathless, creaking bone.

Fragments are woven,
constructing a perilous
ease; wringing it clean.

Ill-fitting layers,
shaking off their candour as
you're righted again.

After Nine Years Vegan

Brendan Stephens

You wanted a quick kill:
spring-loaded back breaker
baited with cookie butter,
but I wanted the triangle glue tunnel;
you caved.

In the morning we found,
not a house mouse but a star-nosed mole
flattened out star-fished and dead,
octopus nose caked in crumbs slathered with glue.

I dropped trap, bait, and body in the garbage,
and remembered the panic of pool swimming
when I tried to surface from a dive
under your inflatable reclining chair—
how I pummeled the plastic,
toppling you and a library thriller into the water.
You laughed later,
but I remember the panic,
the mammalian thirst for oxygen.
For beloved, out-of-reach air,
I would have clawed
through the plastic polymers, skin and sinew.

Wolf-Yard
Dana Sonnenschein

For Apache and Cheyenne, formerly of Beardsley Zoo, Bridgeport, CT.

A Nor'easter wails and whines all night, and the zoo wolves huddle, curled like statues at the entombed city's feet. Come dawn, they romp in the snow that keeps people home, that muffles traffic and falls alike on high-rise, blacktop, hard-pack, windfall, frostbitten goldenrod. They bury their muzzles in drifts, bite at snowflakes and roll, tongues lolling, tails wagging, then leap to their feet, matted with white, the timber wolves they might have been, and when a siren rings out, they lift their heads and howl for the pack, howl for the struggling elk and the hare frozen, crouching low, howl for the massif of storm-cloud and the wind rushing through pine and fir. They do not miss summer's heavy-footed herds, all sugar-ice, match-light, burnt meat, chemical bloom and gusts of hot metal. The wolves chase each other and turn and bow and snap and leap, two alone, present tense in every muscle and glance. Winter piles up on winter. Cold seizes their narrow shoulders. Now, now they lope and leap with other shadows in the night-forest, beyond chain-link and dry-stack stone, blinking at sky-glow, shaking star-flecks from their fur.



Wholehearted
Hari Lualhati



The Stare
Hari Lualhati

My Mother's Suit

Mathilda Wheeler

Creative nonfiction.

The bright pink wool of the suit pinkened my cheeks and made me feel pink inside. Its slim-fitting skirt stopped just below my knees and hugged my hips, while the boxy top had a Peter Pan collar and three-quarter sleeves. Large pink covered buttons ran up the front. It was very well made: Saks 5th Avenue on the inside label. My mother had worn it in the early nineteen-sixties, a gift from her mother.

I'm not sure what impression I was trying to make on that late summer day in nineteen eighty-two. The pink suit did not represent who I was, but perhaps who I wanted to be: a beautiful, confident woman with talent and potential. My hair was long and full of crinkly waves. I brushed it out, braided my temple hair and swung the strands back with barrettes. I knew how important it was for the director to see my face, to see how I express my emotions. Well, I sparkled. A cliché in the making.

There had been an ad in the paper: Actress Wanted for Leading Role in Movie. I hadn't acted in so long, not since university two years before, and despite having told myself I was done being an actress, I was dying to perform again. I'd taken a depressed look at my resume: thirteen college plays, nothing professional. I didn't stand a chance. Still I shrugged, stapled it to the headshot I'd had done in New York City the year before, and wasted the postage.

Then the miracle. A man named Roger called to say I was to come in for an audition.

Maybe I squeaked. I don't know. I'm sure I sounded like an idiot. I gripped the phone tight and pushed my thumbnail into the tip of my middle finger. The pain helped stabilize my voice. I needed to not sound breathless. I needed to speak over the loudness of my heartbeat, but not yell. I needed calm.

He gave directions: a full hour commute from my downtown Chicago apartment. Plan to spend the whole day.

'I can manage that.' Then I remembered my sweet golden retriever and my excitement left so fast I swayed. 'Except I can't leave my dog that long.' Brandy had epilepsy.

'Bring him along. We love dogs.'

An acting job where I could take my dog? Where they would love him? Nothing could be more perfect. I suspected something was off, though, and didn't tell anyone about the audition. My roommate was home visiting her family in Pittsburgh, so no one knew.

On the long drive out, I practiced my aplomb. I knew I had talent, despite my failure as an actress in New York. A bus driver there used to call me Rebecca of Sunnyside Farm because I looked so fresh and young and innocent. I was offended, really. I knew about the scary parts of New York City. I knew I had to be careful crossing Washington Square down near the Village, that people were dealing there and it was dangerous. I knew I could get hurt. But it was all part of the process, right? You had to learn how to put on that 'don't fuck with me' look so you didn't look like a victim. And I did that. And I never got hurt. Still, at the end of that first year out of college I understood I wasn't cut-throat or focused enough to make it on Broadway or anywhere in the city. Time to move on.

Moving on to movie stardom! I laughed at myself in the car. 'Just an audition, Tilly.' But I was already imagining telling my family—later, when I had the part.

