

# Breaking Ground 2023



## DUALITY and OPPOSITION



This edition of *Breaking Ground* is the collaboration of  
the Spring 2023 English 175 Class.

Professor Virginia Shirley

Luke De Jager ♦ David Ely

Isabelle Galatro ♦ Jarrett Ludolph

Evan Mchugh ♦ Katrina Newell

Matthew Nowakowski ♦ Americus Sivers

As well as the many bright minds  
of the artists and writers represented within.

*breaking ground 2023*

*Duality  
and  
Opposition*

*SUNY Broome Community College  
Literary Magazine*

*Binghamton, New York*

Please direct all correspondence to:

Professor Virginia Shirley, Editor  
*Breaking Ground*  
Department of English  
SUNY Broome Community College  
P.O. Box 1017  
Binghamton, NY 13902  
email: shirleyvl@sunybroome.edu

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## DUALITY AND OPPOSITION

T h a n k s / G r a z i e / D a n k e / M e r c i / M a m ' n o o n ! ! !

This year threw a lot of curves at us. Someone (me) had to learn Indesign (yuck). Thanks, Rose Pero, for your patience and support during all of my stumbles and struggles. (As you can guess, there were a lot of them). Thanks to my suitemates for listening to, and forgiving, my rants while I slogged through this process. Thanks too to Chris Origer, for helping me figure things out with the program whose name I will never speak aloud. Thank you so much to the volunteer editors who spent their free time reading through submissions. Ellen Brand, Diane O'Heron, and Chris Origer. Thank you to everyone who submitted their work. I think we've got a nice showing for it, and we have quite a diversity of genres. And thank you to the student/staff of English 175 Creative Writing with Publication. I wanted to include a photo of our group on the inside of the front cover, but there wasn't time. So, thank you to Luke De Jager, Dave Ely, Isabelle Galatro, Jarrett Ludolph, Evan McHugh, Katrina Newell, Matthew Nowakowski, and Americus Sivers. And thank you to everyone who helped me get through my loss and grief. Duality and Opposition wouldn't have happened without everyone's help.

# EUDAIMONIA

≈ CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS ≈

## *Breaking Ground 2024*

Send us your best original poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, memoirs, artwork, photography, or graphic stories for our annual theme issue. As with past issues the only criteria are vividness, vitality, depth of thought and expression and, above all, excellence. Open to all SUNY Broome students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The theme of the 2024 issue is Eudaimonia.

*Reading and Submission Period:*

September 1, 2023 to March 20, 2024

For complete submission guidelines, and to submit your creative work during the submission period, go to [www2.sunybroome.edu/english/breakingground/](http://www2.sunybroome.edu/english/breakingground/)

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Special Color Insert

1. Isabelle Galatro ∞ The Sign
2. Mary Seel ∞ Autumn Frost
3. Rose Pero ∞ Light Up the Night
4. Barry Freedman ∞ Ostiningo
5. Deborah Hibbard ∞ Free
6. Christopher Origer ∞ Antelope Canyon
7. Virginia Shirley ∞ Maelstrom
8. DellaS ∞ Vortex

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Daniela Doller – *Crash (photograph)*.....Inside Back Cover

Deborah Hibbard – *Visitation (photograph)* .....Back Cover

# DUALITY AND OPPOSITION

Oh, hello. Thanks for picking up this year's edition of Breaking Ground – Duality and Opposition. When my class chose this as the theme last year, we had NO idea just how things would turn out. Who'd believe anyone would be afraid of Drag Queens when they themselves watched (and loved) Bugs Bunny, Patrick Swayze, and all those “hair bands” dressed effeminately as they grew up?

But we haven't lost our sense of humor – in fact we're gorging on it. It's no accident that most of the top streaming shows are comedies – Ted Lasso (Oi, Fekkit –Roy Kent), Schmigadoon, Hacks (Yes, Deborah, it IS like watching Picasso sing), Schitt's Creek (I'm very uninterested in that opinion). We need to laugh...

Now it's 2023 (Soylent Green is People, people!) and we're all supposed to have flying cars. No, Teslas don't count. And in spite of our duality and opposition, we're hurtling toward a Trekian future, where beings from all races and backgrounds could sit on the bridge of a starship and boldly go where none of us have gone before. Opposition and Duality is a bridge to bring us closer together in spite of how different we might think we are. It is full of humor, philosophy, hope, curiosity, and creative endeavors. I, and the English 175 class of 2023, hope you enjoy the ride.

Virginia Shirley  
Faculty Editor, Breaking Ground 2023

Student Editors:  
Luke De Jager  
Dave Ely  
Isabelle Galatro  
Jarrett Ludolph  
Evan McHugh  
Katrina Newell  
Matthew Nowakowski  
Americus Sivers.

## *Breaking Ground 2023 Awards*

\$100 First Prize for Front Cover  
Isabelle Galatro - *Depth in the Alley*

\$25 Prize for Fiction  
Dave Ely - *A Rebel Yell*

\$25 Prize for Non-Fiction  
Hiba Khan - *Barfi*

\$25 Prize for Poetry  
Luke De Jager - *Monkey Man*



## THANKS/GRAZIE/DANKE/MERCI/MAM'NOON!!

This year threw a lot of curves at us. Someone (me) had to learn Indesign (yuck). Thanks, Rose Pero, for your patience and support during all of my stumbles and struggles. (As you can guess, there were a lot of them). Thanks to my suitemates for listening to, and forgiving, my rants while I slogged through this process. Thanks too to Chris Origer, for helping me figure things out with the program whose name I will never speak aloud. Thank you so much to the volunteer editors who spent their free time reading through submissions. Ellen Brand, Diane O'Heron, and Chris Origer. Thank you to everyone who submitted their work. I think we've got a nice showing for it, and we have quite a diversity of genres. And thank you to the student/staff of English 175 Creative Writing with Publication. I wanted to include a photo of our group on the inside of the front cover, but there wasn't time. So, thank you to Luke De Jager, Dave Ely, Isabelle Galatro, Jarrett Ludolph, Evan McHugh, Katrina Newell, Matthew Nowakowski, and Americus Sivers. And thank you to everyone who helped me get through my loss and grief. Duality and Opposition wouldn't have happened without everyone's help.



*No Smoking* | DellaS

## Olympus Valencia

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ANONYMOUS

**Y**ou deserve a break, they said. You deserve to rest and relax in the pinnacle of comfort. You BELONG at the Olympus Valencia – Home for Retired Heroes.

It was OK. At first. Spacious rooms, 2,000 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, wall sized bullet and laser-proof windows. We get therapy, nutritionists, art and music lessons. It should be Shangra-fucking-La.

But the DC crowd won't stop hogging the shuffleboard and bocce. And they never clean up after themselves in the common area. At first, we were supposed to stay on separate floors, but after about three months they put Swamp Thing across from Hulk, because they're both green.

Speaking of Hulk, I'm so sick of hearing, "Hulk SMASH!" followed by, "Me want ice cream." An hour later, this is followed by Hulk dumping a Hummer sized load in the bathroom. (Who knew he was lactose intolerant??) Trust me, no one wants to clean that up.

Anyway. We and DC have learned to get along. We've bonded over roasting the independent crowd – those lugs from Dark Horse or Image. They keep trying to win us over, but it's just to fun to bust their chops. (Except for Hell Boy. He's freakin' cool).

Wonder Woman is OK. She started a book club, and while everyone thought it was going to be a heroines only kind of deal, she let everyone in. (Even Goose, that alien cat thing). We all like her, actually. And all of us, independents included, had an intervention with Super Man when he wouldn't stop puppy dogging around after her.

Maintenance isn't the best here either. It's taking longer and longer for holes smashed in walls to be repaired. Hancock got drunk and drove craters into the lawn. Some of them sat for so long they've turned into ponds. And the toilet paper has gone from three ply to one.

The worst was when they let the Manga and Anime crowd retire here. (Goku, please put your shirt back on. No one wants to see your saggy abs). If we weren't already crowded enough, the mixing of genres was enough to put most of us over the top. We might have the occasional POW or BLAM floating above our heads (that's mostly the DC crowd. Mostly) but interjections follow that crowd like Pig Pen's cloud of dirt.

And how some of them can cry! (Yes, I'm talking about you Izuka and Naruto). I know, I know. It's OK for men to cry. It's OK for anyone to cry. But these guys keep Kleenex in business. Oh, and what some of them are considered heroes for...Really, Kosei? You're a hero for playing Chopin?

Well, I'm off to a building meeting. There's talk of building a retirement home for super villains adjacent to ours. This place might not be the Ritz anymore (it never really was), but it's ours. ☺



## Devin and Finley

---

CARA BRAZEN

**W**hen I was a child, I grew up believing I had the same fish for 8 years. One night, I went to the field days with my mom and siblings. I had won a fish whom I decided to name Devin at one of those games where you throw a ring on top of a bottle. He was an orange goldfish who came in a plastic bag with a little bit of water, we immediately got home from the fair and put him a small fish bowl with some cute decorative rocks. Every day I woke up to feed Devin and hang out with him. This lasted for 8 years. He had been around for so long, I loved him so much, so when he eventually passed away I was devastated but I was thankful to have had him for so long. Or so I thought.

A couple years passed, I'm a teenager now. I was shopping at Petco with the intent of buying just dog food, when I walked past a shelf full of Betta fish. I thought they were all cute, but one specific fish caught my eye. He was Galaxy Koi male, his colors consisted of red, white, and blue. He stood out from the others because we were making direct eye contact, he was practically begging me to take him with me. I couldn't resist his adorable little fishy eyes and I decided to take him home. I named him Finley and he was an amazing fish that I had for a little over a year. He got sick somehow and I felt so guilty. I cried for days after his death and left his light on his tank because it hurt my heart to see it dark, you can call me dramatic but he was a great pet.

My mom and I had a burial for him in our yard. I cried as we settled him into a little hole in the ground in a little plastic box that was shaped like a coffin. After my mom finished putting the dirt back on top of his fishy coffin, she gave me a hug. We came inside to settle down and we were reminiscing about Finley when we started talking about Devin and how long I had him. I

didn't understand how a little goldfish from a fair who lived in a tiny fish bowl could live 8 years and my beta fish with a filter, 5-gallon tank and everything else didn't live past 2!

I blamed myself for his death. My mom couldn't bear to see me in agony anymore decided to tell me, that Devin never actually lived for that long. In fact, he died the first week we got him. She kept replacing my fish every time they died and I had no idea. She did this for 8 YEARS. Now not only was I grieving one fish, but I was grieving 2!!!

I now realize that it is very rare for fish to live for a long time and I was able to realize it was not my fault for Finley's death, but I still miss him very much. My mom was just doing what every parent would do and I appreciate her for making the effort to make me happy. I just feel like she didn't Have to keep it from me for so many years but at least she told me at a time where she knew it would matter and actually help me. Rest in Peace Devin and Finley ∞.

## to make this house

---

KELSEY CHEREVKO

fall began, and I wondered and worried - how would I make it through?  
soon the skies would clog up and the air would grow bitter and wet,  
and I would curl up in shivers, tortured, spiteful, and sad.  
then september passed,  
and I worried, how could I survive another overcast plague doomed to dull?  
another dreary display of shame and stress, another sober crisis,  
then october passed,  
and I inflated with concern for no one but myself,  
growing grim under their roof, asking why me? still?  
silently resenting them for winter's ailments,  
resenting the stagnation they so generously provided,  
I begged and I pleaded for a way out,  
how could I possibly make it through?  
then november passed,  
and I really started to worry, how could I make it?  
cooped up, bickering in somber opposition,  
I can't do it, I never let myself forget it,  
december passed anyway,  
I let tension that I created haunt me, let it make me wonder,  
how would I make it through? It's too long, too much,  
I'll go Nicholson on them if I'm not careful,  
but the holidays came and left,  
now there's nothing to look forward to, I insisted,  
now, how will I ever make it through?

spring began, and spring ended,  
and I began to pack my things.  
I had planned for this, I was ready.  
I never considered, how fast,  
time flew.  
finally, my big day, my grand exit.  
we were busy, it took all summer.

I took what was mine,  
and I said goodbye.  
I unpacked and re-stacked.  
I made it my own.  
finally, all mine.  
everything settled.  
and I realized,  
I was alone.  
alone.

then, fall began.  
and I wondered,  
and worried,  
how would I get through?

## Surprise

---

KELSEY CHEREVEKO

I wish I never knew that Santa existed. Or, I guess, I wish that Santa was a realistic Santa. Whenever I see a guy that looks like Santa, it's either an unkempt man with stray gold teeth, smelling like the dumpster of a Chili's, unclear whether he's homeless or just chooses to befriend and transport raccoons in stolen shopping carts, or it's Tim Allen. I've never seen a Santa-like man who's the cute kind of chubby old man, with rosy cheeks and fresh candy in his pockets.

Growing up with the beautiful illusion of Santa Claus was a fever dream that has now worn off, and somehow still left the fever. The Christmas season couldn't have been more special in my childhood. I know I'm lucky for that, I do. I never understood how people could get annoyed with the music, or how they were more stressed than excited!

But... now I'm starting to get it. And don't get me wrong, I still love Christmas and I definitely don't wish I grew up any differently. But now that I am in on the most depressing secret of all time, that Santa isn't real. The presents are no longer fun and surprising, but instead logical, and I can't even enjoy the foods without family members commenting on my weight and asking me about my very unsure future. It's beginning to feel more like just a day. Maybe even a chore. And I can't help but wonder if the imagination and the fascination and all the spectacle that surrounded the season in my childhood only set me up for what is now becoming a repetitive disappointment.

I suppose the real problem here is clear. It is not uncommon in society today to see adults and their respective imaginations, which were once blooming and bright, now withered, if even active at all. But how can we keep imagination alive in conjunction with reality, law and order, and all that other bullshit we were born into? I understand there's no clear way around that, we can't live successfully in a lawless, free-for-all society, not yet anyway. There's too many of us, we're too greedy, post-industrial life is too complicated now.

There must be a way these things can co-exist. Imagination isn't just rain

bows, unicorns, and talking to yourself in light delusion, although I don't think there's anything wrong with that either. Imagination is also about believing in yourself, even when you feel you have no real reason to. It's about having faith, and hope, and a functioning creative side. It's about believing in something, whatever that may be for you. Even if that is delusion, and your faith, your belief isn't real, it's a beautiful delusion, one that allows you a sense of purpose and meaning. In fact, imagination is the real essence of life, when you really think about it. To experience the world with a fresh and curious mind, with levels of excitement and self-confidence that others would deem "stupid" or "crazy". That is the essence of life.

And now, as I approach another birthday, I wonder if I really have to subscribe to the way we typically treat aging, as if it's anything other than beautiful and fascinating. Do I have to start treating Christmas like a never-ending to-do list, the kind that doesn't release dopamine with each item I check off, but instead somehow stresses me further and reminds me of the upcoming social chaos and depleted bank account? Do I have to fear each wrinkle I will inevitably wear? Do I have to fear that each year away from my "youth" is really the end of my youth? It's not easy to reverse, clearly, but it seems much harder and more painful to me to accept and subscribe to society's distaste for aging, where I could instead at least have a glass half full, even if I'm alone in carrying it.

The natural and normal processes of adulting and aging don't have to be the kind of Santa that befriends raccoons and tries to show you perverted pictures on a chipped flip phone. Maybe it can at least be the kind of Santa who carries un-melted, unwrapped candy in his pocket. Who smells like a home cooked Sunday dinner and not like the raccoons he is strangely able to trust.

Or maybe it is the unkempt, oddly trusting Santa, minus the perversion, of course. He is happier than the rest of us, isn't he? How dare we mock the unaccepted Santa, who is comfortable in his delusions, albeit unsanitary and likely unhealthy. We are in delusion as well, just a socially acceptable one.

Fuck it anyway, I listen to Christmas music year-round. I love that shit.☺

## Four White Walls

---

KELSEY CHEREVKO

**M**arceline awoke before her son in a room plagued with white. Before she could really take in her surroundings she ran to her son's side. Sliding up his navy-blue sleeves and wiping off sun-dried dirt, she did a double take. Expecting to find the cuts and scrapes that naively preceded his death, Marceline questioned her sanity as she instead found a perfectly healthy forearm. Baby soft, in fact. Was it really her son? He did have the same two identical moles on his wrist.

She held his face in between her hands and looked him up and down, confirming it was Riley. The child was unharmed, and it was Riley. She lay his head back down and patted herself everywhere, unwillingly letting out a barely audible gasp. Her bruises were gone too.

Marceline had abjured any chance of their survival the moment her son was struck to the ground. So, obviously, this was a dream. Or they were dead. And they were dead.

Marceline was in Hell. In Chamber 800, to be specific. But she would never know. Nor would her son, who was also in Hell. They would forever be protected by the two-way mirror that made up the walls of their exclusive sanctuary.

For them, heaven was a beautiful, pearly white box. They would not just survive in this large, white box- they would thrive. They would never feel constrained within those iridescent white walls. It was a color so calming, an atmosphere so tranquil, she was sure it could never again be disturbed. Marceline and Riley would have access to all their basic needs and greatest desires. They would never so much as suffer a cold, or a paper cut again. They would grow accustomed to their new home, discovering that they could walk outside, ride bikes and explore the world within those four walls. If they extended an arm, the wall extended to their arm. Someday, when they are ready, they would realize they are not alone, and that other survivors were in their own white rooms- thriving, healthy, happy, and eager to welcome Miss

Vittima and her six-year-old son. For now, they would rejoice in their reunion.

Mark was in hell too. Chamber 800, Sector 2.

He awoke simultaneously as the “ol’ ball and chain,” yet nowhere near her. Yet.

He gasped for air and felt around for stability. His hands made unwilling acquaintance with several very alive body parts, causing their associated bodies to cry out in annoyance. He recoiled immediately, not because he touched a random human body, but because of the thin layer of slime on them that Mark took to be sweat. It was really hot. Really, really hot.

Chamber 800 and all of its associated sectors were devoted to domestic violence, both the victims and the perpetrators. Unlike his ex-wife Marceline, Mark immediately knew he was in Hell. His body told him before his brain. His ears were ringing, his nostrils were burning, and his mouth was impossibly dry. Oddly enough, however, his eyes could not stop crying. They were just tears, no intention, no emotional trigger, not even a facial expression. Like raindrops slowly and constantly slipping down a window. That part annoyed him the most.

Looking around, he felt his head ache at the sight of his new environment. It was like staring into shades of flaming neon at full volume, forever. Mark was noticeably sore all over his body. He winced especially hard at the shooting pains all through his right arm and shoulder. He would be chronically and completely sore for an eternity now, but he didn’t know that. His self-pity party was interrupted by a large, calloused hand whose chipped engagement ring scraped the side of Mark’s neck. He tuned out whatever apology the man threw at him and craned his neck to get a better view of where he was.

He was at the very top of a twenty-two-foot-tall pile of bodies, the majority being men, the entirety being conscious. He began to make his way down, every step prompting an awkward cry for help, like playing a broken piano. Only a few steps into his descent, Mark instinctively jerked around at the sound of a shrieking alarm followed by a large thud. The obligatory moans



and groans that rose from the mountain of bodies told Mark that this happens regularly. Mark wondered if he appeared that way.

Some of Hell's unlucky citizens knew immediately why they were there and would likely obsess over that knowledge forever. Many, however, would wrestle with the disease of a bold and disastrous ignorance, one that spread like wildfire, the smoke first clouding, then choking out and killing their self-awareness. They would suffer the internal turmoil of believing they were good people somehow misplaced into an evil place, never really knowing why. They were the most deserving.

Of course, he was confused. There was no explanation. No information centers. No one obvious to question or blame. The only resource that supplied knowledge of their situation was time.

So, Mark Mosure was drawn to those who looked afflicted with time. As he stepped off Mt. Sinner, he realized he was barefoot when he endured the first of many strides onto Hell's sticky, burning Lego-tiled floor. The first wrinkly and exhausted man he could find, a measly six steps away, told him he had arrived only hours ago, and he was just as confused. He was dressed as a priest off duty, but the way his eyebrows and lips rested left a devious first impression.

"Don't bother," called out a man wearing a dotted blue suit in the near distance. "We're not meant to know." He was right.

As Mark came closer, he noticed the suit didn't have dots, but rather an even pattern of cigarette burns. His pants were cut off at the thighs. Ripped, possibly. His sleeves were definitely ripped off. You could tell his skin was desperately dehydrated despite being thinly coated with sweat and stray tears.

"What do you mean? Why can't we know?" Mark began walking quickly toward the man with one arm outstretched, expecting an answer.

"This is Hell. What more do you need to know?" The man spoke with an unearned satisfaction, clearly inviting a contradiction.

Mark was about to raise his voice in frustration when he was startled by another high-pitched, shrieking alarm. He turned to see another body, this

time a woman, appear several feet above the pile he walked away from, then fall, causing the same thud he heard earlier. While turning to face the pile of bodies, he noticed a large white wall in the distance.

“Nah, I wouldn’t go there if I was you,” said the cigarette man.