Brandy and I pulled up outside of a double-wide trailer home in South Chicago suburbia, far enough out of the city to have plenty of land around it. The blinds were down. It didn't look like any kind of movie studio I'd ever imagined, but what did I know about movies? Don't be a coward, I told myself. I straightened my pink skirt, adjusted my pantyhose, and grabbed Brandy's leash. A woman with high cheekbones answered the door. She gripped a growling dog by the neck.

'Hello, I'm—'

'Yeah.' She stared at me with a sort of disinterested hatred that startled me. I stared back, fighting for poised charm. She wore ripped skin-tight jeans and a black t-shirt that clung and showed off the wiry muscles in her arms. She could have been anything from seventeen to thirty-five. I was trying hard not to be prejudiced (she was clearly Native American), but she gave me the willies, and her dog—Brandy backed away toward the car.

'Come on, it's okay,' I said.

The dog under her grip leaped forward, but she held it back. 'It's a wolf, don't try to touch it,' she said.

'I won't.' I held up Brandy's leash. 'What do I do with . . . they said I could bring him.' Maybe this wasn't such a great idea.

She yelled something at the wolf, who slunk back into the house. Then she took Brandy from me. 'Go on. I'll put him out back. He'll be fine.' He didn't want to go with her, but he did.

Six or seven other young women sat in the dim room just inside the front door. I smiled in relief and got a variety of looks in return, but we didn't chat. This was, thank God, a real audition after all, so we were all in competition for that leading role, whatever it was. I perched on the edge of a sofa, back straight, legs crossed demurely, and surreptitiously plucked the wrinkles from my pantyhose. We were all edgy, excited, sizing each other up, figuring out what physical types each of us were. A few were clearly hard-nosed, with the kind of look that could play a biker chick with sharp humor and a bad-ass attitude. Others looked more normal, more like I imagined I looked, though for sure no one else was wearing a bright pink suit. They wore slacks or jeans, which would have been way more comfortable. I told myself I looked really good and sat up even straighter. I wondered how Brandy was doing.

There weren't any pictures on the walls, and the furniture was dingy. Of course it was a movie studio, so they didn't need to make it look homey. We sat for a long time, waiting to find out what came next. We started whispering softly. We'd all responded to the same ad. What was this project anyway? How would we audition? Was there more than one part? How long were they going to make us sit here doing nothing? I couldn't believe I'd forgotten to bring a book.

Roger finally came in and began talking. It was incredible, how this short man with plain features and more bulk than he should have been carrying filled the room with his personality. He spoke of his production company, how he would be making many movies, how he wanted to hire someone who would act in several of them, that it was big time stuff. Roger's words excited me, but it was his energy that had me believing him. This guy's charisma, I thought, would split apart a dam, and if I got this role I would be part of that torrential river force—he would take me along with him.

I remember getting hungrier and hungrier as the day progressed but no one mentioned any food. Eventually, we each met privately with Roger and his antagonistic assistant in one of the smaller rooms and read over some lines from a movie script. When it was my turn, I rocked. I knew it. I felt the power as I performed and when I was done, I could tell Roger was excited.

He told me I was high on the list, very high. Significantly high. I came back the next day, and the next and the next, always with my dog, who huddled in a corner of the large yard and tried to stay out of trouble.

I was not totally stupid. I knew this set-up was suspect. The place did not look like a movie set or anything that could be turned into a movie set. But they told me the movie crew was coming in soon. And there were a few other women who were also called back. Roger and the despising Native American took videos as we auditioners walked around. We read more scenes, and waited. Hours of waiting. Finally we were all given contracts to sign. We laughed. We congratulated each other. We'd get our first paycheck in two weeks, and they were even going to pay us for the lengthy audition time. At last I was a professional actress. And here's the thing: Roger had chosen me to be the star.

The others had been hired for lesser roles, so they didn't need to come in the next day, but I did. I had to come in for specific training. Me! That evening I danced around my empty apartment with Brandy, who got excited for me. A part of me still felt queasy; this movie business was all so new. I didn't want to call my mother until I really understood what was going on. She'd want to know everything, and I still didn't even know what part I was going to play. That was very odd, but I told my suspicious common sense to shut up.

The next day Roger greeted me warmly. 'I love your energy. I love your look. But you must flow with your movements. You're way too rigid.' He told me to take a good look at his assistant, who was the only other person there. She looked more disdainful and detached every time I saw her. I was supposed to watch her, to learn how to move my body enticingly.

'Show her,' he said to her.

She stripped down to nakedness and started a hula-dancing with fluid grace, arms and hips swaying. Looking back, I wonder if she was drugged out of her mind. Her eyes were dead. Or maybe hostile. It was hard to tell. She performed with both brilliance and a kind of robotic emptiness.

Roger must have seen the shock I tried so hard to mask. 'You'll have to show some nakedness in these movies, that's what the film industry requires these days, and we have to make sure you're comfortable with that. I know it's hard, but we'll help you. Everyone has to go through this. It's okay.'

When I in turn stripped down and tried to move with similar fluidity, I could not. I was too self-conscious, too scared, too upset that I was even in this position, that a person I did not know well was watching me, seeing me naked, that anyone was seeing me naked because truly I had been naked in front of very few people before that time, and each time it had been difficult. Nothing compared to this.

Roger was kind. He knew I was fighting my emotions. He decided to take me through steps to ease into comfort with my body. He gestured for me to go into the bathroom and just look at my body in the mirror. 'Look how beautiful you are,' he said. 'Let us see what you look like on film.'

And after we watched the video of me standing there, rotating stiffly for the camera, he had the dead robot woman prepare me for more beauty: she clipped and shaved my pubic hair, which was obviously too bulky for pure aesthetic beauty. I tried to rival her for calm and scorn, head so high my neck hurt. Back rigid. I would do this because I was brave, I told myself, and my morals were archaic, and people had to do things to further their art career and I was strong. Strong enough to do this. And besides, I needed to get over this self-consciousness issue. It was a problem. Roger recognised it. I recognised it. And I despised myself for my crippling modesty.

So getting naked in front of Roger and the zombie was a step in liberating myself. Plus, I didn't want to quit this adventure into stardom. I didn't want to say, 'Look, this is the line I won't cross.' Because you have to be willing to push through anything if you want to make it in the theatre. You're supposed to do it. You're supposed to have that kind of ambition. This was my chance to prove myself.

Wasn't I brave? Yes, I was. I was so brave. I danced the hula naked, I accepted the criticism that I was too stiff, I accepted the idea that I could learn to be less stiff, that Roger would teach me, that the zombie would model for me. If my heart pounded so hard I felt sick, I could live with that. At some point I would be able to collect my dog and go home. Thank God my roommate wasn't there.

'This will loosen you up,' Roger said. I followed him into a darkened living room. And on the TV in that darkened living room, I saw my first and only pornographic films.

'Just watch, see what you think.'

At the time I never made the connection that this was the kind of movie he was perhaps preparing me to be part of. I was too shocked by the content to make any intellectual connections. Women coming down on toy trains that carried phalluses; women gyrating, licking what looked like human bones. My synapses went into spasms. I couldn't look away.

I was naked on the couch, next to Roger who kept watching my face, which I tried to keep expressionless. It was so warm and hard to breathe. I couldn't believe it at first—that this is what we were watching. If there was any dialogue, I don't remember it. All I remember was being appalled by what I was seeing, and being tremendously embarrassed by the liquid pooling in my crotch. And then Roger began to touch me. He touched my breasts, teased my nipples. Perhaps the woman did also. Roger was a stocky man, heavy with muscle and overlaid with some fat, a good 3 inches shorter than me. The Indian woman was his height, maybe a little taller. But Roger laid down with me and I let him enter me. He was so small I could hardly feel him in there—I remember that. He was small and quick and I was grateful for that.

Afterwards, he released me for the day. I put on my clothes, gathered up my dog. I drove home.

I never told my roommate. I never told my mother. I never told anyone before now. Too embarrassed. I was so stupid, the situation so scuzzy. And I let it happen. I let it.

I'm married now to a kind, gentle man who was a virgin when we first made love. Our sex life has been sweet and safe. I don't think he can understand what led me to act like I did when I was twenty-four, what led me to accept that I had to have sex with Roger that day. That I deserved the abasement, maybe because I'd been stupid enough to answer that ad, or because I was disgusting enough to be aroused by the pornography.

I worry about my beautiful daughter, what she will face as she enters young adulthood. I know I can't protect her from herself, the stories she tells herself, the rules she makes, the barriers she feels she must break down in order to live to her potential. I'm glad she's tall and strong, that she's enamored of kickboxing, that she's stubborn and hasn't allowed herself to be swayed by parental demands. Maybe that's a sign that she's got more self-esteem than I've ever had. That she has the resources to spit in the face of people who tell her to do things that she knows are wrong. I hope so.

I don't want my daughter to learn the kind of lesson I did that day. To feel that kind of shame. I want to drown Roger in mud. I think of him lying face down in it and me stepping on the back of his head. I have no pity for him. Why do people like him exist? And how do we protect our daughters from him? Can we? Do all women have a similar story? One we keep buried because the shame is too great to share. Or maybe because we despise ourselves for becoming a cliché.

Poor baby, I tell myself now. I was barely twenty-four years old, struggling to find the boundaries of my existence and floundering pretty badly along the way. I made a mistake and got lucky. I could have gotten AIDS. I could have ended up drugged in a prostitution ring, or pregnant, or like the zombie Indian woman.

My poor epileptic dog and I never went back to that double-wide. Somehow I joined with

other auditioning women who (did they all strip? Did they all have sex and watch porn movies? We did not talk about that) took Roger to small business court because he never paid us for time spent 'in training.' He never appeared in court. He disappeared. That was my vengeance. Our vengeance.