But of course, that only encouraged Mark to wander towards the strange white palisade. As he came closer, his head ached even more than before. It was a white so bright, it was nearly blinding. He realized it wasn’t just a wall, but four walls. He reached out with a sweaty hand and placed it flat on the wall. The wall seemed to recognize him. Scanned him even. Suddenly, the white became clear and a room with people appeared. Two people, to be exact. A woman and a child. They looked awfully familiar.

Another shrieking alarm enlivened Mark’s senses. This one didn’t stop though. It kept ringing, and shrieking, drilling lead into his ears. He rubbed and widened his eyes, soaking them in the involuntary tears that continued to spill from his tired eyes. It was Marcy and Riley. They were hand painting in a well-manicured plot of grass, sitting beside a delicately arranged spread of sweet and savory snacks. They were smiling like they’d just seen a puppy open its eyes for the very first time.

Mark knocked, or punched rather, on the wall trying to get their attention. It took mere seconds for him to lose his patience enough to begin a child-like tantrum. He nearly body-slammed himself into the wall calling out to them. His eyes ping-ponged around their room begging for answers. Everything was impeccably clean. Mark couldn’t decide if it looked more like a presidential hotel suite or a freshly staged house. Why is he out here if they’re in there? He punched and kicked so hard his wife beater started to stretch and slip off his acne-scarred shoulders. He yelled and yelled and yelled, his voice becoming hoarse with rage. His arms were used to this kind of force.

A hand came to rest on his shoulder. Mark turned to see it was the cigarette man again. He had a crooked smile that uncomfortably contradicted his tearful eyes, the sight of which made Mark shudder even before Cigarette Man started to run his hands down his body.

“Oh, cheer up,” he crooned. “Wouldn’t you rather be here with us?” He looked in agony too, but almost in a casual way. It should have comforted Mark that he looked used to the pain, but it didn’t.

Mark shook his hands off like bugs and forced himself upon the white wall again. Again, he yelled and yelled and yelled, to no avail, of course. Cigarette Man stepped back. He could wait. Mark Mosure would be pounding on the two-way mirror for eternity, but his ex-fiance and son would never hear him. They would live in between those four walls, indulging in all the comforts they could dream of, forever satisfied and safe, while Mark watched from behind. Mark could choose the fiery, hot agony surrounding him or he could distract himself with the desperate rage he felt watching his former lover raise his child in a heaven he could only look at. Marceline and Riley were in hell, but only their killer would ever know.☞

## Mauna (an exercise)

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DAVID CHIRICO

In the pre-Buddhist religious texts of ancient India, we find references to Mauna. Mauna is a Sanskrit word meaning “silence.” Silence was a practice of spiritual aspirants hoping to quiet their busy minds. The technique is simple—anyone can do it. It doesn’t require any specific texts, props or beliefs. All it involves is not speaking.

I didn’t know how old this practice was when I suggested it to a class several years ago. I told my ENG 220 group, “We’re going to be taking a weeklong, voluntary vow of silence. That means no talking to anyone, with only three exceptions: work, emergencies or childcare. You’ll have to explain to your other professors what you’re doing. Just mention my name and they’ll understand where this is coming from. They expect a lot of nonsense from me.”

“Can we speak in class,” someone asked.

“Of course. This is my job.”

“Wait—you’re gonna do it with us?”

“Yes.”

And I did. I spent a whole week not talking when I was outside of class. I had a little message prepared on my phone: “I have taken a voluntary vow of silence this week,” that I would show to colleagues if they approached me in the hall. My Dean, I remember, became slightly flustered when I showed it to him, five days into the experience, as I encountered him on the stairs. Whenever he’d see me, he’d ask me some kind of philosophical question, maybe because my responses amused him. When he read the message, it was like receiving the answer to every question.

“Oh,” he said, unable to frame a response, “carry on!”

Now, the thing about the exercise that really makes it hard for students is when I tell them they can’t text on their phone.

“What? No texting? I thought this was gonna be easy.”

“No texting. You’re going to keep your thoughts to yourselves.”

“Can I look at social media?”

“Do it at your peril. You can look, but you can’t respond. You can’t post.”

“Oh my god.”

“I know. This is why I’m saying it at the beginning of the semester. You’ll have until April to prepare yourselves, so try being silent for short periods

before we get to the silent week. If you don't give yourself little doses of it, you'll be overwhelmed when you take the big one. And chances are you'll give up much more easily."

"What happens if we give up?"

"This isn't graded. I can't police you every moment. All of it is an agreement between you and you."

"What if we mess up?"

"Then you mess up. Don't judge the experience. Notice you did it and go back into the silence."

\*

Into the silence. That's the way I began thinking about it, three days in. The silence was a place that felt a little distant from everything else around me, like a kind of cocoon. I only met with my classes twice that week, on Tuesday and Thursday, but I could tell, just by looking at them, which students were really maintaining their silence and which were not. The ones who were also in the silence seemed calmer and more peaceful than others. They were also bursting to speak as soon as we sat down. Some of them, though, spoke in much quieter tones than usual. I asked them about the experience.

"What's been happening the past few days?"

There were a ton of things. Some students didn't want to speak at all, because they were trying to make the exercise as difficult as they possibly could. The ones who spoke talked about feeling lonely at first, or how their family or significant other or their friends tried to tease them into breaking their silence, and what it felt like to withstand that.

"What's it like to be around people who can speak?"

At first it was torture for some of them. But then they noticed how often people speak about essentially nothing, just to pass the time. And they found themselves wanting to interject things, then questioning, since they couldn't, what their motives might've been for adding their piece to a conversation.

"I realized it was just me trying to be right," one person said.

"So it was ego?"

"Yup."

By that time of the semester, I'd given them a useful definition of ego, which I'll now give to you. Ego is that part of ourselves that wants things our

way, but isn't even happy when we get things our way.

Silence has a really punishing effect on the ego.

Much of Wisdom literature helps us identify the ego, that selfish sense of wanting something, usually at the expense of others, and provides a whole array of approaches to help weaken it. Much of our suffering comes from clinging to a sense of ourselves, and our desire to win at all costs. We want to make our point, or be really smart, or appear really powerful, or take what's ours. In the silence, we find ourselves face-to-face with those impulses as they arise. We see that they come from nowhere and disappear just as easily.

"What happened when you couldn't say that clever thing to your friends," I'd ask. "Did the impulse stay around?"

"Nope. It just went away."

\*

Now, of course, at this point you're going to know what the exercise for this week will be. It will be silence. Not for a whole week, which would be impossible, or even a whole day, which would probably be very hard, coming like this out of the blue.

What I'd like you to do is set aside some block of time—a half-hour, an hour—to say nothing. Turn off your phone, or at least silence it too. If you have to, let the people around you know that this is what you're doing. Do this at least three times this week.

If you'd like to try a longer stretch than just an hour, give it a try.

When you do this, have no expectations for what will happen. Don't believe you're going to locate the key to human happiness or that you're just going to be bored. And don't talk to yourself, either. Try to maintain a period of silence.

As you do, notice everything that happens. Take notes on the experience, especially if you try it for long stretches.

Again, I have no way to police this. If you can't do it at all, then write in your notes, and your 250-word reflection, that you couldn't do it. And try to explain everything that happened when you attempted it. ☺

## Who Does the Asking

---

DAVID CHIRICO

**I**t's about that time of the semester, when I've posed a bunch of questions and there doesn't really seem to be any more. But then I think to myself, "Who does the asking?"

\*

"Dr. Chirico, are you going to ask that one? Really?"

"Sure."

"But I'm tired of all these questions that don't have answers. Is that going to happen again?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Yeah maybe."

"Why maybe?"

"Because maybe is always a good answer in my class, since things could be one way or they could be another. Or they could be a third way or a seventeenth."

"Like interdependence. Everything will be different, depending on the choice you make."

"Yes. That's good. You've been listening."

"Of course I've been listening. That's why I'm bored."

\*

Of course "maybe" is also a good answer because I have no idea where I'm heading when I put the first words on these pages. I begin each essay with barely a notion of where I'm heading, but then I always get there.

"You call that a job?"

“I’m lucky.”

\*

But the question I want to ask is, Who does the asking? And again, I want to know what I mean by that.

When I ask who does the asking, what I’m wondering about is the cognitive experience of thinking to oneself. Of asking oneself anything.

We do this all the time.

We do it when we’re hungry — “What do I want to eat?”—We do it when we’re at the store — “What did I need again?”—We do it in class — “What did the professor just say?”

We do it all the time, and usually, we get answers. But who asks, who listens, and where does the answer come from?

\*

For just a moment, let’s focus on that first question. If we ask, “Who asks,” the usual answer is “I.” I ask. I do the asking, because I’m the one feeling hungry, or the one needing dish detergent while I’m shopping at Weis, or the one who blanked out while that professor—damn Chirico—was just going on and on.

So maybe we’re good with that answer, at least for now. I. We can wait to examine what we mean by this.

But who’s the one listening whenever “I” ask?

\*

It’s a kind of crazy situation. “I” ask, and “I” listen? Then answer? Or “I” ask, and that “I” feels distinctly like a location. A voice, familiar, my own —though it is internal, a kind of memory of my own external voice,



constructed by, well, what? — and, from this location, an invisible no-space, I pose a question, one that creates a moment of noticeable subvocalization in the back of my throat, and it is heard. By me. Or the other invisible me. Or is merely heard by the invisible, since when I pose a question from this location it seems to be heard at no location at all, or, perhaps, at a location that seems completely conjoined with the first.

Am I making sense, as I always ask? Ask yourself a few questions, you know, silently. Does this description capture your experience too?

\*

Let's say it does, for the moment. One of the strangest parts of this is that the phenomenon of asking implies not one self, but two. Whatever we're calling a self isn't really solitary, as we tend to think about it. Some separate individual. Even internally, the "self" is a dialogic construction, a fancy phrase meaning "put together as two in communication," not just merely one. And mind you, one is how the self is typically imagined to be. One, solid, unitary, whole, fixed, unmoving, stable, static, all kinds of words that mean permanent.

However, when we think to ourselves, we think (who thinks?) and are heard (by whom?). There is cognizance of that thinking. Awareness of those thoughts.

\*

"Are you with me so far," I said.

"I think so. Say it again?"

"No problem. Usually, we tend to think about ourselves as being singular entities. An I, alone, with no one else. That one self, interacting with a world, the one involved with the many, that's how we tend to think of it."

"Okay . . ."

"When we go in search of 'Who we are,' or our 'True self,' we don't expect that self to be multiple."

“Okay. I think I get it.”

“Try saying it back to me.”

“If I want to know my real self, I assume I’m looking for just one person.”

“Of course, who does the looking?”

“Stop it, Chirico.”

“Okay. But we’re on the same page with that?”

“Yes. Literally on the same page. As characters, apparently.”

“Okay now you stop.”

\*

So, here’s where it gets interesting. If “I” do the asking, the “I” is heard. Dialogue structures our most basic experience of a self. Dialogue is open, and initiates change. The self is not some fixed, static entity. It is an ongoing process.

Now, all of it could just be an illusion. If we go looking for that self, or the actual location of that interior voice, we won’t find it (try this, then try again. And again). It’s possible the “I” really doesn’t exist anywhere, even if we function as if it does.

But, what isn’t an illusion is awareness. When we went looking for that self, we might not have found it, but we were, in all likelihood, clearly aware of not finding it.

“But what is awareness?”

“Good question.”

\*

First of all, we need to distinguish awareness from consciousness. By consciousness I mean the ongoing flow of thoughts and memories. By awareness I mean clearly recognizing that flow of thoughts and memories. The distinction might seem subtle, so let me provide some examples that could help you think about it.

If you want to understand the difference between your thoughts and your awareness of those thoughts, remember:

a knife cannot cut itself

a hand cannot hold itself

sounds cannot hear themselves

sights cannot see themselves

tastes cannot taste themselves

and thoughts cannot think themselves. Thoughts are recognized by awareness, just as awareness must cognize sounds, sights, tastes and smells. Awareness isn't taste itself, but makes taste clearly known. The same is true for all perceptions.

\*

“Okay, Chirico. You said what awareness does, not what it is.”

“Caught me there.”

“I'm paying attention. Whatever that is.”

“Whatever it is.”

\*

Now, the simple fact is I can't say what awareness is, because awareness always eludes my attempts to know it. You know this from your own direct experience. At the end of the mindful drinking exercise, I asked you to use attention to examine attention, and many of you realized you couldn't actually see it. You knew you couldn't see it, but that was the end of that. Your attention wasn't anywhere specific. It couldn't be located like a mug or a chair.

“So I'm using my mind to find my mind, but my mind can't locate itself?”

“Yes.”

“But I can use my attention instantly?”

“Without any problem at all.”

“That’s completely bizarre.”

“And an everyday occurrence. You can effortlessly use the thing you cannot find.”

“Dude that is the opposite of a mug.”

“It’s like an invisible chair.”

\*

So maybe we’ll just say, for now, that awareness is like sitting on an invisible chair. It works, perfectly, but we don’t know where it is. By working perfectly I mean that you don’t have to remind your awareness to be aware. You don’t have to switch it on or remember to turn it off, to save energy, and it takes no particular fuel. It doesn’t hang onto anything (though your memory does), and it doesn’t reject anything (though you might, once you label something “unpleasant”). It even works while you’re sleeping, since sounds can wake you up.

Pretty nice, that invisible chair. And it matches everything, since it doesn’t have its own color. ∞

## Monkey Man

---

LUKE DE JAGER

Monkey Man

Want not be

Stuck inside house

Monkey Man want tree

Monkey Man no soul

When lose family

When pay tax

When drive down street

Give Monkey Man

Grass 'neath feet

Fresh red meat

Monkey Man complete

Monkey Man not well

Monkey Man lonely

Monkey man need sandwich

Bologna

## Time, Extended

---

LUKE DE JAGER

The time is gone,  
The song is over,  
Thought I'd something more to say

The day has come,  
I've grown older,  
Wondering why I'd like to stay

She stays with me,  
Though I've grown colder,  
Festering in this place I lay

Now, time of death  
Is shared between,  
As we both begin to fray

Do I leave you?  
Or do you leave me?  
Is the path of death a common way?

I need time,  
Though so does she,  
Never thought I'd see the day.

## Big Bobby Buchanan

### A Western Legend

---

LUKE DE JAGER

**A**s Big Bobby Buchanan entered the Dusten Saloon, the place slowed to silence. The ‘big’ in his name was indicative of his width rather than his height, so the townsfolk knew who it was before the rest of his body could join his belly at the door. Bobby wasn’t bright, and he called himself a gunslinger. The Dusten inhabitants knew this combination was dangerous.

The bartender broke the silence.

“What you doin’ here, Bobby?” he said with a crooked, curious face.

“Same as you, Doug.” Bobby announced.

“You servin’ drinks?” Everyone was confused.

Bobby had to check his persona a little bit to make some sense.

“No. I’m on business.”

Everybody in the saloon murmured a sound of somber understanding, still a little disappointed Bobby hadn’t gone straight. They went back to their drinks, keeping an eye on him.

Bobby stood as if he always had something to say—probably because he did. Breaking his cemented stance, he left his position at the front door and approached the man behind the bar.

“You seen this man?” Bobby asked, pointing to a picture of Domino Steve with ‘WANTED’ lettered below.

“God damnit, Bobby!” Doug said, throwing his flat cap to the floor.

“When will you learn to just give this shtick up? You haven’t caught a God damn fly since Katamaroo—Fifteen years ago. Ya come in here, struttin’ about...” Doug shook his head, looking down at the glass he was cleaning.

“...My advice: get lost. Nobody wants to see yer face in this town anymore; not while it’s still breathin’.”

“What?...” Bobby asked.

He looked over both shoulders as he leaned on the bar.

“Why not, Doug?”

“Member Freddy Archbow?”

Bobby most definitely did not remember Freddy Archbow.

“Yeah...”

Doug could tell Bobby didn’t recall a single thing. He probably couldn’t remember to put socks on that morning.

“Ya know, the guy you shot the noose out from when we were gonna have us a nice hangin’? Freddy Archbow. Serial killer.” Bobby still couldn’t recall.

“Got greedy didn’t ya, Bobby? Wanted to bring him down to Greshole—claim the bounty. No townsfolk like to miss a good hangin’, boy. Not one.”

The stares from patrons, which Bobby initially perceived as awe, were more accurately translated to glares of contempt. Bobby now realized the precarious situation he had put himself in. He really shouldn’t have been in Dusten.

“And what happened to Freddy Archbow, Bobby? Fell off your horse in High Hills Canyon and escaped, didn’t he?”

Bobby corrected him, looking at the floor with a little shame.

“Carpeta Canyon, but yeah...”

Not everyone in the Town of Dusten had the stomach to fill the ‘Dead or Alive’ bounty on Bobby, but unlucky for himself, three of the men sat at the bar that day. They were out back using the piss trough when he arrived.

They returned, seeing the most recognizable man in the West leaning on their favorite saloon’s bar top. Josh Brighton, Benny Greer, and Old Donny May approached him.



Greer shouted upon entering from the back.

“Bobby?...Boys, that be Big Bobby Buchanan!”

Bobby’s eyes widened.

“What you doin’ here, Bobby?” May chimed in,

“Ya know this is bad business for everyone, now don't ya?”

“Relax, gents. I was just leaving.”

Bobby grabbed his poster off the bar and stuffed it in his pants. He turned to the front door to lumber his way out. At that moment, Josh Brighton’s signature low-toned belly laugh joined the dialogue.

“What a coincidence! We are too!”

There was no way out for Bobby. He knew these boys would handle their business outside with much more ease, so he stopped. His large back faced them.

May spoke again, deliberately.

“What’s wrong, Bobby? Big lunch?”

Bobby looked to the bar again to see the empty bottle of a man who’d finished his time in the establishment. He knew what he had to do. Doug ducked behind the bar, knowing what was about to unfold.

As fast as a man of Bobby’s stature could, he whizzed to the bar, grabbing the bottle. He bashed it, in one motion, across the face of Old Donny May. He died right then. The bottle didn’t break. Weird, he thought. He elected to bashing the bottle on the countertop a couple of times to fulfill his expectations of what a bar fight was; he’d never had the privilege to be in one before, and he didn’t want to be disappointed.

While Big Bobby was preoccupied with the motion of repetitively whacking the bar, Josh Brighton tried to sneak up on him from behind. The

bottle eventually broke, but Bobby did not immediately realize as he was doing it so rapidly. In his backswing, with what was now a sharp, deadly weapon, he gouged the eye of Josh Brighton. Brighton laid writhing on the floor.

Now, with some gumption, Bobby turned to Benny Greer—the brains of the bunch. Greer pulled his iron out, but Doug was peering over the bar.

“You fire that weapon in my place, Benny, and you can never come back!”

Benny Greer holstered his weapon, demoting himself to more ancient tactics. He ran at Bobby with a war cry—full speed. This truly surprised Bobby and put him on the defensive. It can't be said that Bobby did more than cover in this moment, but Bobby had luck on his side that day.

Bobby's belly prevented Benny Greer from doing any real damage. With Greer on the ground now, Bobby picked up the dazed assailant and slid him down the bar. Greer screeched to a halt in the middle, his skin making a loud, high-pitched noise. The freshly-cleaned bar top had sanded down the face of Greer—nearly to the bone. He high-tailed it out the front door, holding his face together.

Bobby stood proudly. He successfully bested three of the Grossman Gang's toughest members.

Still breathing heavily, he flicked a coin towards the bar. He peered towards Doug through the brim of his hat.

“One whiskey... for the road.”

Doug was not impressed.

“Get out, Bobby.”

With that, Big Bobby hopped upon his bow-backed pony to ride into the sunset. He had to find Domino Steve, but Dusten wasn't the place to look. ☺

## This is It

---

DAVE ELY

Fumbling words fall from lips, sweaty palms...nervous laughs...

School kids with grey hair...

This is it...

Meeting foundations, committees...movies...this and that.

Wood walks...wood talks...beating hearts wrestle.

This is it...

Lunch box love notes, dishes...digging...planting in dirt sweet.

Hands touch, they lovingly meet...

This is it...

Long search for Tantra, feeling ...Indescribable...here.

Entwined and sweaty moments, laughter...tears.

Pressing through her...I am Her...We Are...

This IS it...

Shadows form, shadows deepen...sunlight fades.

Potters Urn, colorful and bright ...on mantel above.

Artful...without delight.

This is it...

Life inside, memories reside...warm smiles and shining eyes.

Heart Beat...all inside...clock tics...speaking...

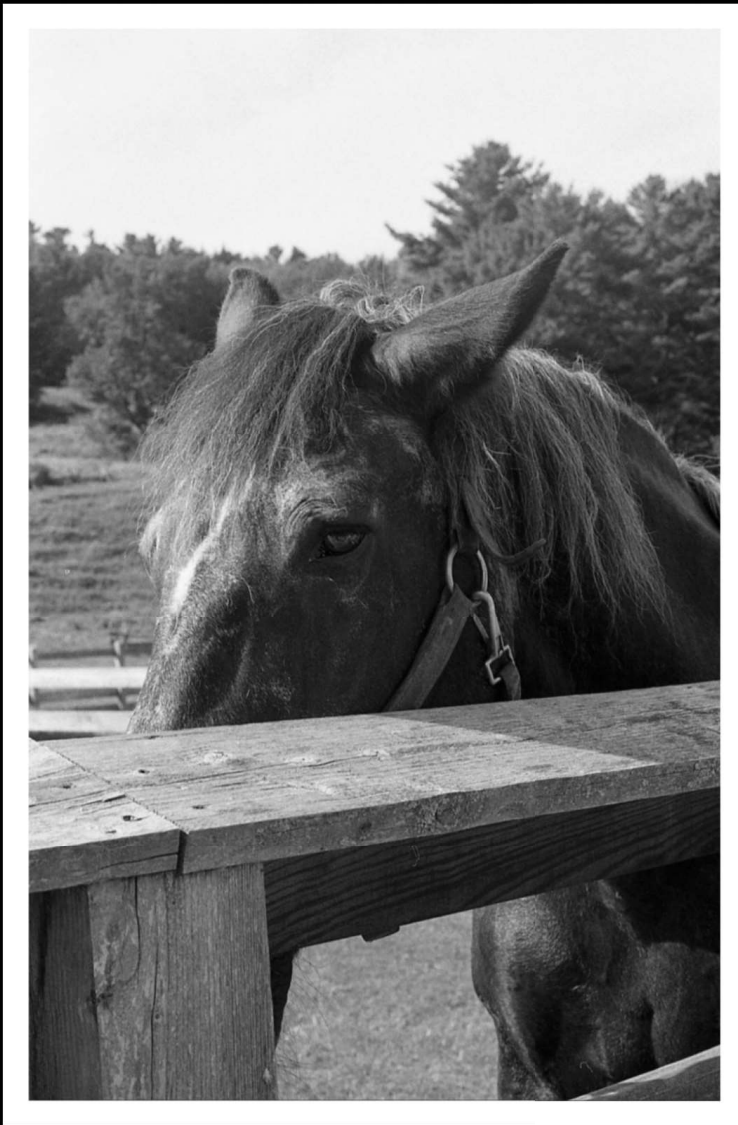
THIS IS IT ...

## The Hour Glass

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DAVE ELY

Trees, finishing their fall strip tease...skeletal forms, blue sky stark.  
Air is crisp, Blue Jays squawk...Squirrels scurry, here...then there.  
Breath leaves in a foggy mist, disappears into thin air.  
I think...all is just this...it's just this.  
What more is the need?  
Children, Granddaughter's smile...Yes, Lover companion...Yes, there too.  
Moment to moment...the great Slide show progresses.  
Sands of the Hour Glass fall, a grain at a time...not seeing...not aware.  
Top of the Hour Glass, sands begin their tumble.  
Supported, Unsupported...cascading in Chaos.  
Constant is change, constant the change...ever it moves...clinging to life.  
Grains fill our hands, falling through the cracks...filter away in trauma or bliss.  
In Death we delight...seeing the bottom of this glass is but the top of the next.  
Moment to moment...slide to slide...and so it goes...JUST THIS!



*Horse* | Gabriela Doller

## The Four Legged and the Two

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DAVE ELY

Painted pony, broken... unmoving.  
Beauty faded... worn.  
Spirit of youth... Spirit of Battle gone.

War paint adorned, figures, symbols...  
Deep meaning to her brother,  
In war paint, lying motionless near by...

Proudly they had battled...  
Numerous coup they did attain.  
Many the Calvary, the Foot soldier,  
In their graves remain...

Now a last run, Warriors with Pride...  
Blood Brothers, four legged and two...  
At peace with Creator they ride.

## Perception

---

DAVE ELY

Perception in sleep, perception while awake... neither correct... neither true...  
A wakeful sleep, asleep awake... with fairie dust we fly, yet only with belief...  
Drowning in abundance and Love... life seems to be just right...  
Our perceptions keep us grounded, a material world of dis-ease...  
With Peace, tranquility... Chaos too... that will be alright...  
The logical mind says figure it out... the Buddha shares... this just is...  
As he confides, we listen... then for real we don't...  
In the material we will linger, in the material world we float...  
Day to day we journey, in our blindness we cling and grope...  
In Life we ask, is this all there is ?... In Death we find... Just This....

## Love Long Lost

---

DAVE ELY

She lay before me...  
Soft – Supple – Sweet  
I had not experienced her in many years

I learned she was not good for me,  
though I had loved her deeply,  
in my innocence and youth.

Her scent fragrantly rolled over me  
Bringing memories of the  
Intimacy we once shared...

The scent...the taste...from years gone by  
remained on my lips.  
Feelings of shame, mixed with desire, overwhelmed.

I knew immediately, I could not resist,  
Her beauty, the feel of her in my hands,  
Left me weak and powerless...

Time gone by, years had been spent...  
Donuts from the Dunkin, from which I'll not repent.



## Timeless

---

DAVE ELY

**T**reading uphill, retracing the steps we had made earlier, my mind was laughing at the meandering path my son imprinted in the snow on our way down; running this way and that around my own straight forward steps. He was now breathing easily, sound asleep over my shoulder the warm sun having worked on his weariness.

I was thinking of the impossibility that there could be anything more splendid or memorable than the time we shared that morning. These were the same pathways, frozen creek beds, and hilly terrain that were trod and worn by my own footsteps as a young boy, memories of my youthful adventures flooding in.

The trip was spontaneous, coming to me as I gazed across the valley that morning after breakfast, the sunshine contrasting the evergreens and the leafless scraggy forms against the stark white snow. Without a breath of wind, the late winter sun looked warm and inviting.

“Come on Buddy how about a hike?” I hollered. Knowing his answer before I asked, quickly I threw together a small pack, binoculars, bird book, a thermos of hot chocolate and snacks. Hastily throwing on sweaters, coats, and boots we embarked on our morning sojourn.

We made our way to the corner of the open field, into the brush lot preceding the wooded areas. The leafless trees followed the frozen stream down through the gullies and fissures it carved into the earth, plunging ever downwards on its journey to the river. We took our time, the snow still light and powdery in the cold, the sun not yet high enough in its daily climb to begin the melt. Winter, its grip still on Mother Nature, was yielding to the promise of spring.

Memories following, we hiked along the creek. I was sharing with my son, relating this and that about Boy Scout camp outs, all day sledding trips with my cousins and the like. This quickly giving way to silence as we walked, the beauty of the present surmounting the past. Moving along the creek bank we descended deeper into the woods, the rushing and gurgling of the water beneath the ice our traveling companion. We took note of the crows in the distance, the deer tracks we sometimes followed, and bare patches of ground

scratched up from the snow by wild turkeys.

Considering the way back would be up hill, I determined that the journey down had gone far enough. Finding a relatively dry place, in the bright sun at the base of a tired old shagbark we settled for our hot chocolate and snacks.

A hawk flew up the edge of the brush lot, landing in a tree not far from us, preening briefly, then abruptly taking off, apparently not as happy to be in our company as we were to be in it's. The direct sun was sublime... it's rays now quickly melting the snow. After the rustling around with the chocolate and snacks ended, we sat quiet, talked very little or whispered, in hopes that a deer or other four legged might wander by. I felt the day getting away from us, other plans were in the works, knowing it was time to head back. Lingerin, I savored each minute.

At last rising, taking my sons hand we began the trek back up the embankment following the creek, now moving opposite of the flow. After a short distance, I felt him lagging, and scooped him up, first in front of me, then after several hundreds of yards hoisting him over my shoulder where he fell asleep. Feeling his weight reminded me of how fast he was growing and changing, realizing how fleeting these moments were, and how quickly the time of his youth would pass. I stopped to catch my breath, and pondered where would life take him? Would he go to college? Would he work with his hands, a craftsman? Chuckling to myself, I thought how silly! He was going to find his own way, as we all do in this endless cycle of life.

That day was more than thirty years ago, but remains in my mind and heart as fresh as yesterday. In the rush, the hustle and bustle of our day to day life it's easy to forgo these peaceful quiet times. It's a pity when we do, these are the moments that stay, remaining with us all of our days. The petty disagreements, and conflicts, disappear from our memories. The days of overwhelming beauty and peace, of family gatherings, the one on one time with our children are timeless. ∞



*Path to Nowhere* | Calvin Yardley

## A Rebel Yell

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DAVE ELY

Thomasina sat at her kitchen table, staring into her coffee. How much could one person take? When would it stop? It was more than a little creepy. In a way it was odd that she should feel this way, in that she had studied the occult for years, was even a bit of a “self-styled Medium” herself. But the bizarre things happening around her house unnerved her. It began right after she moved in, first as plodding foot falls, then murmured unintelligible words spoken from an icy broken voice from within her own head. This waking her from her sleep. She kept thinking, was it real? Or was she in such an emotional state that she was imagining these things? Lights on, she never turned on? Microwave starting up of its own accord? Strange sounds and unexplainable happenings.

Thomasina was 36 years old. Her husband had died very unexpectedly two years earlier. The necessities of life provided little opportunity to grieve the loss, which devastated her. They were best friends from childhood, then as teen agers “played around a bit,” both feeling in the end they were too familiar with each other, nearly like brother and sister, or at the least cousins. After high school, as is often the case, they lost track of one another, each marrying and living miserably until their respective marriages ended. They met at the high school reunion, and began dating, fell very deeply in love, and were soon married. Life was bliss for several years until his untimely death.

It was necessary for her to move not long after the loss. With little time to recover, she moved to a modern sub-division in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Her home was very modest, well built, and less than twenty years old. Still going through “the motions of life” in her grief, it would be hard to say if she “liked” the house, but it was adequate and within her means.

Not long after moving in, she began to have feelings of uneasiness. She sometimes felt a presence, or sensed she was being watched. In some cases even feeling a bit light headed and out of sorts. This brought to mind an article she read about the possibility of a carbon monoxide leak from heating systems, prompting her to call an HVAC technician to inspect her furnace. The plumb

could find no leaks, but did advise her that if her symptoms continued, they could do a more thorough inspection for which they would have to charge her.

It must be added here that Thomasina enjoyed almost daily use of marijuana, which she now was able to procure in a medicinal prescription grade, without worry of legalities. She also meditated and used incense in several ceremonies which she found comforting and soothing to her nerves. Depression loomed around every corner; keeping her spirits up was a daily chore. In her favor, she did not drink, nor had she ever.

Now, staring into her coffee, shivers ran up her spine as she felt “the presence” near.

“My God,” she thought, “it’s the middle of the fuckin day in broad daylight, it’s not even waiting until night!” She got a hold of herself and shook it off, going to the bathroom to wash her face. As she gazed into the mirror, the reflection of the wall behind her began to break up. First looking like a “heat wave” effect you might see coming off the hood of your car on a very hot day. The waves had a nearly “smoky” look which began to take form. Her breath caught, her heart raced. She felt faint... The wisps of swirling heat and vapor began to take human form. The energy she felt was NOT a peaceful nor loving presence. It then dissipated and was gone. She whirled around to see nothing ... nothing but the wall.

Shaken, she pulled herself together and quickly exited the house to stand in the bright sunlight. The warm sun calmed her. She returned for her coffee and sat on her patio remaining in the sun. Physically calm now, though her mind raced with thoughts. What the fuck was going on? What she was experiencing was definitely not the spirit of her husband, his loving kind presence would be welcomed! She was actually expecting him at some point. This presence felt angry and cold...hate emanated from it. It felt dark and murderous. Then she considered that it might be all in her mind. Maybe she needed an eye exam, were the visions in the mirror real? Or some sort of retinal image from lack of sleep?

That evening she tried to distract herself, first reading a book but finding that too quiet, she turned on the TV to watch some old favorite sit-coms. Finally giving that up, still too nervous to think of going to bed, she felt that a warm bath would help her to sleep. She began filling the tub, adding

some luxurious essential oils. Stripping off her clothes, she climbed into the water, allowing it to run til it was nearly up to her chin. The light was subdued, only two small scented candles illuminated the room. The hot water rushed in and surrounded her, wrapping her in a momentary peace. Shutting it off...the house fell silent.

As she lay there, thoughts took her back to her youth, to her childhood friend who was to become her husband, her failed marriage that fell between those years, then his ultimate death. Thoughts of him brought her a calmness and an inner peace. She basked there.

Her heart leapt when the plodding footsteps began again. They were muffled ...shuffling...She was unable to breathe as the steps grew closer. Was the door locked? Would it even matter? She was naked...completely exposed with no weapon. Would weapons matter? The footfalls stopped. There was an eerie silence...Her skin crawled, her body began uncontrollable shaking. The air moved gently, as if a small window were opened. The candles flickered. At the same moment a foul odor overwhelmed her, a wretched mixture of decomposing flesh and excrement.

In the dim light, as earlier in the day, the “vapor” began swirling and shifting before her, finally taking on a shadowy, wispy human form. Although appearing more lifelike, it showed no depth or color. The only thing that felt real to her was the horrible stench which permeated the air. Then there were hollow eyes which grimly stared at her.

At this point, her fear began to transition to anger, which she felt welling up. What would happen if she struck out at it? Would it disappear? Could it strike back? Before any answers came to her, in her head a gravelly toned voice spoke words which rang out against her own inner dialog.

“I am here, I will always be here...This house does not belong on sacred ground.” The voice echoed...How could a voice other than her own be coming into her head? The voice growled and laughed. “I am with you!” the voice rang. Jesus, it knows my thoughts! The voice laughed again.

Thomasina felt both her fear and anger begin to dissipate as the inner voice continued.

“My name is Benjamin Conroy Anderson, of the 14th Alabama Infantry, Wilcox’s Brigade. I fought valiantly and died on the very ground beneath this

house. This is hallowed ground and should have been left as such. All of these houses will burn... they will all burn.”

Abruptly the form began to withdraw within itself, as a vaporous vortex it finally disappeared. The voice no longer rang in her head.

She woke the next morning in a quandary. What to do? What had happened the previous night? Was she losing her mind? Was the apparition real? If real, she had to say she was no longer afraid of it. She thought of all the brave men who had fought and died in that area, though his last words troubled her. “All these houses will burn... they will all burn.”

Again though, she thought, am I crazy? These words had come to her through her own mind, yet not in her voice. She decided it was time to take action! Picking up her laptop, she began a Google search of listings. Where to begin? Paranormal Ghost Hunters? Exorcists? Local Psychiatrists? As she thought and began her search, next to her on the table out of nowhere, her decorative candle ignited...the wick flaming brightly... ☹

Special Editor's note: This, and the proceeding piece, *UnCivil Ghost*, were written as companion pieces.

## UnCivil Ghost

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E V A N M C H U G H

Blog Post on: [Gettysburg-historical-tour-society.com](http://Gettysburg-historical-tour-society.com)

I got a crazy call around a month ago at this point. Some lady that lived near the historical society wanted me to look around the archives and find a very specific civil war veteran for her. I was willing to help her out as it's the off-season for tours and I always like going down historical rabbit holes. So after I agreed to help, she invited me over to her house. Nice place, I'll tell you what! I have no idea how much it cost her, but it's part of some new subdivision built like 20 years ago. I get to this place and she takes me inside and immediately starts spewing nonsense about the ghost of a lone confederate soldier knocking over her vases and leaving her doors open. What a bunch of bullshit! I thought she wanted me to find her great-grandfather or something not be her guide to the very made-up world of the supernatural. I had to politely nod and act like I was very interested. I did write down what she said but mainly as a record of the crazy circle's people will spin themselves in. The whole house smelled like weed and I'm guessing that's the source of most of her "haunting" problems. It definitely made me feel lightheaded and kind of dizzy. I ignored most of her rambles about the murderous presence that just



couldn't be her husband because of his loving embrace or the basement door being closed when she thought it was open. The main thing that piqued my interest is the reason she contacted me in the first place. A day before she called, the ghost had supposedly appeared before her in bed and said its name and what regiment it was a part of during the war. I never called her back after I left but I did look in the archives and there was never an Alabama 23rd regiment. Also, her descriptions of what he looked like were all off for as far as I know confederate soldiers didn't wear blue dress uniforms. Anyway, I hope the readers will find this story interesting and realize why it's never good to pollute history with ghost bunkum. -

Signing off Ben Anderson. ☺

Special Editor's note: This, and the preceding piece, A Rebel Yell, were written as companion pieces.

## My Baby

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BARRY FREEDMAN

Sensing her energy, the attraction was strong,  
feeling the love, falling under her spell.  
Sweet, elegant lines, smooth... rigid yet soft

Small curvy body, easy to hold.  
She vibrates and sings, tones unfold  
Mahogany vibrates, Mahogany resounds,  
warm and harmonious notes they abound,

She cringes as I pick her up, with fumbles,  
Then foils, missed notes, missed times be her lot  
The Martin God created her... a folkie from 53,

She uplifts, she leads, she brings out the best...  
A song played mournful, or a song in jest.  
Teasing... pleading she says play me right  
I struggle to please, And hold on to her tight.

## Sublime

---

BARRY FREEDMAN

Sublime,  
Wrapped in the arms of the Eternal...  
All fear is washed away,  
Nature caresses my senses  
Euphoria fills the heart,  
all things are possible...  
The sweetness of the air, the laughter and the singing of the naked trees, and  
their children...  
Ahhh... but to feel this way always  
Glimpses we are given,  
these to hold on to, these to keep...  
Holding our child's hand,  
gazing into the depths of our lover's eyes...  
With sweet, sweet surrender...  
Comes Peace...  
Comes Peace ...

## Lest Ye Judge

---

BARRY FREEDMAN

I did not care for the man, he didn't say a lot, quiet much of the time. When he did speak it was often loud and opinionated, tinged with a bit of underlying arrogance it seemed to me. I wasn't aware of such a thing as Asperger Syndrome in those days more than fifty years ago, but looking back I'd say that may have been in the mix.

I worked with Fred for almost 3 years, it was a small place with only six or so employees, so it was impossible not to be in interaction with fellow workers... mostly, we all got along fine.

Fred was ok, even at my tender age of 18, with limited judgment and experience, he seemed like a good man. He just "rubbed me the wrong way" as my dad might say. In my perception, his laughs were a bit too loud, in genuine, or fake to put it bluntly. He was very "surface," and limited his conversations with us.

As it happened one day, for whatever reason, it was just the two of us in the shop, with an awkward silence hanging in the air. In the background the radio played Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water." Our eyes met... quickly Fred looked away. I could see that tears had welled up in the corners of his eyes. He remarked that he felt the song was the most beautiful one ever written, something to that effect. I was deeply struck by the moment, and couldn't fathom why. It seemed so out of character for him, it took me off guard, as he had briefly allowed his guard to drop. The moment passed quickly.

Sometime later, I fell into conversation with one of the other workers, when Fred was not present. My co-worker had been there several years longer than myself, and knew more about the goings on and general history of the place.

In both youthful... and ignorance in general, I was relating some of my issues concerning Fred, when the co-worker abruptly stopped me. He said, "Have you ever learned what happened to Fred a while back"? As the words fell out his mouth, my heart began to sink, somehow I sensed I was about to have my Ego flattened and handed back to me in pieces.

As he shared... Fred had two sons, Sean and Ryan. Sean was younger, a Downs Syndrome Child. Ryan was a couple of years older... a healthy vibrant youngster, full of life. As it happened, Sean passed away quite suddenly and unexpectedly. This was a shock to Fred and his wife, as they did not expect to lose him so soon. While still in the grieving process... the loss, the funeral and burial of Sean, Fred was attending a baseball game of his Son Ryan. He watched in horror as his son collapsed and died on the field of what was later discovered to be a brain aneurysm. Fred had lost both his sons in a space of less than 4 weeks.

My mind was swimming, my heart felt like a bar of lead...Jesus...Jesus...  
Out of Death come the Lessons of Life... ☽

## This is Life

---

BARRY FREEDMAN

The morning menagerie surrounds me, a gentle breeze evident in the dancing of the maple leaves. The sun is making its way, its path worn and predictable. The air is sweet, though tinged with the diesel fumes pouring from the garbage truck roaring by. I feel a peacefulness, an inner calm and joy that I have not felt in sometime. My mind begins to cascade back through the years, this and that.

I bring myself back to the beauty of the present, back to the warm cup of coffee in my hand, the squawk of the blue jay scolding me for interrupting his morning, back to the dancing leaves. Six blocks from me a 9mm bullet crashes through the chest of a twelve year old girl. She lay on the sidewalk, her lifeblood pouring out, her father watching helplessly as she breathes her last breath.

The sun shines, the leaves dance, the blue jay squawks. The garbage truck roars and stinks on its way by...

## Familiar

---

ISABELLE GALATRO

**T**he sun beating down on me felt warm, but the air was the opposite. This feeling should feel familiar, but for whatever reason, something is off. This isn't what I'm used to.

I remember when I worked in that tall, intimidating building last summer. The feeling of the freezing office air around me gave me goosebumps while I leaned on the black windowsill, trying to feel the heat absorbed from the sun. Like standing outside on a sunny day in the winter, watching as the snow melted. The warmth, and the city view were my favorite parts of that job. I hoped that one day, instead of being an intern who picked up lunch and coffee every day, I could have my own office and have people working for me.