I never again wore the beautiful pink suit I inherited from my mother, though I think of it sometimes. I do.



High Noon
Anna Kazan

A Simple Twist of Fate

Bobby Steve Baker

an invasive species: say Zebra Muscles
perfectly adapted to an environment it has never seen before: say
Lake Huron
wipes out 10,000 years of evolution
they are eradicated by a disease that comes along and kills them all

two cannibals are eating a clown
one says: does this taste funny

these thoughts
keep me up at night, there will be consequences

two clowns are eating a cannibal: one says
it's funny you know this tastes ironic.
the other one answers: that's funny, I was thinking it tastes
vaguely like clown.

nature hates an oligarchy: a royal lineage
a single species genus: say homo sapiens sapiens,
that is never nature's way
when this happens the great thrust of life
loses its sense of direction

people often over estimate
how many close friends they have, apparently
this is also true of those who have been mistaken as close friends

if you decide to have children (and why not)
you should keep trying
until you get a girl: it has been shown that parents with at least one girl
live eight months longer

72,000 BC was a really bad year
volcanic ash six inches deep covered the planet
the sky went dark human kind were reduced to about 3,000 souls
in East Africa, but they made it and now have six billion living descendants

2016 is said to have been a bad year Bowie died Prince died Cohen died
democracy died
terrorist or cops or cop haters killed people every day
a rape victim had a mental breakdown testifying and was put in county jail
where she was beaten and abused
after a month they realized a mistake had been made

meanwhile the alleged rapist
was in the same jail at the same time
no one laid a hand on him
does this taste ironic or vaguely like clown

How to Locate God on the Surface of an n -Dimensional Calabi-Yau Manifold

Zach Weber

In the air now. One man used a bobby pin to peel an apple. At the back of First Class a woman chewed ice plucked from a plastic cup. The stewardess served drinks with ice in plastic cups. A baby's crying was general throughout the cabin. From his middle seat in Coach a man spoke rapid Portuguese into an obsolete cell phone, his voice high and thin, visibly irritating those who flanked him while he clearly didn't give a damn. On his left side a militant feminist graduate student with a laptop computer attempted to complete her master's thesis regarding the effects of novel technologies (i.e. social media, the advent of portable digital photography *and* videography) on the rate and effectiveness of the dissemination of materials both beneficial and detrimental to the cause of feminism. This task was made difficult by her garrulous neighbor (whom she knew already to be a chauvinist asshole) and the unseen wailing infant and the, to be honest, three orders of godawful whiskey she'd downed since takeoff. She had the cups stacked on a corner of her folding tray table not occupied by her laptop, with the leftover ice piled into the top cup. And to peel an apple with a bobby pin, one first stabs the straight end of the pin through the upper curve of the apple, then moves the pin in a spiral down the apple, while rotating the apple, rather like the standard process, the only difference being the need for a gentle and subtle sawing motion along the spiral, which maintains momentum and is crucial to achieving even a halfway decent result through these admittedly unconventional means. What one should be left with is the classic coil of a peel like a flat green garden snake. The smell of the cabin was less than pleasant, despite the faint scent of the apple. One could almost pick out by sight the parties responsible for the malodor. It would do no good, though. The woman in First Class chewed ice and silently repeated her mantra. It gets better, it gets better, it gets better. Her hair had the sheen one might expect from an expensive styling serum and she smelled like a designer brand. Men generally considered her to be top shelf. She wore real jewelry. She had a face that compelled gazes, black hole-like, never to return beyond the event horizon of her aura. And in Business Class a baby wept. Why shouldn't it? Babies cry because they live in a dictatorship of frightening scope where nothing is clear and nothing is self-obvious, for one cannot recognise the self-obvious if one is not self-aware. And in Business Class its parents sat weary and trembling. They were outstanding parents, everyone could tell. Tolerant, patient, strong, loving. They were doing it right. They sat there quiet and weary and trembling and thinking, quite independently of one another, of murdering their child. Of course they wouldn't do it. But they had to think it, like any of the other dark and foolish impulses which occur to everyone throughout the day, like scratching and picking at a nasty bug bite or peeling back a scab to see what's inside of oneself. These feelings were simply the workings of the imp of the perverse, who makes us think those thoughts that we find most horrible and repellant. And this is one of the most brutal paradoxes of parenthood: that the unconditional and overwhelming hormonal love of the parents is at times equaled by a desperate longing by the parents to rid themselves of the object of their love and all of its responsibilities. So, given that this is the foundation of every person's relationship with the world, it should be no surprise to us how fucked up those relationships tend to be. The man was Brazilian. He spoke Portuguese with a Brazilian accent. He was incredibly self-conscious and unsure of what the beautiful young woman to his left thought of him, so he used his speaking far too loudly into his mobile phone as a way of simultaneously drawing attention to the self which he presented publicly and away from his true inner self, which he feared nobody would ever find attractive. This was a simple redirection of responsibili-