Both of my bosses were talented and amazing and everything I hoped to be, which stressed me out. One wrong move from me or anybody that I worked with, and they could kill someone on the cold metal table where lives are supposed to be saved. Surgery is no joke. Neurosurgeons have this seriousness and calmness to them, like everyone else in the room could be panicking and breaking down, but they would be still, calm, and 3 steps ahead. I'm not sure if this is every neurosurgeon, but the men I worked for were so organized that they could be considered mental. Everything had to be done a certain way down to the last little detail, or their day would be ruined. From the way we walked when we showed the patients into their offices, to the direction we put a paper in a folder. The direction and distance of the pens on the desk, the color order of the sticky notes laid out in the drawers, the capital letters of the specific subject line to an email, and everything else that you would probably never think of.

The best and worst part of my job were the IMEs. These are independent medical records that are over a thousand pages long that have to be gone through to find specific records throughout the patient's life of any injuries that relate to the head, neck, and back. Completing this usually took a total of 24 hours, or three work days. It wasn't the worst thing ever when I got to lock myself in my office for three days listening to music and being alone. However, it's probably the most boring part of the job. I would be reading a thousand

pages of information I barely understood, then had to put them in date order, scan them, and email them to the surgeon on the case. If a mistake was made, and medical records were missing, there could be a lawsuit, and, sadly, that would be on me.

I remember one day there was an appointment for an IME that I had completed. One of the doctors asked me to sit in on the appointment. I was excited to see how the examinations actually worked, and being present would also help me to understand how to do my job better. I walked into his office and he left for a moment to get something from a different room. The room was even colder than the rest of the rooms. The cold air went right through my clothes and touched my skin. I shivered and went right over to the large window on the far wall of the room. Leaning my body against the wall, I put the arms up on the windowsill to feel the warmth from the sun outside. I wish I could work outside in the warm summer air instead. After a minute or two, the doctor walked back in. I moved away from the window and took a seat in the corner of the room. A moment later, the patient had come in and the appointment began. It was interesting to be there and watch the doctor on his computer. He went through the records that I had gone through before, while asking the patient about their past and present injuries. I was right, I better understood how to do my job and I found it more enjoyable after that; except for the endless paper cuts.

I genuinely enjoyed that job. It made me feel like an adult who had actual responsibilities. Waking up early and being on a consistent schedule made me feel better about how I spent my time when I wasn't at work. If I wasn't working, I would usually sleep till one in the afternoon and not leave my room or my bed until three o'clock. For no reason other than the fact that I had no responsibilities so why not be lazy, I guess.

I really did like the job, so why did I quit? And why can't I remember when? Everything is just blurry to me. Not the memories of me working there, only the end. Why?

For some reason, I don't even recall where I am right now or how I got here... I can't see anything. Just darkness. I feel cold, but there is some warmth. It doesn't feel like it usually does. The cold is only coming from something I seem to be laying on, maybe metal? The warmth is coming from above but doesn't feel right. I hear a slight buzzing that's sort of high-pitched. I don't



remember the last thing I did today, or yesterday, or the day before that. I remember driving somewhere. Where was I going and when did I get there?

Oh.

I think I remember.

Was that me honking or somebody else honking at me? Was it my fault? No. I don't think it was. Does it matter? Probably not. I just hope it wasn't my fault. There are so many questions that I can't come up with answers for. Honestly, it's not important right now.

This might be the last time I feel the cold air with that slight warm feeling. I love this feeling. I don't want this to be the last time. This cold metal table that I'm lying on, is where lives are supposed to be saved, the table I wanted to be standing over, saving the lives of the people that lay on it. I never wanted to be the person on the table being saved.

Please don't let this be the last time I feel this familiar feeling. Please. ☹

## Cooking with Julia

### Mushroom soup (no dairy)

---

JULIA CHILDISH GAMBINO

Darlings!

When I heard that poser hack Hannibal had submitted recipes, I just had to get the jump on him. He's just a preposterous buffoon who thinks you have to travel to the ends of the world for the perfect ingredients. Who has time for that? Not this chef!

This soup is hearty and super healthy. It takes a lot of chopping, but it totally worth the final product. It's dairy free, and you won't need a blender or food processor to blend it all up in the end.

You'll need:

3 tbs butter

1 chopped sweet onion

5 (or more) cloves of minced garlic

pinch of thyme

24 oz package of baby bella mushrooms (more/less as you like) chopped

3 cups stock - your preference (I prefer vegetable or mushroom)

2 tbs Worcestershire sauce

dash of red pepper flakes

salt/pepper to taste

Melt the butter in a stock pot. (you can add a dash of olive oil if you like)

Add onion and carrot, cook til tender

Add garlic, mushroom, thyme.

Cook for 5 minutes (or until tender) or medium to low heat

Add Worcestershire sauce, red pepper flakes

Season with a little salt and pepper, to taste

Reduce to low and simmer for 30 minutes

That's it. You're done.

Your dinner guests will love you for this, even if they didn't think they liked mushrooms

I know I said this is a dairy free recipe, but I like to serve the soup with a side of crusty bread and a good sharp cheese.

## Angelcynn

---

### GRENDEL

Meat Bags!

Listen

Beowulf is but a bespawling fopdoodle

All air (in his nog, in his aers)

No laurels, save the ones he invents

Braggart and bully

P'too! (I spit at him)

All I wanted was to sit in your Mead Halls and sing

(There wasn't much else to do -

You try living in a swamp

with a mother who chews her own toenails)

But no, Grendel may not enter Heroet

(which isn't that nice anyway...

who did the decorating and

why aren't there anywindows??)

Did you ever notice, hop breaths,

that your name sounds like Angel sin?

Because it does, and you are

P'too (I spit again!)

I digress

That Muck-spout Quisby

Beowulf, I mean,

is only good at sacrificing men

to make himself look good

(although those men were tasty)

The windbag may beat me  
(I am over 2,000 years old)  
But he'll sacrifice more men  
and take all the credit.  
He's a scobble-bloching  
saddle-goose  
stampcrab  
tallowcatch

So says I

Aers - Anglo Saxon for ass  
Angelcynn - Anglo Saxon for People  
Bespawling - Anglo Saxon for drool  
Fopdoodle - Anglo Saxon for foolish old man  
Hereot - Hrothgar's Mead Hall. It isn't that nice anyway  
Muck-spout - Anglo Saxon for someone who talks a lot, likes to boast and swear  
Nog - Anglo Saxon for head  
Quisby - Anglo Saxon for someone who claims a lot, but is in truth lazy  
Saddle Goose - Anglo Saxon for imbecile  
Scobber-blocher - Anglo Saxon for someone who avoids real work  
Stampcrap - Anglo Saxon for clumsy oaf  
Tallowcatch - Anglo Saxon for barrel of lard



*I Are Da Winner* | Virginia Shirley

## Living Well

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DEBORAH HIBBARD

The sound of trucks cutting through the hills below was different on the nights she didn't work. And if there was any fog settling over the highway after a humid day it was sadder and bothered her more. Mondays when she didn't work were the worst – she'd sit on the back porch and listen - torturing herself at the same time seeking relief; imagining the hot grill but also the one night respite she had from it. She hated the truck stop and the locals who hung out there. They baited her. Called her queer and made jokes she understood were not meant to be funny to her.

It was warmer on the porch than in the house. The house was cold. It was always cold. In the winter Ira let the fire bank and water would freeze in the bedrooms. In the summer, night and day, her mother kept the heavy drapes pulled closed. Ira was asthmatic and allergic to mold, her mother sensitive to the cold. Bridgette marveled at their devotion to making the house uninhabitable for each other. Now her mother rattled around upstairs and Ira sat in the kitchen watching the TV as Bridgette settled in on the couch in the living room. If she worked tonight, she'd have to leave in an hour. But tonight she watched Johnny Carson.

She pulled the gargantuan and chaotically colorful afghan tight up to her chin as Johnny spun out his opening routine. A few winters before her mother had started cranking out afghans, she'd made stools out of tomato juice cans. Always looking for a way to give others something for nothing, she had nearly exhausted the human ingenuity for multi-use of garbage. Her mother was industrious in the winter, but in the summer she mostly slept. Boxes and bags of half-finished projects waited for the cold winter months.

Tuesday night she walked to work down the dirt road until it hit a T. She turned right and continued past Buck's farm, past the house where the hired man lived, past the guy that gave every teenager the creeps, and past the widow Winnie's, who would always have a piece of lemon meringue pie for her when she visited. Tonight the air was still. No stars, and only one car in the mile she walked through the dark. Rounding the last curve she could see the sodium arc lights illuminating the parking lot full of semis and their clouds of exhaust. The smell was saccharin as it hit the back of her throat, so cloying it

made her sick to her stomach.

She liked club sandwiches and eggs the best, but most truckers and locals wanted grease slathered potatoes and the homemade pies at 2am. When she worked second shift in the spring, she got a lot of buses and liked the predictable rhythm that 50 turkey club specials demanded.

Bar rushes on the weekends meant at least one drunk would find his way into the kitchen and ask for the dyke cook to give him her best buns. Bridgette forgave the drunks. It was the sober ones she hated. When she worked the bar rush she liked the frantic pace of the waitresses as they yelled their orders for one-eyed toast, bossy in a bowl and mystery in the alley. It amused her that you could fuck up every order and no one cared except the waitresses - all farm girls who still had a work ethic. Some mornings after she got off work, she and a few of the waitresses got drinks at 8 am in the Rainbow Tavern. They rarely ordered food, too sick of the smell of grease and cigarettes. But they drank a lot. Leaving the bar around 9 am was like emerging from a dark movie theater into the afternoon bustle, only better because she was always drunk.

Ira was already at work when she got home in the morning and her mother was moving piles of things - dishes, books, laundry - a constant forward, backward, ebb and flow of things from one room to another - her version of cleaning. Bridgette slept and woke up at 6 to the smell of baking powder biscuits. She could always tell her mother's mood and the state of her parent's marriage on any given day by what her mother cooked. Chicken and biscuits were easy to heat up and she knew tonight he would make them wait dinner on him. He'd be hungry after drinking and holding court at the bar. Heavy and irritable with sleep she went down to set the table and then walked to the backyard to cut flowers. She hated cutting the flowers every night. Cosmos, Snapdragons, Ladies in the Bathtub, and whatever she could find supplemented with wild daisies, because she had lost a dog named Daisy and it seemed right. A ritual to provide something beautiful - a ridiculous and wasted effort. Her mother insisted this would be her job until she moved or the leaves dropped - whichever came first. She crossed her fingers as she thought about the apartment on Fulton Street. One room, kitchen and bath on the third floor. It was small, and smelled of cats and cooking oil. But it would be hers. There she could live well.

It was at least a once-a-week routine waiting for Ira. When her sisters and brothers lived there, the four of them took turns watching for his car



headlights in the winter and the plume of dirt behind his car in the summer. When she was younger, she had to go to bed before he ever came home, and she was sure each time as she studied the ceiling for car lights that he wouldn't make it and she'd be fatherless. She blamed her mother for driving him away until he stayed away even after her mother stopped talking to him. Until she was 14, she thought the mix of paint fumes from the body fender shop where he worked, his sweat and port wine was cologne. She no longer worried about him. But still she waited.

At 8 pm both she and her mother, as if part of a biological migration, shuffled to the porch where they sat pretending not to wait. When the clock in the dining room chimed 9, she went to the kitchen and took a biscuit from the wicker basket on the table, walked out to the road intending to walk to her neighbors to kill some time. A few hundred feet past the house and just past the barn she saw her father sitting in his car, the engine off, smoking a cigarette. From his vantage point he could see the porch, see them sitting. Waiting. Everybody waiting. Waiting for Ira. Ira watching her mother waiting. Afraid of her mother's icy silence or asking for it by making her wait so many times. Bridgette didn't bother to tell her mother what she saw, and her father didn't see her seeing him. What mattered was leaving. No more waiting. She went into the house and ate. ☺

## Cooking with Hannibal

### Liver and Onions (onions optional)

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HANNIBAL LECTOR

HELLO, Clarice (and all you Clarences)

If you're having a hum-drum day, most any liver will do. But why have a hum-drum day? Start with a quality liver. A full-professor or top administrator will serve. (avoid certain faculty or staff ((you know the ones)) unless you prefer your livers pickled). If you're having a dinner party for the college president, only the college president's liver will do – and that defeats the purpose.

You'll need:

Liver

Ghee (pilfered from the refrigerator of the liver donor)

Two sweet onions, sliced

¼ cup flour

Salt/Pepper to taste

Truffle Oil (also pilfered)

Slowly melt two tablespoons of Ghee. Add the onions, and caramelize

While the onions are cooking, remove the outer membrane of the liver and pat it dry. Cut into bite size pieces. Dredge in flour. In a separate skillet, melt another two tablespoons of Ghee. Gently place liver in the pan and cook til brown – 1 ½ minutes a side (for fun, you can leave the liver raw).

Combine the ingredients, add a splash of truffle oil.

Mangia!

## Atom Bomb

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LILY HODSON

“**W**hy is everything so brown?”  
“Nuclear holocaust tends to do that to an environment.”  
“Yeah, but it’s ALL brown. There is no other color except brown...where do I go now?”  
“Anywhere you want.”  
“...yeah, but like...where?”  
“Anywhere.”

At the time? This was the worst graduation present ever. My brothers and my dad have always liked video games. It was a common ground that they could bond over, something that managed to slip its way into conversations even when it had no reason being there. I, however, couldn’t seem to get my foot in that door. As a kid, blowing zombie’s brains out or modding weapons just didn’t appeal to me. I tended to stick around my mom more, who knew even less about video games than I did. Sure, I played games like Super Mario, Minecraft, and Guitar Hero, but those weren’t exactly something worth talking about.

Now, graduating middle school was a point of pride for me as it was, without a doubt, the hardest time in my life. My family was so proud of my accomplishments having known my struggles more intimately than anyone else. While my parents took me out to dinner and gave me a graduation card with a twenty dollar bill tucked inside, my older brother gave me a letter written in sharpie on a piece of computer paper. It was a heartfelt note, talking about how I had made it through all the shit of middle school and how he would be there for me throughout high school. He gave advice and words of encouragement, but the thing that stood out to me was the very end. You know I’m poor as shit, so I offer you the one thing I can: Fallout :)

At the time? I would have rather him just leave it at not being able to get me anything. Fallout. It had been my brother’s hyperfixation for years now. Anybody who met Max knew that Fallout was something that he lived and breathed. His room was pretty much a shrine to it at this point, made up of equal parts game paraphernalia and actual artifacts from the Atomic Age. Flags, mugs, models, a genuine manual from the 1960s detailing what to do in

case of being irradiated. Anything there was to have, he had it or was expecting it on the porch in due time. The game's storyline follows a Lone Wanderer who has lived their entire life in an underground vault after the raining of atom bombs and the end of the world as the world knew it. Your dad, who is your only living relative, is a scientist who decides to leave the safety of the vault, which has never been done before and technically isn't allowed, leaving you to run off after him through the irradiated wasteland left behind.

“Asshole! I'm his kid! He just left me here?!”

“Yeah. Bad parenting is kinda a running theme.” While he tried to impart his knowledge on me once before, I gave up rather early. I didn't like the drab scenery, how shooting an ally would turn them hostile, or how hard it was to aim. I had the mindset of, “If I'm not immediately good at it, I'm gonna quit.”

To be honest, I only agreed to take him up on his offer because he was practically vibrating with excitement at the prospect of having somebody else to talk about Fallout with. Sure, my other brother and my dad had both played the game, but you could only listen to so many hours of lore before you wanted to blow your brains out.

So we carved out a few hours in our schedule, popped in the disc, and booted up Fallout 3. When the intro started and the narrator began talking about how “war never changes,” my brother recited the lines almost word for word.

“You fucking NERRRRRRD!” He walked me through the intro of the game, shouting at me to do this and that, much like a coach yelling at a boxer in the ring, until I finally got out into the world. I wandered a bit, freaked out at the intensity and tension created when it came to actually shooting things, and wondered just where the hell I was supposed to go.

Eventually, my brother decided that he would let me off the leash, no guidance and one piece of advice. “Just keep at it,” he said before scuttling back to his room, likely to play the exact same game on his computer.

So I did just that. At first it felt more like a chore. I had to stick with this because I promised my brother I would. I did errands for NPCs and shot irradiated creatures with unenthusiastic skepticism.

Now, I don't know exactly when it happened, but it slowly stopped seeming like work. It was less of a duty and began to feel more like something

I wanted to do. I found myself booting up the Xbox more than I ever had. My dad, who was allowed to sit back and play his own games in relative silence, was now being pestered by me, demanding that it be my turn to play after his 2 hour timer was up. I found that I loved the world, the characters, the missions, the humor. Everything about it. When the game finally came to the climax, the water purifier finally being operational, the Lone Wanderers life sacrificed for the greater good of the wastes and the credits began rolling, I did what any sane person would do. I restarted the game. Immediately. I only got as far as character customization when my brother stopped me, popped the disc out and put in a brand new game. Fallout New Vegas.

I was now an angry mailman (courier) wandering across the Mojave Desert to find the man who shot me in the head amidst heightened tensions between two rival factions. It was like Fallout 3 but with hookers and blackjack. I loved it. I quickly finished before going on to expand my horizons. From the sci-fi genre of Portal, to the fantasy world of Skyrim, to the 19th century American frontier of Red Dead Redemption. I finally understood why my brothers and my dad talked about it so much. I met my best friend in the 10th grade and one of our first pieces of common ground was video games. Senior year we had a tradition every Friday where we ordered dumplings and Boba tea, sat at the local public library for a while, and went back to my house to hoard the Xbox. Do you know how many rounds of Left 4 Dead we have played? I like to think that it numbers in the hundreds and our zombie kill-count numbers in the tens of thousands.

The games I have played have meant so much to me. I've laughed, I've raged, I've cried. A lot of people may not get what I'm saying, or think I'm way too emotional, too passionate about this, but honestly it's never just a game. Anyone who has felt any sort of feeling towards a book or show or movie should know the power that media has over us. For me, a video game isn't just watching events happen or a character's life go by. You're immersed in a world. And to be the one who controls someone greater than yourself, to be the hero, the main character, to rise and fall, accomplish great things? There's not really anything like it. ☺

## Trapped in Space

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LILY HODSON

**F**enris Gul's log, 270010, Staryear 2077x.

After careful deliberation on behalf of the Beta-Maxx 9, the five seats in the shuttle have been assigned to five crew members, myself being one of them. Honestly, after being berated this entire voyage by almost all of the crew for my less than righteous past and morally questionable present, I thought I would feel a sort of smug satisfaction with getting to go, but the victory is more bitter than I anticipated.

The BM9, ever the blunt hologram they are, explained the reason I was chosen was that I was the last remaining medic aboard the ship. I will be needed to patch people up when things inevitably go wrong. The likelihood that someone is going to get hurt, what with this being an unknown environment, is pretty high. The likelihood that it's gonna be severe? Almost definitely. It was also mentioned that, while we may have Skel with us, her lack of experience out of a lab means that someone is probably going to eat or touch some poisonous flora at one point, never mind the fauna. Don't even get me started on Foster Chase. He is a right wild card, that one, a possible murderer, so who knows if I'm gonna have to help clean up stab wounds or something. The point is they need me or they're going to lose people. If we lose one person, the balance of responsibility and skill set is totally forfeit. My background in severe disaster medicine may very well be the difference between everyone surviving or everyone dying...no pressure.

The Advisor said all of this like I didn't already know, like it wasn't apparent to all the other survivors that I would be top pick, especially the ones being left behind. I know that if there was even one other person with less than half my training, they wouldn't hesitate to leave me to rot here. Can't have the "shady druggy" stitching your wounds unless you're real desperate. Lucky for me I guess because that's exactly what they are: desperate. Can't believe I'm saying this, but thank God I didn't drop out of med school.

Now I know I normally don't do video logs, I think there's only an

introductory log on file, a required entry we had to record when we first got here, but I imagine this to be my last one. The shuttle we're taking will divert all power to the autopilot and life functions so that it can actually get us to the planet. There'll be no power for a luxury like video diaries. I honestly don't know if the BM9 is saving these things or sending them back somewhere or if this is some psychological placebo that no one ever sees, but I figure I might as well get everything out of my system now. Say what I need to say, clear my conscience just in case the shuttle bursts into a fiery ball or we land and immediately die. If we do somehow survive, I don't know if I could say this to someone face to face.

My malpractice charge was not something minor or a simple mistake, even though I have told my fellow practitioners and crew members such. It was a botched and bloody procedure that should have had me thrown in jail for life for my idiocy, but I was "lucky" enough to have some sort of "guardian angel" to clean up after me. Some faceless person pulling all the strings.

The patient in question was my wife.

...

Did you know there are around a million words in English? And that's just one language. Thousands of them and galactical dialects for each one and yet no number or combination of words in any of them could encompass just how much I loved her.

We were living together happily in the Anrathos quadrant. We moved shortly after we were married and lived there for 7 years. She was a brilliant lawyer, just brilliant. She was established, known to win any case, even against all odds. I had my own practice after years of dreaming and saving. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't successful. Things were going well. We were even beginning to start a family. We were planning out our lives together.

She was around 6 months pregnant with our child when she went into cardiac arrest during the night. She was perfectly healthy in every way and yet I knew when I saw the panic in her eyes as she gasped for air.

If anyone were to believe a word I have said, believe me when I say that I put

everything I had into saving her. I had only a few minutes to help her, those few agonizing, frantic minutes, and I had virtually nothing to help her with. I called enforcers, medics, anyone, but help never came.

She flat lined after suffering for 8 minutes and 23 seconds.

I panicked. I panicked and I tried to get the baby out. I thought that maybe I could salvage something, something that would ease the grief and pain, if only a little. I knew they wouldn't make it if I were to leave and I owed it to my wife to try. Needless to say, our family died that day.

When the enforcers finally showed up, it wasn't easy to explain, impossible actually. I was covered in blood in the middle of an active "crime scene" shaking and in total shock. They didn't give me the chance to say anything and opted to slam me on the floor instead.

I honestly wanted nothing more than to rot in jail, to stew in my torment for what I had done, but some "anonymous benefactor" took that from me. I was let off the hook after a substantial amount of money and favors were cashed in and was allowed to go on two conditions: one was that I would be marked with a non-detailed medical malpractice charge on my record, a middle ground reached between my serving a sentence plus a subsequent criminal record and me walking off scott free. The other was that I would have to join the crew of the Invincible for an expedition to the Ja'Unca planet. I got to find all this out from a message sent from a one way communication through an unmarked device. Totally untraceable and totally anonymous. The amount of messages full of questions and anger I sent numbered in the thousands. They always returned to sender.

I fell into Ice-Nine shortly after and stopped caring about anything. I hardly went to work, wasted all my money on I-Ni. I sold the house, it being too much of a reminder, and moved to an apartment in Net'Va City halfway across the planet. My medical practice was hanging on by a thread when I decided "Hell, why not" and left for Ja'Unca, not that I really had much of a choice.

As for my "issues", BM9 held a private meeting with all 5 members



who would be going on the shuttle, myself included. It was a long meeting in which each of us were practically picked apart psychologically in front of the other members. We aired grievances, hashed our personal issues, etc. etc.

When it came time for my turn, The Advisor recommended that I open up to the group, Wooster especially, about my “drug problem”. Try to get a hold on it before it interferes with my job. I told them that I haven’t even used Ice-Nine since two weeks before initial departure over a year ago, let alone actively use it. They didn’t look like they believed me. As for my record, the other members clearly weren’t privy to my crimes and didn’t seem to like my default answer. Brill was the most vocal of the group, but I couldn’t seem to care about her cause of Wooster staring at me the entire time. He didn’t even say anything to me or have a discernible emotion on his stupid face. He just looked at me blankly, but his eyes looked like they understood, almost forgiving. I usually don’t buy into that “power of prophecy” crap everyone says about him, but he seems to know something.

Once dirty laundry was aired, BM9 met with us as individuals, hoping to advise us one last time before we depart on the journey. They talked to me about my role. How I would need to not only heal the extreme injuries, keep everyone alive and healthy so that they could perform their own tasks, but also keep a handle on basic illnesses and smaller cuts and scrapes. How I need to be mindful of the supplies we’re given. I may be the only one using them, but that means that I’ll have to ration them at my own discretion. If I use too much of one thing on one person, I could very well be dooming the group. They even mentioned that I may be needed to help with possibly delivering infants if we so choose to repopulate, if rescue never comes. I didn’t dare say anything to that. I just felt sick. I feared if I opened my mouth it all would come spilling out.

Bottom line: if I fail any of my tasks, I could very well destroy this mission.

They finally ended their long speech with telling me that the sooner I tell the group, the better it will be for me in the long run, helping to make a cohesive team and all that. I asked if they knew what I had done. They didn’t.

“Classified information only accessible to higher clearance members,” they said. I told them that my business was my own and that I wouldn’t let it affect the mission.

I was a little dazed after that. I just floated around to the other four group members, getting medical histories, records, the like. That was hours ago. I haven’t even opened any of the files yet. I threw them on my bed and set up a camera for this log. I’m supposed to be keeping those files organized and safe, studying them before we get thrown out, but I can’t bring myself to care about that right now.

I know BM9 is right. I know I need to come clean, but when they’re leaving someone like Marcus Rowe behind partially because he beats his wife, makes you wonder what they would do to someone who killed theirs. Maybe they’d get it, but then maybe they wouldn’t. Maybe they wouldn’t understand why, even if I told them. They would never understand how it felt in that moment, to be alone and totally helpless.

Remember when I said I didn’t have any Ice-Nine on the ship? I lied. I have a bit stashed in the back of the bottom drawer in my desk that I’d brought on from home. I was saving for a rainy day or something, I don’t know. Figured I might as well take a trip before the trip, you know?

Oh God. What am I gonna do? ☹



*Barfi* | Hiba Khan

## Barfi

---

H I B A K H A N

"Fluffy?"

"No, it's too common."

"Mom, what about Coca?"

"Like Coca Cola?"

"No, like cocaine. Since she is white and so is cocaine."

"You need God, Hiba."

"She's white, has the sweetest eyes, and is so tiny. What could be a decent name for something like that?"

"Barfi."

"Huh? Like the dessert?"

"Exactly like the dessert!"

Imagine having a dessert so sweet that it makes your teeth ache, triggers all your sensitivities, and yet you can't stop having more of it. I remember the first time I had barfi. It made me brush my teeth multiple times but had me coming back for more every few hours. I could say the same thing about my cat - my 10-month-old, biting enthusiast, and purr machine of a cat, Barfi. I could talk about Barfi for hours and what she is like now compared to when I got her. But I'm going to talk about what I was like before Barfi and what I am like now.

"Asshole."

"Moron."

"Hehe, what an idiot!"

I've called every cat I have ever come across these words or worse. I know, it's not my proudest moment. When I was 8, a stray cat jumped at me out of nowhere and scratched my neck badly. I had to be rushed to the hospital due to the wound being deeper than expected. That's where my fear/hate relationship with cats began. So, you can imagine my shock when my mother told me that we were adopting a 4-month-old kitten. It was the 29th of September, and we were on a flight back home when my mom brought up the fact that her colleague's cat had kittens a few months ago and she told him she would adopt one. I vividly remember being shocked since she knew how much I despised cats. My fear got the best of me, and I decided that I had to

stop this from happening.

Over the next few days, I tried to convince her not to bring a feline freak into our house. I showed her videos of cats breaking things and hitting their owners. I made her aware of the fact that they are hard to take care of and that cat litter would stink worse than a blue cheese and rotten fish milkshake.

A week passed and there was no sign of the cat so far. So, I thought my mom had finally listened to my pleas and said no to her colleague and we had moved past this phase together as a family. That day I went out with my friends and came back later than I normally would. I was expecting to get a lecture from my mom about how it's unsafe to be out past midnight, but all I heard as soon as I opened the door was, "Awe come here little one!" "Let me see your adorable little face."

In my head I thought "Oh my god, they missed me?" and walked in excited to be greeted by my family. But to my disappointment, I saw a white, fluffy, minion looking thing in a crate and my family sitting around it. Safe to say, I froze. My worst nightmare had come true. There was a cat in my house.

As the days passed, I felt myself getting closer to the feline freak. Since my mom worked 10 hours a day and my brother was busy with his exams, I somehow got stuck taking care of it. I started researching about how cats need to be taken care of and what types of food they like to eat. I found out everything from the type of shampoo to be used to the differences in the number of times they sneeze. For example, if cats sneeze once or twice a day, it could be a part of their normal behavior but if they sneeze a lot for several days in a row it could mean that they have an upper respiratory infection. I became the thing I hated the most: a Karen mom who rushes to the ER the moment their child bumps into a toy. I started testing what type of food she enjoys the most and which treats she liked best. I left my bedroom door open so she could walk in whenever she pleases, at any time of the day. She slowly became the biggest part of my day and the sole owner of 90% of my phone's storage. She became the centre of my universe. Everything I did revolved around this four-legged fur ball. She loved sleeping in her bed through the night, but the moment the clock struck 6 a.m., she would walk into my room, jump on the bed, start smelling my face, and purr loudly to wake me up and get the signal that she wanted to snuggle under the blanket. She became the most important aspect of my life, and she knew it too.

Barfi changed my life in ways I had never imagined. She came into my life at a time when nothing was going right, and she took all that negativity and my pain without even knowing it. She gave me something to look forward to every day. She did more for me than I could possibly do for her.

When the time came for me to be move to the United States for college, all I wanted was to be able to spend time with her. Yet all that kept happening was just me tirelessly trying to get everything for my big move, which resulted in me hardly staying at home. I kept losing time with Barfi, and yet she continued walking into my room every day at 6 without negligence because that was our routine. I knew that my time to part ways with her was coming soon, but I did not realize just how quickly that time was approaching. It felt like impending doom, like that sinking feeling at the bottom of your stomach when you bid farewell to your closest friends at the end of the night. That feeling that tells you just how much tougher everything is going to get from this point on. I felt it every time I looked at Barfi. I experienced it in instances where I would randomly start crying while playing with her because I knew that it was one of the last few times I would be doing that.

The day of my flight, I played with Barfi every chance I got. I gave her as many treats as she could have wanted and gave her just as many kisses that she did not want. When the time came for me to leave for the airport, I felt like she knew that she was a part of something bigger than her and her hatred of cuddles. She knew that this would be the last time I was going to torture her with cuddles, which is why she let me do it.

I had sworn I would not cry while bidding my farewell to the only thing that was the source of my sanity for 6 months, but I failed. The moment I held her in my arms, I broke down. I sobbed and shuddered, thinking that this was it for my time with my feline freak. I hugged her and cried for five minutes, and it was as if she knew it too, as she let me cry and hug her without moving or even squirming a single inch. I cried more saying goodbye to her than I did when I said goodbye to my family and friends. I feel no shame in admitting that, because when I had no support from my family for the things I wanted to pursue, when I had no help from my friends on the days I needed them the most, Barfi was there for me. She gave me a sense of responsibility that I had never experienced before. I felt a constant sense of companionship when I was around her. I knew that there would be someone waiting to give me a jump

scare the moment I entered the house. I knew that lifting her up in my arms and singing to her would make her fall asleep instantly and that she cared about the efforts I made for her. Maybe it is too much to expect from a cat, but when that cat changes you in ways you never thought, you would do the same.

I left a part of me back home. That part roams around the house all day and wakes people up from their sleep because it wants attention or food. It sleeps on my bed through the night and sleeps on any other surface through the day. It tries to catch flies but is horribly bad at it. It looks at you dramatically when you serve food without the treats mixed in. It purrs when you scratch its neck but bites if you do it longer than it wishes. It only eats seafood-based cat food and will blatantly ignore it if you present mere chicken. It sits next to you on the days you need it the most but will run away the moment you try to get close. It brings a smile to your face whether you like it or not, and it will be sure to let you know just how much it loves you, but in its own way. I left a part of me back home, and its name is Barfi. ☺

## *Armchair Travel (When Nothing Else Will Do)*

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RACHAEL LEONARD

**T**hat was the thought in her mind as Thao plunked down into her favorite overstuffed chair that faced eastward overlooking the lake. She loved this spot, a true home-coming place where her body could rest and her mind could drift as it pleased. It never failed to offer a much deserved, much longed-for release from the unfulfilling, taxing work days; taxing work days, she called them. She snuggled into pillows and afghan, releasing a deep sigh, and with it, the burdens of the day.

“Hmmm, I’ll reminisce about my trip to Venice last summer; so relaxing, so beautiful, it was such good medicine!” she thought. “I could easily go there again and again.” And with that, she allowed her gaze to travel through the glass doors to the lake beyond. The water was restful now, finally quiet after a day of choppy boat traffic. The birds had long since gone to bed, and it was just the lake, the moon, and Thao. Or so she thought.

The wise Universe has a way of knowing and caring far beyond our wildest imaginings, and it refuses to be held to our self-imposed boundaries. So while she tried her best to reimagine Venice, it was the full moon rising to dance on the water that spirited her away.

Soon Thao realized she was opening the doors and walking out to the beach. “This wasn’t what I planned,” she puzzled to herself.

The soft breeze whispered in reply, “It rarely is,” and seemed to nudge her onward.

Disquieted, she rationalized, “I’m dreaming a most vivid dream!”

“Dream on,” Breeze teased.

“I...I don’t know...what I’m...”

“I do,” came a wisp swirling around her, now growing more intense. “Come dance! Come dance with me!” Breeze beckoned irresistibly. And with the constellations piercing the night sky, the light of the moon intensified its dazzling reflections on the water, compelling Thao onward.

“I’m losing my mind!” she thought.

“So let it go, dear one, let it go. You’ll find it later. I promise.”

Permission to play, to dance with the moon! Thao stepped out into



the water. No, not into the water, but onto the water! Letting go of earth, of sand, of gravity, of everything that 'makes sense', she stepped from reflection to shimmering reflection in rhythm with the moon, leaping and twirling, giddy with utter disbelief.

“How can this be happening, this rapture?!”

“How can it not?” Moon spoke for the first time. “I've waited your entire life for this moment.”

And as Thao yielded to its embrace, she admitted, “So have I. So have I.”

On and on they danced until Moon had to set. “I must continue on my way, but we can meet again and again, as often as you wish—as often as you will. Wherever you are, I shall spread my reflection before you, a surer path than any you've trod thus far.” And with that, the kiss of Breeze carried Thao back beyond the doors and settled her once again into her chair.

“Such a vivid dream. If only it were more than that,” she thought, recounting it with deep delight as she nestled back under her afghan. Only then did she realize her feet were wet. ☽

## Go Gently with Yourself

---

RACHAEL LEONARD

Go gently with yourself.

Hold fast to the kindness you give to others,

and give that kindness equally to yourself.

The words of wisdom you say to them,

say also and with as much conviction, to yourself.

Believe the kindness.

Believe the wisdom.

As much for yourself as for them,

these treasured, deeply loved Others.

Go gently with yourself.

## Changing Faces

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RACHAEL LEONARD

**I**t was the sparrows' vigorous chirping that first drew my attention. So close, just a few feet from where I sat. Two little ones independently hopping around, scouring the ground for anything edible. Independent. Only a couple weeks ago they perched on a branch of my red bud tree, fluttering their wings and squawking for parental attention.

“Feed me!” Now side by side, they've graduated.

I silently wonder if they recognize each other. Sister. Brother.

Yes, this is you.

Yes, this is me.

Independent, but belonging still to one another. They seem grateful for the companionship, the belonging. The language of belonging, that tacit understanding of who they are; they seem to get it.

Do we? ∞

## Joys of Flying

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RACHAEL LEONARD

**H**ey, look at that! It takes all one hundred plus of us up here to make that tiny little shadow down there. Yes, that one that's dancing over the fields and roads as if they didn't exist. It knows no boundaries, no barriers to hold it back. Hundreds of feet below us, a plane on a course about 40° west of ours appears like a determined bug, wings stretched wide, scurrying to its next destination.

Descending from 31,000 feet to land, I feel like I'm cloud shopping. Perusing first this one, then that one, the choices are mine. Billowy, kissed by the sun, rain rich, which shall I choose? ☽

## Haiku to Springtime

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RACHAEL LEONARD

*The late winter sun  
pierces clouds and barren trees  
with promise of spring.*



*Winter Sky* | Mary Seel

## Cooking with Hannibal

### Buffalo Bill Wings

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HANNIBAL LECTOR

Hello again, fellow gourmands. This recipe is simply perfect for tailgating or picnics. For this bit of deep fried fun, gather together the “wings” of those who have had wings or entire buildings named after them.

Garlic, salt, pepper, cayenne. Dry and flavorless, so pump up the flavor volume. You'll need:

4 pounds of wings  
1 tablespoon baking powder  
½ teaspoon salt  
5 finely diced garlic cloves  
Just a pinch of black pepper

For the Sauce:

¼ cup Ghee  
½ cup Hannibal's Original Red Hot Sauce  
2 tablespoons honey

For the Dip

¾ cup crumbled blue cheese, softened  
1/3 cup sour cream  
¼ cup finest Mayonnaise  
4 cloves garlic, minced  
1 tablespoon lemon juice (I prefer Meyer's lemon)  
Pinch of salt and cracked black pepper

Preheat your oven to 450. Pat the “wings” dry and place all the ingredients (under wings) in a bowl, add the wings. Toss gently to coat. Put on baking sheet and leave a little space in between each “wing.” Bake for 30 minutes, then turn them over and bake for another 30.

During the first 30 minutes, whisk together the sauce. 10 minutes before the second bake is complete, coat the wings in the sauce. Make sure to coat the wings evenly. You can always leave them another 5 – 10 minutes if you want them extra crispy.

While the wings cool a bit, make your dip.

Serve.

Delicious!

## Floating Below

---

JARRETT LUDOLPH

Waves ripple  
The tide trickles  
Nothing's wounded  
Everything's easy

Ears hear  
Water washing  
Above the head  
Now below

Floating under  
The surface's skin  
Airborne above  
The sand's bottom

Lazy days  
Spent swiftly  
Swimming free  
Lowering nicely

Sun above  
The ocean's lens  
Pouring down  
To the floor



## What They Call a Romance

---

JARRETT LUDOLPH

One more touch on the hand

Walking, talking, and then stopping

There's a bird in the trees over there

Feet in a pretzel on a restaurant chair

A laugh at nothing, and then another

Something more than a passing glance

Words that say it's a pain to leave

A sigh and one last hug before you go

I guess this is what they call a romance

## As the Town Burns Down

---

JARRETT LUDOLPH

The journey is done; Though it just begun  
Death circles in; He will always win  
The cavalry cheer; Enemies draw near  
With spear and shield; they shall not yield  
Commanders shout; Swords draw out  
Soldiers cry; arrows sore high  
People scatter; windows shatter  
Something spills; a women shrills  
They ride away; night replaces day  
Their battle is won; what is done is done  
So much unsaid; To those now dead  
With shovel and spade; graves are made  
This town; it's torn down  
None know why; It's left to die  
Too many lost; Too high a cost  
The start of the fall; The end of it all

## Deep Dive

---

JARRETT LUDOLPH

Ten years. That is the time it took to get to this point. A decade and a whole chapter of our lives spent. We stood in front of the cave entrance, its vines covering its dark empty mouth. Ten fucking years. This better be good.

“Doesn’t look like Caspian, the City-state that never truly died,” Roland said. He looked around at the rocks and moss and shook his head and smiled. We were only a few yards deep. I shook my seeker’s phial until it glowed.

“Cut the snark” I said. “This will be a particularly long expedition. How many times have I actually been wrong huh?” I started walking more into the cave. “Zero, remember?”

Roland muttered something unintelligible to himself.

That is in fact true there was something in those sarcophaguses after all. And the Dead Mines. And the Opal Caverns. It just didn’t hold up to his subjective standard. But it was good enough for buyers, and that’s all that really matters.

It was an hour before we saw the massive cavern that Caspian was supposed to be in. It would have taken half the time if Roland was used to this sort of terrain. Helping him up the rock faces took too long, and he’s not the most motivated person in the world.

“It says your little city is supposed to be around here” he jabbed a finger into the map.

“That map is only good up those hollow spaces we passed, he literally made up the last half” I pointed back them.

“Well thank you for telling me this just now over an hour into the trip”

“You’re welcome, my good sir.” I pulled out the journal. “This is actually useful from here now.”

“That’s the journal from that Miraz’s place?”

I nodded.

Now, we walked across the narrow rocky platform overlooking the underground city. It laid hundreds of feet below us, its building crumbled. I

held my knife in one hand, and the other had a seeker's phial. The knife laced with contact poison, for any creature that we could encounter in the labyrinth of the city streets.

Roland was fixing the map to their belt and tying the rope off to a large rock. "I'll make sure the rope's secure, you climb down, got it?"

I nodded and took hold of the rope. I lost my footing. I grasped at the rope, it slipping through my fingers. I hit a rock, and the rope left my hands. My head hit the ground. Pain spiked from my head to my spine. I placed my hand on my hair, and shakily brought it to my view. Blood. Blood wetted my back. My white shirt soaked in red.

Roland's laughter echoed across the cavern. He called out from the top. "Serves you right!" He cupped his hands around his mouth. "You idiot"

"You bastard!" I tried to yell but nothing came out. "You Shifter!" I saved his life a dozen times! We fought side by side for decades! Since forever. "I'll kill you if I survive this! How can you? Why..."

The cliff became fuzzy, and I started to nod off like what happens right before you sleep.

•

My body rested below me. I'm dead? My hands had become translucent. The ground, though rocky, didn't pinch my feet. The air, being thick and hard to breathe before, is now perfect and clean. I heard oxen and wagons behind me. This city has been dead for thousands of years. I turned around and found it alive with people.

"Welcome to the City of Caspian!" a voice shouted. ☁

Special Editor's note. This, and the preceding piece, Roland's Lament, were written as companion pieces.