ty: by creating a false persona that was unlikeable, he eliminated the risk of potential rejection, the horror of being himself. If anyone didn't like the persona, or didn't find the persona enjoyable, sexy, fun, etc., all the ways in which we feel compelled to appear to the world, then it didn't reflect on him as a person, because he was just playing a part. And it was sort of perverse and sad that in his tortuous attempts to be liked, he ended up lonelier each time he tried to be less lonely. The SAM was a decommissioned Soviet 2K12 Kub typical of the ex-USSR nation in whose airspace the plane now flew, somewhere between Russia and Afghanistan. The man with the apple took a bite of his apple. He thought about calling the flight attendant over so that he might dispose of his apple peel, but realised that he would then later have to call her over in order to dispose of the apple core, so he resolved to wait with the peel in his lap while he ate the apple in order to save the clearly overextended stewardess a bit of work. And this made him feel rather self-satisfied. It always made him quite nervous, though, eating on a plane. There were many considerations, he found, that were not self-evident. To wit: would his neighbors be disgusted, repulsed or otherwise upset by the method he used to eat the apple? Would this repulsion be apparent to him? If it wasn't and he continued to eat the apple, would those in the adjacent seats grow to hate him over the course of their flight, the way in which one hates a rat or a mongrel that tears with abandon at its meal, ignorant of those that despise it? The fact that he consumed apples and indeed all food in a thoroughly normal manner did not factor one bit into these considerations. And the operators of the transporter erector launcher (TEL) were young village men employed in the service of the local warlord. They had consumed a by-no-means negligible amount of homemade root vegetable liquor and mistaken a commercial aircraft en route from Hong Kong to Amsterdam for an enemy bomber and come to the only logical conclusion, given their inebriation. The SAM was approximately a quarter of the distance from the ground to its target. The Brazilian's frequent looks over to his left-side seatmate, which he desperately hoped would not be perceived as lustful or lascivious in any way, increased in frequency as the flight dragged on and indeed as the frequency increased, so did the perceived intentions of lustful-/lasciviousness increase, in an ever-ascending spiral of mutual misperception and anxiety, up like a missile with deadly intent. The liquor the mercenaries drank was homemade but not artisanal. The graduate student preferred artisanal liquor. Their swill was not only of a blindingly high proof, but also contained sizable traces of aluminum and dirt. Nor would the parents be at all interested in the moonshine. The Mother was a recovering alcoholic and the Father abstained out of solidarity and love. They loved each other. Their hands joined across the infant's chest caressing the infant lightly where they joined, rising and falling in concert with its even, sleep-measured breathing. The baby had a bit of black hair which grew in the centre of its head. And the beverage cart is the Stewardess's first line of defense against the hostile crowd. In another row in Business sat three men in similar blue suits and loosened red ties, mid-level hedge fund managers for a well-known international firm, returning from Hong Kong to HQ in Amsterdam, all three more hungover than they had ever thought possible, the man in the middle at the tail end of a brutal coke jag, feeling like he had a raging sinus infection in addition to the hangover. As an airline stewardess you don't see the deepest depravities of which humans are capable, you are simply witness to the immediate impact of their execution. This, along with the relentless tedium of the job, tends to give flight attendants a very specific and odd sense of cynicism. A non-aggressive view of the cabin as cow pen. Each request is just another blurting call from a depraved bovine. And they don't give a fuck. And the SAM was approximately halfway the distance between the ground and its target. It gets better, its gets better, it gets better. Ms First Class wore earrings. Gold hoop earrings with no diamonds. She didn't like diamonds. When she wore diamonds she always ended up thinking about Africa and the tragic state of the diamond-mining nations there and she couldn't enjoy her jewelry and her day would be