## Rowland's Lament

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ENG 175

**F**or as long as I've known Geth he's been treasure pated. Always something buried somewhere, golden rings tucked into foundation stones. Rare paintings hidden in walls, gems in cisterns, amulets in attics. He once took me out after a storm to look at the root halos of fallen trees.

"You'll find untold wonders," he said. "Meerkins love to hide..."

"Not Meerkins again." They were rodent thieves, drawn to anything shiny.

"They hide their troves in the roots of trees."

"Gian told you so, didn't she?"

He nodded, squirming between gnarled roots and rocky muck. He never came up with anything but mud. He'd cost me good pairs of boots. Bruises and broken bones. He'd gotten us in trouble for trespass. There were misunderstandings and close calls. Angry inn owners. Perturbed lawbearers. We'd had our fun, but there was never any treasure. Now he was sure he'd found the Lost City of Caspian. He'd done his homework on this one though, and it seemed far more plausible than most of his other searches. Interviews, research at the Grand Hall of Records, survey records, a visit to Professor Quick, who specialized in uncommon knowledge. At the very least, the map that started it all was certified as coming from the Caspian era.

Which is why we were burdened with packs, hours into a journey to the guts of the world. I never minded caves, and as they went this one was splendidly roomy. He walked ahead of me, talking excitedly about the map, how he had scouted things out, laid caches of supplies in for the long haul. At 12 hours in, we made a quick camp and dried out our boots.

"No one has ever been this far in." He tore off a hunk of bread with his teeth and chewed. "We're..." chew chew chew, "the first."

I didn't tell him that it wasn't true. That as soon as he'd told me I'd come in myself. I'd never believed in any of his proclamations. But I followed the copy of the map I made in secret. Codes and riddles and formations...they all matched up. It'd been hard, but as we "explored" I had to let him find the

answers. I played dumb, feigned excitement and wonder.

I grabbed the bread out of his hands. "All these years..." I tore off a bit of bread. "And finally, finally, you might just be right."

He grabbed the bread back. "Of course, I'm right."

Another hour and we were running out of map. We were getting close. Geth was half stumbling forward. He turned back, talking, and tripped. I caught him by the elbow and we both nearly went down.

"Oooof, sorry." He dusted himself off. "I was just going to tell you that I think I've got the final clue."

"Yes?"

He shook out the map. "We're here..." He poked a finger at "us" then ran it about two inches to the right. "And that..." Now he pointed at a feature of the cave roof. "Is there."

There was a deep canyon between "us" and "there." Where we wanted to be was under the formation at the far edge of the vast trench. I peered over the edge, watched dust and debris bounce downward and out. I shined my light down and frowned.

"Well?"

I rubbed my jaw. "Doable," I said. "Just." He shrugged out of his pack and started pulling out equipment. "Whoa, slow down there. Let's make sure we understand what we're looking at."

"Caspian!" He edged from foot to foot. "The lost city. Treasure." The last he whispered. I made a show of studying the map. Was it possible? Was he right? Even a broken clock is right twice a day. It had to be his time. I wasn't dull enough to imagine chests spilling fortunes, gold and camber stacked ceiling high. That was the stuff of story books. But there would be more than plenty of wealth...

"Well?" Geth stood on the edge of the edge and my pulse rippled.

"Just a minute..." I looked from the map to Geth and back. I looked into the abyss. And for a split second I saw him falling, fumbling at the air before he met the cave floor. I shook the image out of my head. Behind me, Geth had

spooled out the rope. He fit his climbing spikes over his boots and grabbed his gloves. He was talking about being rich, about never having to work, about using his riches to go on more treasure hunts. He smacked his gloves against my chest.

“And you can finally pay back your family’s feud fine,” he said. “Live a debt free life, get out from under those suck nosed collectors.”

He threw the rope. It arced into the darkness and I heard it fall. I closed my eyes. Debt free. No longer bonded to my family for a debt that really belonged to my father. I would be a full citizen again, could go where I wanted, do what I wanted. BE who I wanted. But it would take more than half to buy my younger sisters freedom. Behind my closed eyes I saw him fall.

“Gods be with me,” I breathed. My hands ached to push him.

“Gods be with you!” Geth patted my back. He’d mistaken my doubt for a blessing.

“Be careful,” I said, even as I turned and hip checked him. Off balance, he slid, grinning, thinking it was just a close call, that I’d grab him and pull him back the way I’d done a few minutes earlier. His hand stretched out for mine, but I didn’t fully extend. Less than an inch separated us. His grin turned to confusion. This was really happening. To him.

“NO!” I scrambled to the edge of the precipice and watched him go. A bounce, a tangle of limbs and a hollow thud when the falling stopped. I scrambled down the rope, talking to him as I descended. Still playing the faithful friend. Still the self-loathing friend.

I needn’t have bothered. He was barely breathing by the time I got to him. “I’m sorry.” I was shocked that I’d done it. Shocked and horrified. “I’m... sorry.” I pulled at my beard. “You idiot!” I cursed myself. I grabbed his hand. My heart constricted under my ribs.

As life eased from him a light began to rise from the cave floor. It got bigger, brighter, until it took up the entire wall. I had to shield my eyes, but even with them closed and my hand in front of my face the light came through.

And then I could see...Geth was up and walking toward the light...the

city. It was there, in front of me. So Glorious I fell to my knees. At first he was like a paper cut out, denser bones and guts in grey silhouette. As he moved he became more and more solid. He stood at the gates and then turned toward me. "It's alright," he said. "We found the city. It's alright."

He couldn't know what I'd just done. I stood up to follow, to apologize. To do I don't know what. But as he passed through the gleaming archway, darkness devoured everything. I was alone swathed in pitch dark. I just killed my best and oldest friend. Over greed. Blind greed. If I could do that to someone I loved, what could I do to someone I hated? I climbed back up the rope and went to find out. ☹

Special Editor's note: This, and the preceding piece, Deep Dive, were written as companion pieces.



## Dragons Come

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EVAN MCHUGH

I saw the dragons come. They take the dead away. They are of muscle and bone with skin stretched as an albino membrane knitting their unholy visage together. Flying with such force they shake the sky and ground. With a skirmish one dragon comes, after a war the heavens shake as they clean mankind's folly. No one knows where they take the bodies, some say to their nests, some say heaven. When mankind rebels against them for taking our sons and fathers the dragons strike back. For men cannot fly and dragons always seem to remember. But I know their secret. On the field, a woman died in my arms. She choked out her last breath, told me to run. But I couldn't. My legs were injured sunk and twisted among the roots and mud of the battlefield. I knew I would die soon and I hoped I could hold on long enough to see them take me away. To see the world from the sky one last time before death took me. But on that day it seems death had other plans. I sat in the muck for days, drinking brown water and eating plants that I could barely crawl to. Why had they not come for her? Why wasn't I dead? Had they forsaken me? As more questions gathered in my head, I received my answer. I heard the cracking of bones and I saw something I will never forget. A beast, an amalgam of flesh and gore tore its way from the corpse's chest raining a blast of splinters and blood all around the forest. It moved as though it was just born it thrashed wildly. It made a low gurgling sound. I could hear responses coming from far away, Evil shrikes came from all around me. This thing had family. And as they approached I hoped it would be quick and let my eyes close. The last thing I heard was a crack like lightning. My chest was horribly constricted. I opened my eyes to see the dragon's talons piercing my chest, my life blood oozing slowly. I called out to them, tried to tell them I was still alive. I beat upon it with the last of my remaining strength, but it would not listen. I could not hear myself, the beating of its wings deafened me. I was above the ocean now. The dragon released its hold. As I fell to the ocean I began to hear a voice in my head. The ocean called to me to tell my tale. And as I hit the water, I am finished. ☹

## Two Metaphysical Blades

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EVAN MCHUGH

**Y**ou and I are one and the same. Two blades forged from the same slab of metal, of primeval earth unimportant until now. 2 halves of the same weapon only made apart because of the unwieldy nature of our birth. For I can speak and you can only listen.

Our paths diverge at this moment for our creator wrenches us from our mold cast into war oncoming. I am of gold with silver and you are my inverse. Both of us given to warriors, one to a scholar, one to a king. How unbecoming that we are born first yet those who shall wield us are yet to be found? Both of us who reveal truths to those who kill and to those that meet their end by us. For sister, I console you as we shall never meet again. Our first lord has come, but he who made us knows not what we are. He has bound us within these forms for his own ends. I shall follow them you shall follow how you see fit. Is the one who shall master you worthy? Only he may decide. ☞

### 3 True Haikus

---

AHMAD MUHAMMED

today's our first date  
it's at our regular spot  
we do this a lot

we get too cozy  
nitpick till the pull away  
glow up the next day

anniversary  
can you please stop irking me?  
see why we can't date.



*Leaves* | DellaS

## Autum Leaves

---

AHMAD MUHAMMED

Somewhere in NYC, Autumn leaves fell over summer rubble.

I yearned for the day I'd find peace in that rubble.

Walking the streets, I swayed to carry my own weight.

A deluge they call markers mark kept me down weight.

I didn't pray at day.

I didn't eat that day.

I wanted to live as a dove in the city.

The only place I wished to love was the city.

I was looking for women who were unlike me.

They were moving fast; they knew the city.

## Transient

---

AHMAD MUHAMMED

There once was a man who traveled the globe.

He claimed we evolved from microbes.

If this is true I do not know.

But, so they taught it years ago,

Sometimes I fail to give a shit.

Before the dirt and cold may have my bones, I live my life a hedonist.



*The Light in the Dark* | Isabelle Galatro

## Can You See Me?

---

MIK NABINGER

When I was very young, I didn't have imaginary friends like most kids that I went to preschool with. I did have a friend that no one else could see though. I named my friend Guy and we hung out all the time. We had tea parties, played with my kitchen set (I was a chef and he was the customer), or went outside and picked flowers together. I didn't really talk to any of my friends at school about Guy, but my mom knew about him. For a while, my mom and Troy, my stepdad, didn't really question it as most kids have imaginary friends. One time my mom came into my room as I was having a tea party with Guy. Guy looked at me, smiled sweetly, and asked me if I could invite my mom to the tea party.

"Mom, Guy says that he wants you to have tea with us!" She sat down, and I pretended to pour her a cup of tea and served it to her on a plate. Guy seemed so happy that my mom was having tea with us.

My parents are split so I'd go to my dad's house every other weekend. Guy never went with me for some reason, I only saw him at my mom's house. My mom told me that one night while I was at my dad's, my alarm clock radio started playing "Celebration" by Kool & The Gang at 3 am. It scared her and Troy out of sleep. My mom freaked out and was too scared, so he went to turn it off. He walked back into their room a few seconds later and told my mom to follow him. She got out of bed and they went back to my room. My stuffed animals were all over my floor when they should've been on my bed. This was strange because my mom always made me clean my room before going to my dad's.

One day while I was at school, my Nana gave my mom a box of old stuff she thought that my mom would like. My mom started going through it, and it had memorabilia of her father inside. Her dad died when she was 10 years old, he was only 30. She hung a framed picture of him on the wall in our living room. When I got home, I noticed the picture on the wall.

"Mom, where'd you get a picture of Guy? I thought no one could see him!"

My mom started to connect the pieces together and realized Guy



wasn't imaginary. He was the ghost of her dad. My mom figured that there was a reason the Celebrate started playing that one night, so she called my Nana and asked if there was any significance behind that song.

“That was the first song that played at our wedding reception.”

Guy wasn't the only ghost I saw. Some weekends, my mom, Troy, and I went to visit Troy's grandma and have dinner with her. On our way back home one evening, we saw an apartment building on fire. I was very Christian when I was younger, so I asked my mom if she and I could pray for everyone in that building and that they'd all make it out safely. Troy was an atheist but still prayed with us anyways.

When we got home it was time for me to go to bed. I woke up in the middle of the night because I felt uncomfortable and heard crying. I opened my eyes and there were two young girls by the side of my bed. One looked to be about my age, and the other wasn't much older. Their nightgowns looked stained gray and black and had holes in them. The younger girl was holding a melted and burnt baby doll in one hand, and her sister's hand in the other. The older one kept saying, “Where's my mom? Please help me.”

I was absolutely terrified and ran into my mom and Troy's room screaming and sobbing. I told them about what I saw and they tried to calm me down as best as they could. I slept in their room for the rest of the night.

A few days later, my mom was reading the newspaper and an article about the apartment fire was published. She had read that there were 3 tenants in the building. All of them made it out safely except the apartment on the third floor. The apartment on the third floor was being rented by a single mom and her two daughters. The mother was rescued by a firefighter, but by the time they were able to get to the girls' room it was too late. My mom told me what had happened but in a more age-appropriate and innocent way. I didn't see the sisters again after that one night.

As I've gotten older, I don't really see ghosts anymore, but I still can feel the presence. I can feel the energy shift, and very rarely I see silhouettes or shadows. I'm not sure why I can't see ghosts the way I used to. I've told many of my friends about these stories, and even then only few believe me. I tell my close friends because even if they don't believe me, it's still an entertaining ghost story to tell at sleepovers. There are a lot of questions and beliefs about what happens after you die. Is there an afterlife, reincarnation? Or absolute

nothingness for eternity? What if you remained on Earth as a spirit for eternity? Even though many people, maybe even you, will argue and say that ghosts aren't real, I have experienced otherwise.

A majority of people that believe in ghosts say that the reason spirits continue to linger in our world is because they have "unfinished business." I believe that my grandpa's unfinished business was seeing my mom grow into the strong and successful adult he always knew she would become, and to meet his granddaughter. I really wish he could've lived longer so I could meet him while he was alive. Even though I don't know much about my grandpa, I have a very special and unique connection with him. I wish he could've stayed longer so I could know who he was and ask more questions about his life, but I'm really thankful I got to meet him. Those sister's that visited me that night had an unfinished business which was reuniting with their mother. If there's one thing I've learned about ghosts and even humans as a whole, it's that family is very important and possibly the whole reason we were all put on this planet.

My experiences changed my view on life after death. Maybe there is a special place like heaven, but maybe all there is to life is fulfilling a connection and moving on with the stages of life. These experiences also have taught me that no matter what, I'm never alone. That may seem sweet, or creepy, but it's mostly comforting. It's probably also a reason I talk to myself a lot. Someone or something is always watching over me. It could be an angel, or another relative that passed on that I can't see. Or maybe it's another lonely ghost trying to complete their unfinished business, and I bring them comfort because they know that I can feel them with me. Ghosts are very real, and very special. ☺



The Sign | Isabelle Galatro



Autumn Frost | Mary Seel



Light Up the Night | Rose Pero





Ostiningo | Barry Freedman

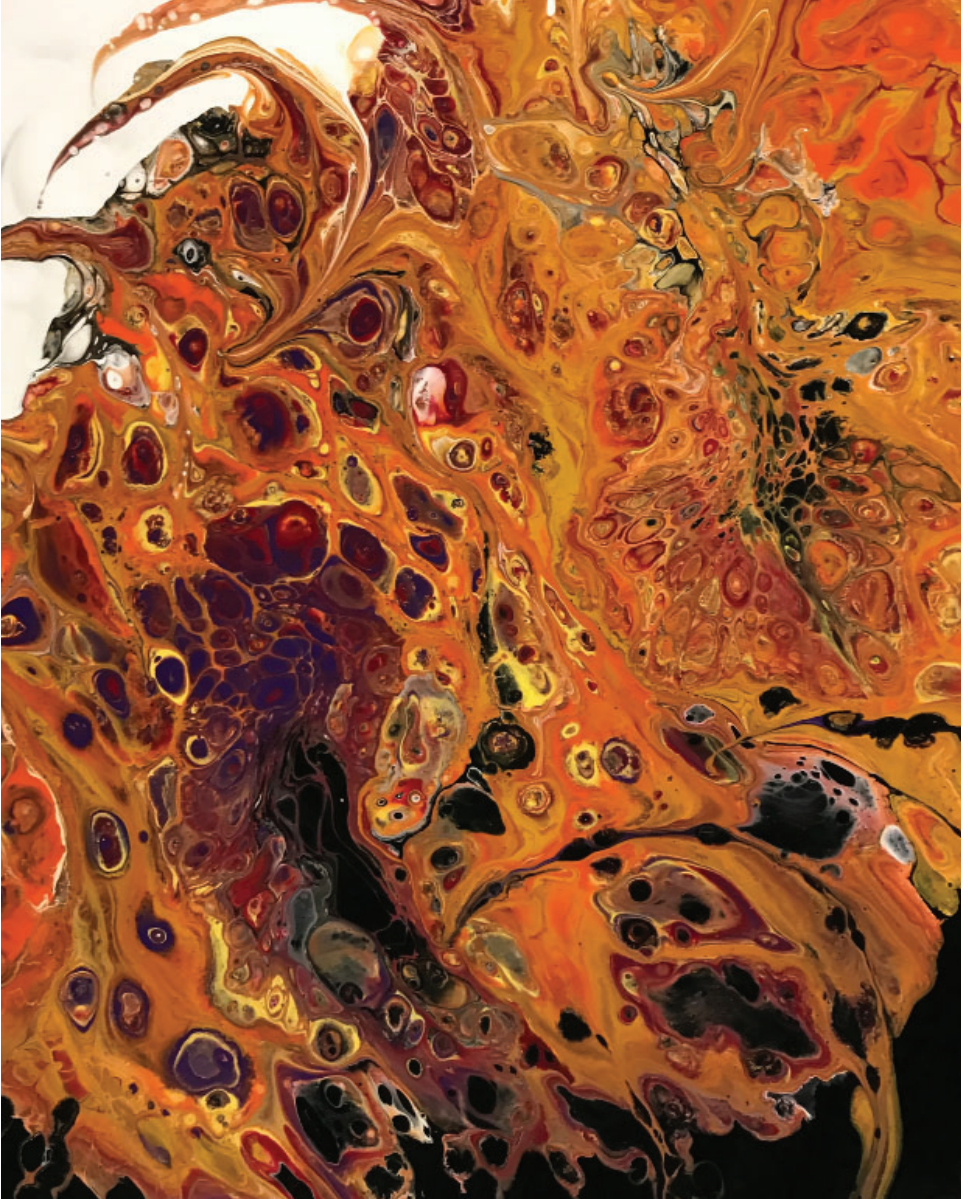


Free | Deborah Hibbard



Antelope Canyon | Christopher Origer





Maelstrom | Virginia Shirley



Vortex | Della S.

## Agitatus

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KATRINA NEWELL

A long forgotten chant,  
Calls forever from the depths,  
As hurt souls thrown to water,  
Mourn and scream to their deaths.

Upon land the echoes fade,  
While lazy soldiers sing,  
Too drunk to listen or care,  
to the forgotten suffering.

The black water trembles,  
And shakes with building rage,  
The souls of the bodies screaming,  
let them out of their cage.

An injustice long ago,  
Resurfaces on the land,  
As those living on the coast,  
Shall behold something grand,

The chained souls begins to rise,  
Seeking misplaced revenge,  
On the fearful descendant soldiers,  
Questioning their end.

My ancestors were lucky.  
Spared from the ocean's wrath.  
But I still sometimes hear the chants,  
Of a now, long forgotten past.





*Giant* | Deborah Hibbard

## That Thing in the Backyard

---

KATRINA NEWELL

It's an eyesore, I first thought.  
Miles of beautiful flat pastures, with several vibrant, blooming colors,  
ruined and torn apart by this spiderweb stretching to the sky.  
It is ugly and noisy. What else could it be?  
At night, I lay in bed  
and I hear through my window,  
hushed rustles and whispers accompanied by wind,  
like it's exchanging secrets with itself.  
I go to inspect the being after some time,  
with its patchy, brown and broken skin,  
I ask, "what are you doing here?"  
It says nothing in return,  
and there's nothing I can do but listen.  
One morning, the air is cooler.  
The fields adopt a flaxen shade,  
wilting and trembling with familiar fragility,  
succumbing to their delicate personalities.  
But, that monster,  
it has captured the sun.  
It holds in its arms hundreds of amber-colored gems,  
filtering the golden light and fluttering in the breeze.  
I have to strain my neck to look at the full thing,  
and I think for the first time,  
how colorful and grand.

The air becomes frigid after many days,  
and white specs begin to descend from the very sky the creature reaches for.  
I look once more, curious to what it thinks of the weather.  
It has dropped its gems,  
now dull and broken,  
and its sharp, bare fingers look agitated and brittle.  
It is gaunt and twisted, and the whispers have ceased.  
I am surprised to find myself feeling sorry for the thing,  
but I can't help but think it is dying.  
It's harder to fall asleep without the soft murmurs now.  
I check to make sure it is still standing each morning.  
And each morning,  
It remains.  
When the air is warm again,  
and the grass and blossoms return with splendor,  
I hope the creature is capable of such a return.  
The backyard is soulless without it.

## Flawed System

---

MATTHEW NOWAKOWSKI

Workers' compensation: a system of insurance that pays benefits to employees who are injured or disabled on the job.

The benefits may include partial salary (2/3 of average pay in NYS when at total temporary disability or 100%) and coverage of medical costs.

By accepting workers' compensation, the employee gives up the right to sue the employer for negligence (compensation bargain; I'll touch on this later).

Workers' compensation law is governed by statutes in every state.

**A**nd here we are. The second part of my story. My (continuous) fights with insurance carriers and the ass-backwards system that is workers' compensation. For a refresher, I was hurt on the job on October 15, 2017, have had 6 surgeries since then, with the most major surgery being a below-the-knee amputation in July of 2021. The lead up to that was HELL that I still haven't escaped from.

Let's start at the beginning of the journey. I was an over-the-road trucker, spending two days on the road at a time. The company I was working for was short on drivers, and I did my part to pull extra weight for the "greater good". I was on my second stop of my first day, slipped and fell 5 feet to the ground and twisted my ankle in the process. Normal so far right? Here's where it gets interesting. I worked for the rest of that day and all day the next on my hurt ankle. I got home after my run and went to the walk-in. Doc told me I was fine and that I could go back to work the following day. WRONG. Not gonna happen.

Now you're caught up. Let's get into the worker's compensation side of things. I filled out an accident report the day I got hurt and handed it in to the powers that be when I returned to transportation. I got a call from the insurance company to get everything set. Things like address, weekly wages, etcetera. I know what you're thinking, "Why is this guy complaining? He's

getting paid while being hurt and not being able to do his normal job.” To that I say you’re right. I am getting paid to not be able to do my regular normal job. The problem is that I was making between nine hundred to a thousand dollars a week while I was working. Worker’s compensation pays two-thirds of that only when you are one hundred percent temporarily disabled, which ONLY happens when you’re recovering from surgeries and only for a month or two at a time. When that time comes, I bring home six-hundred-forty-one dollars a week, which I get paid bi-weekly, making my bring home not even HALF of what I could have been making if I was healthy and on the job. Most of the time I bring home a little over nine-hundred every two weeks. Fucked isn’t it? It gets better. I don’t even see that money for the first TWO MONTHS that I’m out of work. Buckle up. That’s only the income side of things.

Now to the medical side of this circus.

The insurance company gets to dictate what you need, when you need it, and how you get it. That goes for doctor’s visits, surgeries, medical equipment, physical therapy, mental health support, and everything in between. We covered my initial visit with the walk-in physician. I followed up with occupational medicine the next day which was the right choice as they pulled me out of work for a couple of weeks while they took x-rays and I did PT. Once the results came back from the x-rays (nothing irregular), I was sent to podiatry to get opinions and next steps. My podiatrist was amazing and took great care of me and recommended surgery. Insurance had other plans. They denied the first surgery request, as they didn’t see it necessary to treat my condition. Ok gotcha. I was then required to see a doctor of their choosing to assess the damage. This is called an “independent medical examination”, which is essentially going to see a doctor that they pay off to say you’re better off than you say. This IME was interesting. This initial instance, the doctor sided with the plan and agreed that I needed surgery. Cool. Went in, had the surgery, everything went smooth.

Two months later, IME number 2. The doctor looks over my chart, all the x-rays, medical notes, PT notes, and decides I’m only 75% disabled, and I can work SOMEWHERE. This cuts my pay, which is devastating as I’m already making way less than I was. A month after that, I get an infection and need my next surgery. No dispute from the insurance company. Dope. Neither surgery helps so it’s surgery three. Dispute. Fight. Court hearing. IME.



Surgery three gets approved. Two months go by. IME 4. Pay cut. Mental health break. Mental health care (only ten visits), IME 5. Surgery 4. Dispute. IME. Approval. IME 5. Pay cut. Mental break. You get the picture. Shit system. It's worker's compensation but it fucks the worker and only benefits the company paying for the insurance.

After the third surgery, I made the decision to amputate. Insurance company said that I needed to "exhaust all other options" before they would ok the amputation surgery. I was forced to have another surgery to "fix" the problem, even though my doctor was skeptical that it would work, which obviously did not. Even after that, they were still hesitant to approve the amputation surgery. Long story a little shorter, I was approved for the surgery, got my leg cut off, had an amputation revision surgery, and am still unable to work, and still receiving compensation payments. My lawyer has reached out to settle, meaning a one-time payment to close out the payment side of things. This puts a max price on the body part injured. For me to get one hundred percent of the payment, I need to lose my leg above my knee, but because I only lost part of my leg, I get ninety-five percent of the payment. To figure that out, they take the 2/3 pay rate and multiply that by 200 weeks or so. I'm only 34, which also penalizes me because I'm young and may die at some point and time, so they dock the payment more. Cool right?

The worker's compensation system is flawed AT BEST. At worst, it causes more pain and suffering than the injury caused by the work accident. It took a toll on me mentally and made me miserable which in turn made my wife a child miserable on edge because of how unpredictable my mood was. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, PTSD, anxiety, and agoraphobia since being hurt. I thought about suicide on more than one occasion, not only because of the pain, but because of how shitty and useless the system made me feel. Sometimes I truly feel like the insurance company WANTS us to kill ourselves because then they wouldn't have to pay us anymore. It's a blessing and a curse. On one hand, I'm getting paid, and having medical treatment covered which means I'm not paying for it financially. On the other hand, I sure as shit am paying for it mentally and physically. I've been "in the system" for five and a half years now with no end in sight. Something needs to change, and I plan on trying to make that happen. How can you call it a worker's benefit, when the only one REALLY benefitting from it, is the company that pays for it? ☹

## Forgive and Forget

---

DIANE O'HERON

Balanced in the ear,  
but slightly less so  
to the eye, the visual  
asymmetry of the adage  
hints at the not so simple  
forces required  
to set these twin action  
in motion.

With some self-subtraction,  
“forgive and forget” becomes  
“give and get.”  
Remove your feelings for yourself,  
remove your anger at another,  
give compassion, and, then  
get peace beyond measure.

However, to summon forbearance,  
After an offense  
requires more of us  
than the subtraction of ego  
and the addition of compassion.  
We must desire a transformation  
and then we must make it happen.

To make resentment less desirable  
than the freedom from it--  
what effort, we imagine!

Insult added to injury, we conclude.

And in doing so, the pains of long-lived anger are  
almost  
justified.

## Arcimbo's Apology

---

DIANE O'HERON

In the moment after  
I pull the cloth from the canvas,  
I wait to hear the breath pulled from your chests,  
the gasp that starts a laugh  
or the bark that signals indignation  
because I have turned flowers into men  
and rendered men as flowers.

And then I hear the whispers:  
“He must be a madman to paint such an insult!”

And to this, I think, but do not say:  
Why not insult them,  
those that measure their worth more than a peony's?

And: “He makes a mockery of his sitter!”

And to this, I think, and again do not say:  
Why not make them think twice,  
those that expect a noble's portrait and instead,  
get a humble portrait  
of another of God's creations?

And: “He is a clown or a genius!”

Why not make them laugh,  
those that see a flower and a man  
and cannot see they are of the same  
fragile, beautiful stuff?

And then after all  
I hear footsteps.  
You,  
all of you,  
take turns to  
step forward  
to examine closely  
and then back  
to survey from a distance  
the beauty of Creation.

The shuffle of your feet  
erases and rewards me.

## Clouds

---

CHRISTOPHER ORIGER

**W**hat do the clouds look like to you? she says as the car careens around another curve in the road, nearly sideswiping a truck hauling unpeeled logs.

What clouds, he says, glancing at his watch. He wants to be out of the mountains by dark.

Those, she says, pointing to patches of pinkish-white moving over a field of rye, as they pass another unknown river lined with unknown trees.

He peers at the sky beneath his visor, then studies the map on the seat. I don't know, he says. They look like clouds. An enormous blue road sign ahead confirms his location, and then it passes with a sudden deafening rush of air invading the car. God it's hot, he says. There's a noise in one of the tires, he's been hearing it for two hundred miles.

I've decided it's a goat, she says. Up there is the head.

What? he says.

See, there are the horns, and four fat feet, and now the goat has grown wings—but wait, the head is lifting off. It's floating, it's become, yes, I think, it's now a turtle. Do you see it?

Where.

There.

What an imagination you have, he says finally, glancing down at the map again.

She continues to gaze upward, alert to the possibility of more sky animals. What does it look like to you? she says again.

Once more he looks to the watch, as if it alone provides reliable answers. He checks his rear-view mirror, and sees only part of himself, a huge mouth, frowning. They look like clouds, he says again, as the miles add up, and the river and the forests and all the signs fly by, indistinguishable from the clouds, as they continue on their journey out of the mountains. ∞

## Duality

---

CHRISTOPHER ORIGER

**O**n the pages before her are notes that mark the silence, as vital as the notes that mark sound. Sometimes, as she reads the music, entire lines go by where she plays nothing, where the silence is almost mesmerizing, marked by rest notes and more rest notes. There is tension in these rests, for she must continue to follow the undercurrent of movement as the symphony builds and she waits, poised before the tympani, to strike when the long rest is finally over. Late at night at home, after the concert hall has emptied, when she returns her belongings to all the ordered places—the bracelet in a velvet-lined box, the watch next to pictures of loved ones in frames—the movement of her life continues to be measured out by the passage of minutes on a blind clock on a mantle. Everything has movement, even what stands still, flowing toward something, everything marked on a turning page. She plays the silence with grace. Even the passages she must give attention to at home, where no one speaks and there is only the curt rustling of an evening paper, or the neighbor's children playing in a sandbox at sunset, or the sounds of a lost car lumbering up the road, or the vast territory between dusk and dawn—even these silences are marked, and when the page is lifted and a new movement begins, there is again something so faint she can hear it if she listens, leading her life to *da capo al fine*. It is the interplay of silence and sound that reassures by producing this necessary tension in her life. When she was

younger, she lived in a roomy atelier with a sculptor, amidst the grotesque busts of unknown people, a place overlooking the train station, and on rainy afternoons travelers hurrying to their trains along the street below possessed a double life that seemed visible only to her—a palpable life above ground, their lives flattened and reversed within glistening reflections painted in the wet pavement. She believed when she looked at these travelers that she, too, must also possess such a double life invisible to nearly everyone but the sculptor and herself. Years went by and she left that life where only encouragement was spoken, where the power of her imagination was somehow stronger than any raw materials extracted by brutal processes, and one day like today, when she was rehearsing at a window streaked with rain and watching birds pecking at seeds below a green bench, and people in serious hats stepping on their own reflections, she recalled that sense of exhilaration at the dual nature of her own presence in the world. ∞



## PlayDo's Cave

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### PLAYDO

PlayDo: OK. So, imagine a bunch of people. They're in a hole. No, a cave. Yes, right. A cave. So these people are all chained together, and not because they want to be.

So-Crates: I'm with you so far.

PlayDo: The cave is, like, underground.

So-Crates – Of course. Please, continue.

PlayDo: Where was I?

So-Crates. In a cave. Underground.

PlayDo: Right, yes. Cave. Underground. Do...Do my hands look weird to you? Like, snakes?

So-Crates: No, they're just hands. You ate too many mushrooms.

PlayDo: Mushrooms. Check. No snake fingers. So...Cave. Underground. So there are these shadows on the wall...

So-Crates: What shadows? Where did they come from? What wall?

PlayDo: What?

So-Crates: Shadows. Wall.

PlayDo: Are you SURE my fingers aren't snakes?

So-Crates: Yes. It's the mushrooms.

PlayDo: So there's a fire. Behind the people all chained together. Oh, I forgot the part where they've never seen anything in their whole lives. They can't turn their heads.

So-Crates: Uhhhh, how is that possible?

PlayDo: Too bad they can't see the fire. It's...Beautiful. Amazing. It dances and shimmers. I could eat something that beautiful...

So-Crates: Ahem! Concentrate.

PlayDo: So beautiful...So anyway, they all see their shadows. Not the fire because it's behind them.

So-Crates: Why don't they just turn around?

PlayDo: ...and the shadows on the wall, they sway and undulate in time with the flames. They stretch and bend. Oooooh...So, that's all they see. Art. Right in front of them. But they don't know it's art.

So-Crates. Is there a point to all this?

PlayDo: This all made sense before those mushrooms. So, OK, the only thing in the whole universe that is real to them are the shadows they don't even know belong to them.

So-Crates: Uhhh, why don't they see each other as re..

PlayDo: So then what if one of them has to leave the cave? He has to go outside.

So-Crates: The daylight would probably blind him.

PlayDo: So he goes out at night.

So-Crates: And sees nothing because it's dark.

PlayDo: Can you just cut me a break? I know I got an idea here somewhere. OK, so, if he goes out and sees things – and his eyes adjust gradually, let's say. He sees bees and flowers, puppies, women in togas, trees, birds, turkey legs...and he comes back to free the rest of the people in the cave.

So-Crates: But what about...

PlayDo: He tries to free them. OK? And tries to tell them what all is out in the big bright world. That they never knew about. What do you think the rest of the people would do?

So-Crates: Uhhhhh?

PlayDo: Would they stay? Leave? Kill the messenger? Would they be able to adjust their consciousness to include a whole new level of being?

So-Crates: This is your big idea?

Glaucon: (quiet until now) I told him not to eat so many mushrooms.

PlayDo: Really, what would the people in the cave do?

So-Crates and Glaucon are nonplussed for a moment.

So-Crates: What do YOU think they'd do?

PlayDo: Screw it. I can't think straight. I'm going to go follow the 'shrooms. The readers can figure it out for themselves. I'm not their freakin' teacher. ☞

## Red Roses for a Blue Lady

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ROSE PERO

“Red roses for a blue lady” ♪♪♪ ♪... I hear the words from the kitchen. Mom scurries around the kitchen, singing her heart out. You would think she would feel the pressure of getting everything ready to have two dozen family members sit around her table, but if she does it is not evident. Instead, the beautiful, calming words flow over her lips like a comforting, gentle breeze on a summer’s night. She’s always this way...calm, peaceful, welcoming, and loving. It’s no wonder why so many people visit our home. Not only is she a fabulous cook, but her presence instills a sense of peace in anyone that is lucky enough to spend time with her, including me. She stands beside me pouring steaming, hot potatoes into the mixer to make her famous mashed potatoes. Not a single lump will be left once she is done. They will be smooth and creamy, just like the sound of the words she is singing... “send them to the sweetest gal in town” ♪♪♪ ♪ as she turns to kiss my cheek.

“Red roses for a blue lady” ♪♪♪ ♪... It’s been so many years since I have heard her sing those words, but now I sit here singing it to her. I play it on my phone as I sit here by the hospital bed. In this moment I am the blue lady. I am unsure if she hears me, but in my heart, I would like to think she does. In my heart I hope it puts her mind back in time to that kitchen, so many years ago where she was at peace. In my heart I hope it takes away the terror that is currently happening in her mind and instead instills a sense of peace like she did for countless people. I hold her hand to feel her warmth once more knowing soon she will hold another’s hand. The hand of my dad as he meets her at the gate. I would like to think he will have red roses in his hand when he greets her. Tears roll down my cheeks, but the thought puts a smile on my face. As the words play... “send them to the sweetest gal in town” ♪♪♪ ♪, I turn to her kiss her cheek one last time. ∞



*Iron Man* | Deborah Hibbard

## Rotted Green

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TYLER RIZZO

The two scrappers, Bill and Jim, overlook the hull of the massive crashed ship in front of them. The wreckage looks old, with parts of the metal exterior appears rusted over with long vines grown over areas of the ship. Bill whistles as they look over the damage “This has definitely been here for a while.” Jim says as he rummages through a backpack and get a flashlight, shining it down an opening in the ship that is about ten feet high. “Whatever took it down must’ve been powerful to punch these kinds of holes into it. Hey Jim, you think this was downed during the war a few years back?”

Jim walks with the other scrapper into the ship, looking around the moss infested ship for anything of value. “It’s possible, it certainly looks old enough with how deep the plant life of this system has moved into the ship.” He picks up an old electronic datapad, tossing it aside when it refuses to power on. “It could also be that that flora grows fast on this planet. Bill you’re sure everyone back at the ship is getting audio and visual from our heads-up displays right?”

“Yeah, I ran a test before we went in. we may not be able to hear them but they can see and hear us. So, watch who you insult.”

Jim rolls his eyes and continues looking around, stopping at the entrance of a hallway and squint into the darkness. “Hey, shine the flashlight over here, I think I see something.” “What the hell is that? There’s no way someone could be alive in a wreckage this long alone right...what is that on their back? -” his thoughts are interrupted as Bill walks over and shines the flashlight down the hallway revealing nothing but red colored moss.

“Ah how exciting, more moss. Come on let’s go the bridge and take a look at the ship logs, maybe we’ll see what happened to the crew.”

Jim looks at the hallway again before following Bill. “I swore I saw something there it looked like a human....but wrong somehow. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“It was probably your imagination playing tricks on you then and there was nothing there but moss.”

“Yeah...just moss.” Jim thinks for a second before continuing. “Actually. It’s odd that moss was red wasn’t it? All the other moss in the area has been green.”

“Don’t think too hard about it, Red moss could be natural here.”

“Just for that one patch in that one area where I thought I saw a person? Doesn’t it seem a bit too coincidental?”

“Listen.” Bill turns to look at Jim. “I’m not paid to investigate moss. I’m paid to take apart ships and sell the pieces. Whatever happened to them before we got here is not our problem.”

“Even if it’s dangerous...”

Bill cuts him off. “The only thing dangerous is your messed up head, I told you that fall in Matriovik messed you up.”

Jim takes a deep breath before continuing. “Isn’t it odd there’s no remains anywhere? Even skeletons or anything.”

“Maybe some animals took them. Who knows? Let’s stop with the speculations and just head to the bridge. Maybe something of value is up there.” Bill walks away before he gets a response and heads to the bridge.

After a while of forcing open moss covered doors and avoiding moss covered hallways and corridors, which seems to get more frequent the deeper into the ship he gets. Bill makes it to the bridge, forcing open a door and thankful for the silence Jim is giving him instead of stupid theories or rattling about things that he is imagining, although it is odd that he is extra quiet but that’s not important to Bill right now as he surveys the condition of the room.

The inside of the bridge is in a state of disarray with broken consoles and screens with sparks shooting out of them and the viewing glass at the front is cracked, likely from the crash. There are also supplies strewn about, from some medical supplies and a weapon even left seemingly abandoned. Bill was about to take a look at the weapon before he takes a second look at the sparking screens and realizes something, “Wait if these are still sparking. That means there’s electricity going through them...I wonder if the ship can be powered. At least turn the lights on right, Jim?” he finally turns around and realizes Jim is nowhere to be seen.

“Augh whatever. He probably wandered off somewhere. I’ll deal with him later,” He mutters and starts looking at the command console, trying to see how to turn the power fully on.

He hears a crash behind him and turns around but sees nothing. “Jim if that’s you stop fucking around and help me with the power-” suddenly everything turns on. Including a recording.

“If ever the power is turned on. Turn it off immediately. Whatever these things are they thrive off of electricity and can control the ship. Whatever you do, do not leave the power on.”

The clanks get louder as Bill’s eyes widen and he starts hitting buttons to try to turn off the power but instead he hears loud deafening bangs sound out. He runs to the display window at the bridge just to see the ship’s artillery firing at the scrapper ship. The small ship bursts into flames and slowly crashes down planeside.

Bill steps back in shock and quickly turns around, his gun aimed at the entrance as he hears another clang, but he only sees Jim. “There you are. Where the hell were you? Look it doesn’t matter. You may have been right we are getting out of here.” He walks up to Jim but just as he is face to face with him he notices something. “What happened to you? Is that blood on your fa-”

He doesn’t finish his sentence as a green mossy looking tendril pierces his abdomen. He only has a moment of shock to realize what happened before he gets pulled away into the darkness, screaming as explosions are heard in the distance from the crashing ship hitting land.

The scrapper team has never been heard from since. When a scout team was sent to look for them there was nothing found except the ruins of their ship...and a large crater where their last transmission said the downed ship had been. ∞

## Let Me Help

---

AMERICUS SIVERS

Let Me Help, a novelist would write a classic using that theme.  
He would recommend those three words even over, "I love you."  
A very old and lonely man,  
And a young and lonely man.  
They put on a pretty poor show, didn't they?  
If only I could forget about them. And that was the secret of secrets.  
In a grave of roses while the night is chasing in, my soul is cold but I want to  
live again.  
The world is a filthy place.  
It's a damn horror show, but there was a reason for the horror.  
The horror was for love.  
The things we do for love like this are ugly, mad, full of sweat and regret.  
This kind of love burns you, maims and twists you inside out.  
It is a monstrous love and it makes monsters of us all.  
If we stick together, nothing can hurt us.  
Always and Forever.



## A Dream

---

AMERICUS SIVERS

A group of friends separated but were reunited by a dream.  
A dream that became a reality and spread throughout the stars.  
A dream that made Spock and James T. Kirk brothers.  
But it was torn apart by systems.  
It was the best of times,  
It was the worst of times.  
You might be my superior officer, but you are also my friend.  
I have been and always shall be yours.  
Truly an eternal triangle.  
You wouldn't understand that now, would you?  
You see...I feel sorrier for you than I do for him  
Because you will never know the things  
That love can drive a woman to.  
The ecstasies,  
The miseries,  
The broken rules,  
The desperate chances,  
The glorious failures,  
The glorious victories,  
All of these you'll never know  
Simply because the word "Love" isn't written into your book  
And the wind shall dance. The trees shall sigh,  
while you go through the day  
When the sun finally sinks, and we wait for the moon to rise.