thoroughly ruined. She wore gold. She didn't know if gold caused conflict but she didn't want to know. It wasn't the fact that diamonds caused violent conflict that had caused her to stop wearing them, it was that she knew that they caused violent conflict, and if she wore them while knowing about said conflict, she would become terribly unhappy at the thought that maybe she wasn't as good of a person as she believed she was. So she wasn't interested anymore in the origin of any of her luxury goods, lest she feel the need to forgo them out of selfish guilt. In the event of an emergency, please. There was an unsent email saved on the hard drive of the feminist's laptop. Large commercial airplanes such as this are subject to an uncomfortably high population density. Every aspect of the experience is in some way anxious, noxious, upsetting, discomfiting, nauseating, disgusting and/or unappealing. He bit into the apple, not realising that the bobby pin had become stuck in the bottom of the apple, cried out in pain as the sharp flat point of the bobby pin punctured the floor of his mouth, under his tongue, and watched through tears as the green coil of apple skin fell to the floor of the cabin. His mouth tasted sour and bloody. He put his index finger into the pouch of his bottom lip and removed it to see the upper portion of his finger opaquely coated in the dark red blood of his mouth. It was a fine sort of burgundy he wiped onto one napkin while using another napkin to apply pressure to the wound and soak up the little puddle of blood in his mouth. Only the feminist had read the email. It was addressed to a man she knew well, who she had loved before she gave up on having feelings. After an incident with the man, she had resolved that, moving forward, she would forgo emotion and fill its absence with more reliable things. So she didn't have feelings anymore, or impulse. To be clear, it was not this negative incident with the man that had radicalised her views on gender—it was simply her nature. The SAM was approximately three-quarters the distance from the ground and its target. And she was never more reassured of the wisdom of her decision to go emotionless than when she heard the crying of an infant and saw, she thought, in the purple-pouched, sleep-deprived eyes of the parents, a far hollow stare of regret. That email: Times New Roman, 12 pt, left-justified, typed into the word processor that came with her computer, the same word processor she used now to write her thesis. Writing her thesis didn't feel so much like banging her head against a wall as it did like having her head glued to a wall. At least with the former some progress could be made, however minimal, and it would end soon. The hedge fund managers were barely coping with the baby's screaming, which sounded to them, in their hungover states, like microphone feedback at some demonic circus. It was looking like maybe the child would never sleep. One of the hedge fund managers, the one coming off the Hong Kong cocaine, repeatedly bemoaned the fact that he owned a pair of very expensive noise-cancelling headphones, but had forgotten to bring them. His colleagues were very tired of his bitching—it only added to their discomfort. The stewardess heard only the lowing and grumbling of so much cattle. In the rear, in her seat, in her space, she stared through the backs of a couple hundred useless heads. Sometimes she fucked the pilot in between flights, in private airport restrooms reserved just for them. The pilot was four years her senior. They didn't know if they were in love. Those sad heads she sat behind—it was all so sad. Why was she so sad? It wasn't weeping sadness, but something between panic and grief. She didn't look out the windows anymore. During her first few years as a flight attendant, when she still had hope, as she served the passengers their drinks and goddamn pretzels and peanuts, she would look out at the clouds and the barest impression of what lay far below. Now this was a job and the sky was devoid of mystery and the clouds were just water waiting to break. There were three medical doctors on board. One sat in First Class, two rows behind the woman eating ice. He wore a slim-fitting Italian suit in black with a red necktie and his eyes were grey. The other two doctors sat in the same row in Business Class, on either side of an extraordinarily old man, a row ahead of the crying infant. They did not know each other. Nor did they know the man. The doctor on the old

man's right hand side was a woman in her mid-forties, brunette, face pointed like a bird of prey, eyes large and hazel. The other doctor was a male, early thirties, murky blonde with a pack-a-day habit and severe aviophobia which he was attempting to overcome, this flight being part of a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) regimen that his psychiatrist had insisted was necessary in order to move forward with his treatment. One of the main sources of anxiety which contributed to his phobia was the fear of being shot down out of the sky, dying without warning, without witness. With the exception of the coke-jittery financier and the chatty Brazilian, no one on the plane spoke. They formed a kind of quartet with the crying baby and the howling engines. The engines like the hives of some large bees, more droning than buzzing. The feminist thought to herself that the sounds of the cabin were rather reminiscent of a John Cage composition and wondered why he never wrote a piece for jet engine. The Brazilian was considering going to the bathroom in order to masturbate. He would think of his seatmate, her large breasts, long hair. He was a compulsive masturbator and in fact had never flown without masturbating at least once. Already he was feeling guilty about what he was going to do. This fact, however, would not stop him from doing it. The motivation behind so many of his actions was an attitude of self-deceptive spite. He wondered if the crew's bathroom on the plane was nicer than the passengers'. Passenger bathrooms had, so far, left him dissatisfied. Not enough elbow room for his purposes. The sound of cracking ice in First Class cut through the dense rumbling of the engines and the whipping of the air that the plane left in its wake. Turning toward the back of the plane, pivoting at the hip, the woman in First Class noticed for the first time that the seats in other classes were upholstered with entirely different fabric. She was looking for a flight attendant. A total of four passengers had killed a person at some point in their lives. Of these, only one had been within his legal rights to do so. He was an officer of the law and he didn't sleep well anymore. The other three, two men and one woman, were vigilant at all times, as a guilty conscience will allow no true rest. In fact, the woman was on her way home to confess. She sat in Business Class, rehearsing her confession in her head. Before she went to the police she would visit her mother and embrace her and tell her that she loved her and she was sorry. It was cruelly ironic, she felt, that the same guilt and self-realisation which made her long to repair her relationship with her mother was also the impetus behind her desire to confess, officially, all that she had done wrong and to be removed from her mother's arms and become a ward of the state, which is a far worse mother no matter what her mother's failings may have been. She was trying to think of the best way to apologise, the most sincere way to confess, when the stray SAM made contact with the hull of the plane, the Brazilian was still thinking about the bathroom and the feminist was thinking about her email, the doctor was thinking that he wasn't any less scared of flying yet, the parents were very tired, it gets better, it gets better, it gets better.

Stop.

For a second, nobody thought of anything.

Refael Salem was born in Israel in 1985, is a graduate of Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. Since graduating, he has had several group exhibitions in art galleries such as Ana Cristea (NY), Dan gallery (Tel Aviv) and art fairs such as Munich Contempo. refaelsalem.com.

Leonard Zawadski currently lives in Chicago, IL. Poetry of his appears or is forthcoming in *Quail Bell*, *Burningword*, *Five:2:One*, *The Trumpeter*, and *Atlas Poetica*.

Patrick Cahill co-edits *Ambush Review*, a San Francisco based publication. He received his PhD in History of Consciousness at UCSC. His poetry twice received the Central Coast Writers Award. Recent work has appeared in *Left Curve*, *San Francisco Peace and Hope*, *Digging Our Poetic Roots*, *Otoliths*, *Forgotten*, and *Volt*.

Jeff Ewing is a writer from Northern California. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *Sugar House Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs*, *Utne Reader*, *Crazyhorse*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Saint Ann's Review*, and *Southwest Review*, among others. jeffewing.com.

Shai Yossef was born in March, 1980. He is married, and a father of three children, lives in Israel in Rosh Ha'ain, likes to "sculpt" his artworks on the canvas. They are very texturized, large-scale, colorful and often engage in social values. shaiyossef.com.

Patricia J. Miranda is an American poet whose work has been featured in *DASH Literary Magazine*, *The Literary Nest*, *Mount Hope*, and *Pif Magazine*. She teaches high school English and lives in the state of Ohio with her husband and two children.

Marian Kilcoyne is an Irish writer based on the West Coast of Ireland. She has been published or is forthcoming at *Prelude*, *The Louisville Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Crannóg*, *Ofi Press*, *Frogmore Papers*, *Cyphers*, *Apalachee Review*, *New Contrast*, *Quiddity*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Off The Coast*, *The Galway Review*, *The Liner*, and others. mariankilcoyne.com.

Laurie Theurer's writing draws on her childhood in California, Peace Corps Thailand, and over 20 years in Switzerland. A freelance project manager, mother, ranch manager, and emerging author, she's addicted to flash fiction and the moment when words meld into something magical.

Iris J. Arenson-Fuller's work has been published in *Jewish Literary Journal*, June 2016; *Compass Magazine*, Greater Philadelphia, 2010-2015; *Esme On Line*, 2015; *What the Flicka*, blog; *StoryBleed Magazine*, 2014; *Issues Anthology*, published by Bob Vance, Petoskey, MI, 2008-2014; *Omen*, Anthology of CT Feminists in the Arts, 1971; among others.

Anya Charikov-Mickleburgh is a London-based artist, has had three solo shows, been exhibited across the UK, Switzerland, Russia, Ukraine including MANIFESTA 11 in Zurich and Pushkin House in London where she curated a major exhibition. Graduates in 2017 from the Royal College of Art where she is doing an MA in Painting. anya-charikov-mickleburgh.weebly.com.

Amanda Gaines is a recent graduate of WVU's Creative Writing program, was a poetry reader for *Callopie*, its literary journal, and similarly, a poetry editor for *Mind Murals*, the Eastern Region's literary journal for Sigma Tau Delta. Her poetry and fiction have been published in both.

Heller Levinson's publication, *Smelling Mary* (*Howling Dog Press*, 2008), was nominated for

both the Pulitzer Prize and the Griffin Prize. *Black Widow Press* published his *from stone this running* in 2012. *Wrack Lariat* is newly released from *Black Widow Press*. *tenebraed* from BWP appears in 2017. He is the originator of Hinge Theory. hellerlevinson.com.

Anna Deligianni was born in Athens, Greece, where she lived until she studied at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, specifically at the Faculty of Fine Arts. Besides painting, she was very interested in engraving and installations, which led her to participate in various festivals on these subjects. behance.net/annadel88bee9.

Heath Brougher, poetry editor of *Five 2 One Magazine*, has published two chapbooks with another forthcoming, and his work has recently appeared in *Gold Dust*, *Chiron Review*, *Off/with*, *The Seventh Quarry*, *Main Street Rag*, *MiPOesias*, *The Journal*, *Peeking Cat Poetry Magazine*, *eFiction India*, and elsewhere.

Sarah Brown Weitzman has been published in hundreds of journals and anthologies including *The New Ohio Review*, *Poet & Critic*, *The North American Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poet Lore*, etc. Sarah received an NEA Fellowship. A departure from poetry, her fourth book, *Herman and the Ice Witch*, is a children's novel published by *Main Street Rag*.

John Stupp is the author of the 2007 chapbook, *The Blue Pacific*, and the 2015 full-length collection, *Advice from the Bed of a Friend*, both by *Main Street Rag*. His new book *Pawleys Island* will be published in 2017 by *Finishing Line Press*. He lives near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Paul Luikart's first collection of short fiction, *Animal Heart*, was released by *Hyperborea Publishing* in May 2016. His MFA is from Seattle Pacific University. He and his family live in Tennessee, USA. Twitter: @PaulLuikart.

Kasandra Larsen, two-time pushcart nominee, has poems in *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Literary Juice*, and *The Lake* (UK); forthcoming in *Stonecoast Review* and *Flumes Literary Journal*. Her chapbook *Stellar Telegram* won the 2009 *Sheltering Pines Press* Chapbook Competition. goodreads.com/author/show/4414529.Kasandra_Larsen.

Zachary Riddle is a graduate student at Central Michigan University and current Editor-in-Chief of *Temenos*. Zachary has had poetry published in *Apex*, *The Blue Route*, and *Glassworks*, among several others. He co-published a chapbook of poetry, *This Labyrinth We Wander*.

Kurt Luchs, in addition to writing poetry, founded and edits the literary humor site TheBigJewel.com, online since 2002. He has written humor for the *New Yorker*, the *Onion* and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, among others, as well as writing comedy for television (*Politically Incorrect* and the *Late Late Show*) and radio (*American Comedy Network*).

Annie Blake, an Australian writer, has poetry published or forthcoming in *Southerly*, *Hello Horror*, *Verity La*, *GFT Press*, *About Place Journal*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and more. Her poem 'These Grey Streets' has been nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize by *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*. annieblakethegatherer.blogspot.ie.

David Carapinha is 23 years old and was born in a little town of Sesimbra in Portugal. He pursued his dream of studying photography and just finished his bachelor's degree.

cargocollective.com/davidcarapinha.

Mary Ann McGuigan's short fiction, nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, has appeared in *The Sun*, *Prime Number*, *Grist*, and other magazines. The Junior Library Guild and the NY Public Library rank her novels as best books for teens; one was a National Book Award finalist. maryannmcguigan.com.

Claire Scott is an award-winning poet who has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Healing Muse* and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, among others. Her first book of poetry, *Waiting to be Called*, was published in 2015.

Esther Vincent is from Singapore. She was co-editor of a poetry anthology, *Little Things* (2013) and the accompanying *Teacher's Guide* (2013). Her poems have been published in *New Asian Writing* (Nov, 2016), *Unhomed* (2016), *Sound of Mind* (2014), *LIVEPress Pilot* (2014-2015), *Little Things* (2013) and in *Ceriph #4* (2011). Twitter: @EstherVincentXM.

Joanne Spencer's work has appeared in *Sick Lit Magazine*, *Mother's Always Write*, *Wildflower Muse*, *Dying Dahlia Review*, *Ink In Thirds* and *The Tribe*. She currently works as a contributing journalist for *The Florida Newsline*, a reviewer for *The Review Review* and has published one novel, *The Letter Keeper*. poetryroad.wordpress.com.

Nadia K. Brown's fiction has or will appear in *Yellow Chair Review*, *Lost Documents*, *Corner Club Press*, and *(parenthetical)*. She is a mother of three children and many pets, and a health-care worker.

Brendan Stephens is an MFA candidate at the University of Central Florida. His works have previously been published in the *Little Patuxent Review*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, and *Clash By Night Anthology*.

Dana Sonnenschein teaches literature and creative writing at Southern Connecticut State University. Her publications include *Natural Forms* and *Bear Country* (poetry) and *Corvus* and *No Angels but These* (prose poems). Uncollected work appears online at *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Poemeleon*, *Pith*, and other journals. facebook.com/Dana-Sonnenschein-104761453404.

Hari Lualhati was born in Philippines and obtained a Degree in Fine Arts in University of the Philippines, Diliman 2006 (CumLaude). Now based in South Africa, Hari has received numerous awards from international competitions and been featured in international art magazines. Hari's artworks have been exhibited in different parts of the world. harilualhati.yolasite.com.

Mathilda Wheeler holds a Master of Fine Arts in Writing from the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts. Her short story, 'Moving On,' won seventh place in the 2011 Writers Digest Competition, Children's/YA division. 'Lindsay Plays Dead' appeared in *Tiny Lights: A Journal of Personal Narrative*, vol. 14, No 2. thewonderwriter.com.

Anna Kazan was born in New York City, travels internationally and currently resides in Japan. She earned her BFA at the School of Visual Arts, and has worked as a visual arts teacher in many institutions. Her work was displayed in 2016 at the Society of Illustrators. annakazan.com.

Bobby Steve Baker lives in Lexington Kentucky with his wife, children, and a large Airedale. He has published recently in *The Tule Review*, *Town Creek Poetry*, *Kentucky Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and *Picaroon*. His book is *This Crazy Urge to Live* by Linnet's Wings Press. bobbystevepoetry.com.

Zach Weber writes and listens to the wind. He is in his early twenties.

To everyone who submitted to, purchased, talked about, and read from *Into the Void Magazine*: thank you. Without you there would be nothing.



Cover Image: 'Two Boys in the Woods' by Refael Salem.