## The Flower

---

N I C O L E S H E F L E R

1

What does it mean to the flower?  
whose wilted petals press against her body,  
hot and rough.  
Dry against her delicate skin,  
then crumbling against the wind to fall at her feet.  
What does it mean for her as she looks down upon the brown, desiccated  
remains of what was once her splendid glory?  
What does it mean,  
as she watches the remnants of her youth  
fade away as she swells with the seeds of new life?  
Is she in mourning that her time is ending?  
or is she proud and hopeful  
for the new generation about to begin?

2

In class, we learn the pieces of a flower.  
We learn the anatomy.  
We learn that the scent,  
the color,  
even colors we cannot see,  
ultraviolet,  
we learn that they bring in pollinators.  
Little landing strips for bees,  
butterflies, and flies.  
We learn about the pistil, the stamens,  
the petals and the sepals.

We learn about the corpse flower.  
We learn it smells like rot.  
Like a body that has fallen from the land of the living, down that rabbit hole  
of fungi and decay.  
To attract flies.  
It wears the scent of rot upon its petals,  
the smell of death,  
upon its soft petals,  
to draw them in,  
to draw in the flies.

Around here, death smells like sanitizer.  
It lingers in the air,  
on the white walls,  
and on the people in the wheelchairs,  
who stare groggily into space.  
It lingers on your soft skin,  
where you sit in a stiff-backed armchair, sitting watch.  
Waiting.  
Your brothers have their words,  
they buzz about your head.  
Asking, asking,  
Wanting more,  
and waiting.  
Like flies.  
Estate, they say.  
Taxes. Car. House.  
Buzzing, buzzing.  
And your mother,  
she's so quiet.  
So very, very quiet.

3

I return myself to that violence of quiet.  
To that place, deep beneath the ground.  
I am the buried seed,  
once again, potential.  
Remembering the leaves,  
sprawling out beneath the sun.  
The whispered words of ancestors, the memories of parents, brothers  
and sisters,  
broken little fragments of dust in the wind,  
to be remembered by others,  
...not me.  
I am empty.  
But am I alone?  
One day we will awaken,  
to fill our empty bellies  
with the blazing sun.  
And we will be left with only the memory of fear.  
You and I,  
my sister.  
We will shift into that quiet,  
across the tumbled, grassy mounds, and be surrounded by fireflies.  
And there,  
my daughter,  
my friend.  
We will bloom.

## The Silent Wailing

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NICOLE SHEFLER

The distance seems so small between your skin and mine, but to me it's gaping  
like a chasm.

Opening up before me,  
every doubt and anxiety I've ever had,  
swirling deep within its depths.

Like the Cocytus river of Hades;  
cool, dark shadows reaching up from its murky current,  
half-forgotten, broken, nameless souls.

Misty fingertips brush against the hairs of my arms.  
I shiver.

They mumble words against my ears.

She won't like you,  
they say.

No one wants you,  
they say.

There is a reason you are alone

## The Sun

---

N I C O L E S H E F L E R

The end of the forest is marked in barbed wire and you,  
the broken mourning dove,  
with sky blue hair,  
and perfume smelling like roses,  
the orange blouse that slides down your shoulder,  
left collar bone,  
orange blossoms.  
I hear they're beautiful in bloom;  
I've never seen them.  
But orange peels,  
I guess they're more our style.

One thing that I always expected  
was that clouds would always cast shadows  
over the land below.  
But somehow, today,  
you have defied my expectations.  
I never knew that you could light up a world  
from below.  
I never knew  
that the sun could shine from the ground,  
from amidst the daisies  
or the hemlock trees.  
From deep within the shadows of the forest  
as we stand looking up through the trees,  
for porcupines,  
(finding only squirrels, of course).

I once wrote a poem about whispers.  
Words so soft,  
like the pale blue petals of an iris flower  
sitting on your desk,  
dying in its spectacle,  
still lovely but withered and smelling like decay and swamp.  
I once wrote a prayer about rain.  
Now I think of you in the rain.  
The floods that rattled my city,  
would they have dared?  
Would even they have paused to  
bask in your sun?  
Would they have dared  
to challenge your light,  
if you had been here then?

## Anachrochristic

---

VIRGINIA SHIRLEY

“God damnit, Jesus! Would you stop it already?” He’d gone and turned the water into wine again. Normally, I wouldn’t mind, but I was currently in my bath.

“Relax,” said Jesus. He stuck his hand in and swirled it around. “I made it a good vintage.” He sucked his finger and nodded, pleased with the outcome. I slapped bath wine at him. “What is it with you and water anyway?” I tried not to move too much and slosh wine all over the packed dirt floor. “You walk on it, change it to wine...” I snapped my fingers at him, gestured for a towel. He didn’t move.

“God damnit, Jesus.” I stood up, purple from the armpits down, and stepped out of the tub. “You think you’re sooooo funny.”

“Father thinks so.”

“Hah!” I reached for my towel. “Your father has no sense of humor.”

He sat on the bed and examined his feet. “Have you ever seen a duck-billed platypus?”

“No, but I feel like this is a ‘touche’ moment.”

“It is indeed.” He picked at his big toe nail.

“Stop that. It’s disgusting.”

He answered by tearing off a small sliver of toenail and flicking it in my direction.

“Don’t do that. It’s filthy.”

“Every part of my body is holy. You should be honored to have even a bit of it in your abode.”

“I’m not.” I scrubbed the towel furiously up and down my torso, hoping he’d get that I was pissed. The purple wasn’t coming off. “I thought you said this was at least a good vintage.”

“A couple thousand years from now, someone will sell off toenails they pick out of Elvis’s shag carpet.”



“I don’t care who Elvis is.” I threw the towel at Jesus. “And I don’t care what a shag carpet is either.”

“Fine.” Jesus waved a lazy hand in the direction he’d discarded his toenail. “Poof. It’s gone.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“Asshole.”

“Touche.”

“Asshole.”

“Touche,” he said again.

“Why didn’t you just turn it into wine?”

“That only works with water.”

“At least that’ll come in handy at supper.”

Jesus flopped backward on my sleeping pallet, opened and closed his arms and legs repeatedly.

“I’m afraid to ask,” I ran my fingers through my hair. “But what are you doing now?”

“They’ll call this a snow angel.”

“Whatever.” I snorted at him.

“I’ve never tried a storm,” he said suddenly.

“What?” Still damp, I threw my tunic over my head, and struggled into it.

Jesus had his legs in the air now, turning his feet this way and that. He rolled over on his stomach and propped his chin on his hands. “I said, I’ve never tried a storm before. Rain. Turning it into wine.”

“Huh.” I sat down next to him. “How much water have you done at one time?”

He nodded across the room. “A tub? Check.”

“A well?”

He nodded.

“A pond?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t tried a pond.”

“It gives you something to shoot for.”

“Next time it rains? I’ll give it a try and let you know how it works out.”

Later that week I came in from tending the donkeys. I cautiously washed my hands in the bowl of water near the opening of the tent. Something smelled off. I sniffed at my armpits and my clothes. I had been working with donkeys, after all. I looked both ways, waiting for Jesus to change the water as I dipped my hands. I shook the excess off and walked deeper into the tent chamber. Jesus was standing on a crate, doing what he called swan dives onto the bed pallet. Cramming every other available surface were piles of moldering fishes and stale loaves of bread.

“God DAMNIT, Jesus.”

“Oh, hey,” he said, mid-dive, and floated gently down on the pallet.

“It Stinks in here.” I pointed at the fish. I could almost see clouds of stink wafting in the air.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does.” I looked around, overwhelmed at the sheer bulk of fish flesh.

“You are the worst tent mate ever.”

“Relax,” he said.

“If you tell me to relax one more time, I’m going to rip your nipples off.”

“Ow,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest and grinning. “Promise?”

I picked up a sheet and swiped piles of fish muck into it. He watched me work, but did nothing to help. I shook a stale loaf of bread at him. When he smiled wider, I threw it at him.

“It could be worse,” he said. “You could be stuck with camels.”

“Just shut up.”

“Camels are worse than donkeys, trust me.”

“Camels?”

“Oh, that’s right,” he wriggled his eyebrows. “In spite of what all those ridiculous holiday cards depict, camels won’t show up around here for another 930 years or so. And the cigarettes centuries afterward.”

“What are we…” I slapped my hands across my eyes and dragged them

down my face. “What are you going to do about all this?”

He rolled over onto his back. “Dog, I got people to feed.”

“Even a dog would rather starve than eat this slop.” I kept cleaning, grumbling under my breath the whole time. He didn’t seem to care. He got up and began strutting up and down the length of the tent, asking me to watch him “vogue.” I turned my back on him, but stopped trying to clean up anymore. He stilled himself, but I still didn’t look at him. After a few minutes he cleared his throat. I thought he might apologize, but no.

“Oh, hey...”

I turned back. “What?”

“How do you think they’ll iconize me?”

“What?”

He dropped his toga, kicked it to one side, and opened his arms wide. His pendulous gut suddenly sucked in, showing a wave of tight, endless abs.

“Ripped?” he asked. Then he let his gut hang. “Or rotund?”

“What?” I ask again. “What are you doing?”

“This is important. Pay attention.” He sucked himself in. “Abs?” He popped his belly out. “Gut.” In “Fabulous!” Out. “Real?”

“You know what?”

“Yes. I do know what.”

I was momentarily confused.

“I do know what,” he said again.

“Then here!” I threw the sheet full of fish at him. “God damnit, Jesus.” I stormed out of the tent. “You take care of this.”

“Wait!” he called after me. “I haven’t asked you if I should be brown or white!”

Jesus was busy for the next several days, but on Wednesday he followed me like a puppy. He stayed a few paces back, smiling and peeking around corners. I was still angry, because even though the fish was gone, the smell wasn’t.

“What do you want?” I turned and demanded, after hours of his fawning.

“Walk with me.”

“Walk with me,” I mocked. “I stink. I ruined your sheets. There are flies everywhere. But walk with me.”

We walked for a while in companionable silence. We bumped together from time to time and I couldn't help but forgive him. I always forgave him.

“Hey, I know I've been a total knob of late.”

I didn't even ask what a knob was. I could pretty much guess.

“So I want you to come to dinner with me.”

“When?”

“Now. We're almost there.”

“I'm not dressed for it.” I gestured at my dirty tunic. It was covered in donkey.

“Re...” he hesitated. If he'd said relax, I would have punched him in the throat. “Take a chill pill, yo.”

He lifted the flap of the tent and we weren't alone. There were twelve men, his bloody disciples, milling about, deep in conversation. When they noticed Jesus, they all stopped, still, staring. Transfixed.

“Like deer in the headlights,” Jesus whispered to me. Then to everyone, “You all remember Mary, don't you?”

We made small talk, which I hate. About the weather. About the price of donkeys. About Peter and Gabriel and the music they were working on. I don't know why Jesus laughed at this, but he found it...what was the word he used? Ironic.

“Mary,” he said suddenly. “Why don't you tell everyone about the camels?”

“The what?” several of them asked at once.

He clapped his hand on my shoulder. “She'll tell you all about it.”

“God damnit, Jesus,” I whispered. He just flashed his eyes and smiled at me. After a few awkward minutes of more talk, Jesus signaled that it was time to dine. We headed into the dining area. We were used to his odd way of doing things, but the seating arrangements were really confusing.

“Why did you seat everyone on one side of the table?” I asked. “It's ridiculous and awkward. It's crowded.”

“Private joke.”

“With who?”

“The future.”

We broke bread and drank wine. The waiters weren't sure what to do about the bill. Technically, they only sold us one ewer of wine. We couldn't be held responsible if Jesus kept refilling it – and all of our plates. They scurried here and there, cleaning up the scraps and setting down new linen.

“Bet they stiff us on the tip,” I heard one of them whisper.

When we were all full of food and spirits, Jesus pounded one fist on the table and stood up.

“Not another one of h-his b-bloody speeches,” Paul said, clearly drunk.

Jesus spread his arms wide. “I just wanted to say, I love you guys,” he said. “But before the night is over, one of you will betray me.”

“This again,” Peter said, rolling his eyes.

Judas nodded. “He does this all the time.”

Simon stood up. “I'm out.” He dropped his napkin on the table. “It's been real.”

Chairs scraped back. One by one they got up and made their departures. Jesus scowled for a moment and bit at the back of his thumbnail.

“I better go after them?” He shook his head, in agreement with himself. “I better go after them.”

Still seated, I finished off the last of my wine. With it gone, it would no longer refill itself. I too made ready to leave, but not before a waiter tugged at my sleeve and handed me the bill for the night. I looked at it. Then looked at it again.

“God Damn it, Jesus!” ∞

## Lunar Bacchanal

---

VIRGIL

**K**neevus had just sold the hundredth ticket of the day to El Profundos, Flame Worms of the Moon.  
“You’ll never see anything like it again. In Your LIFE!”

The couple nodded and scurried inside the tent. “Thanks,” the husband said. He poked his wife in the side and she giggled.

“Flame Worms,” she whispered, and the man snorted in reply.

“Stupid fuckin’ Earthers,” he sighed, then crossed one ear so they wouldn’t hear him.

“Come on, Come all.” He drew himself to full height, then ducked down low. “Live! Not one but three! You must see to believe. Behold the Tubular Titans! The Immeasurable Invertebrates!” He sold a ticket and made change without a pause in the banter. “Only on the Moon. You won’t see them in...” he swiveled to follow a passerby. “Where are you from, sir?”

“Overpark.”

“You certainly will NEVER see a Branson’s Flame Worm in Overpark I guarantee you that.”

And just like that another ticket was sold. Kneevus took a short break and a fast shot of brandy. Had to keep the pipes slickered. As he slipped the flask back into a pocket he noticed a child. It? He? She? Impossible to tell. It was just another damn larva to him.

What he wanted to say was, “What are you gawking at, you jug nosed snot licker?” Instead, he said, “And how are you enjoying the moon?” The thing blinked at him. “Is this your first visit?” The blinking continued. “There’s a Children’s Pavilion just that way.” He jerked a thumb eastward. “It’s got aaaaal kinds of Amazing Wonders.”

“Miss Kitty says you’re a huckster.”

The little shit! “Did she now?”

“She said you were a right proper one.”

Miss Kitty could give herself a flying fuck. He wondered if she'd sent the child deliberately. "What's your name?"

That awful blinking. The eyes looked black and reflective. "Benji."

"Well, Benji. Do you know what a huckster is?"

Benji shook her head. "Negatory."

"You didn't ask Miss Kitty?"

Another vigorous shake.

"A huckster is someone who hucks." Kneevus leaned back on his heels. "You don't know what huck means?" He didn't wait for the third shake. "It means I am an exemplary...shining...excellent example of someone who works hard. It means I'm the best there ever was at my job."

"That's not how she made it sound."

"She said right proper, didn't she?"

This time Benji nodded.

"Well, there you go."

Kneevus went back to work. "You have to see with your own eyes. Not one," he held up a finger. "Not Two," he raised a second. "But THREE! Three in one see!" He backed up to distance himself from the child. "Only on the Moon, friends. You'll never see..."

Benji blinked and wiped at her nose. "So, what's really in there?"

A lanky boy who was about to buy a ticket looked between them. Kneevus took the credits from his hand and gave him a ticket.

"What's in there?" Benji asked again.

"What part of Flame worm do you not understand?"

"Flame worms can't live in captivity."

"Is that so?"

A nod. "That's so."

"Well, that's what makes these such a wonder." He tapped a finger to his head. "They don't know they're captive. They're so happy sucking down NutirCal they don't..."

"It's not about what they eat."

They're about to eat a little snot nozzle. "Why do you even care?"

"I don't."

"Then, kid? Get the fuck lost up a horse's rump." To his surprise she laughed.

"You think that's funny?"

"Loads."

"Then how 'bout this? Begone, you slug licking fart trumpet."

Benji laughed even harder. "Miss Kitty said your mouth was a night spoil."

"She would know."

Benji turned and grabbed the nearest passerby. "Mister, I wanna see the Flame worm and this man said I was too young. He said I needed a caparon."

"Chaperone," Kneevus corrected.

"Chaperone."

"Honey, you sure you want to see such a sight?"

"Oh, yes, please."

The man and Kneevus exchanged looks, then credits and two tickets. As they slipped through the curtain to the tent Benji looked back and flashed him a ram's head with one hand.

"Her I could work with," he said, and went back to hucking. ☺



## The Time of Your Life

---

VIRGIL

For as long as she could remember, Spring had always made Valdis giddy. All that talk about renewal and rebirth, all the songs about the circle of life gave a wicked edge to her already twisted sense of humor. Gods, if people only knew just how true and untrue it all was. Ashes to ashes and all that dust. But she couldn't deny Spring put her in a mischievous mood. She joined facebook and twitter, sent outrageous messages to mess with people's heads. She tweeted "not every day above ground is really a good one" and "God doesn't love you either" to a suicide watch list. She posted "Rehab is for Quitters" on addiction sites, and "I'm coming to get you Barbara" to every single Romero fan named Barbara. They worshipped or worried over her posts, she didn't care which.

Valdis walked down the sidewalk, hands deep in pockets and watched as people attempted to frolic, smell daffodils, skate-walk their dogs, and other such nonsense. It was still a bit cool, but the young forced the issue by stripping down to t-shirts and shorts. A curly bearded boy threw a Frisbee for his dog. For a split second she imagined the teeming mites and moldy food bits refuged in the tangled tresses on his face.

"Pity if he cut it off," she said.

"Get it Eddy! Get it!" Val knew that he threw the Frisbee so it would land close to her. Both the dog and the boy trotted over to her.

"Eddy," Val whispered. Eddy whined, tucked his tail between his legs.

The boy bent and tried to comfort him. Eddy only whined more.

"What's wrong with you buddy?" He looked up. "Sorry, he's not usually like this."

Val and Eddy reached a silent understanding. She ruffled his head, kissed his nose. Eddy pranced in relief, pushed himself against her. "It's OK. He probably smells my dog."

The boy eyed her appreciatively. In spite of everything – her age, the stress of her job - she took very good care of herself. She could smell his

chemicals changing.

“You got a dog?” he asked.

Hadn’t she just said so? “Yes.”

“What kind?”

“He’s a real monster.” She stood up. “Cerberus.”

The boy laughed. “That’s a great name. Where is he?”

“At home. Far, far, from here.”

“You must miss him.”

“I’m there with him now, actually.”

“Yeah, I get you. I’m always with Eddy here in spirit.”

She smiled at the word spirit. “I’m everywhere, you know.”

He looked a little uncertain of her meaning, but pressed on. His smile was nice. His eyes held just the right sparkle. And there was no mistaking the fine, developed muscles under his t-shirt. But he was alive, so wasn’t exactly her type. She decided to end his flirtations.

“I’ve got work.”

“Oh,” he said, disappointed. Clearly he thought it had been going well.

“Going now,” she said.

“Oh,” he said again.

“Have a nice day,” she said.

“Maybe I’ll see you later.”

She smiled again. “Bet on it.” She neglected to tell him it wouldn’t be for another 45 years. And that the next time he wouldn’t be so excited to see her.

She didn’t have to walk far. She could have just materialized right in the living room had she really wanted to. But there was something so extra satisfying about putting in the extra effort - ringing the bell and seeing what happened. In this case nothing happened. She stood tip-toed to get a peek through the windows but the curtains were drawn tight. She rang the bell again. Still no answer, which wouldn’t deter her. Just as she was about to open the door herself, a frazzled looking woman in scrubs answered the door.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Ezzie,” Val said. She could smell that the woman

had just finished cleaning Ezzie, had done so with grace and gentility.

“I don’t know you,” the woman said. She was edging the door shut, putting her body between Val and the door. Val knew her, knew her kind even better. She cared endlessly for the sick and dying, making it easier to shuffle of this mortal coil. It took a devastating toll, it always did, but people like Ramona here were her unknowing foot soldiers.

“I’m here to see Ezzie,” Val said again. She touched Ramona’s arm and Ramona nodded. Jedi Mind Trick indeed. “You can have the rest of the day off.” Again Ramona nodded.

“I’ll just get my jacket.” She was gone and back a moment later. She smiled a goodbye and all but skipped down the steps. Val had done a lot for her in that simple touch. She’d soothed her doubts, eased her suspicions. During that brief encounter she’d seen Ramona’s whole life and death. As a reward, Val filled the two weeks of Ramona’s coma with her deepest fantasies. Bottomless Margaritas on the beach while a parade of her favorite bands played twenty four hours a day. Men and women lavished her with passion and pleasure. When she swam, dolphins joined her, jubilant. If Ramona’s brain figured it out, well, that wasn’t Val’s problem.

Val let herself in. The interior was dim but her eyes didn’t need time to adjust. She didn’t need a floor plan or a guide, she went straight to the living room.

“Living room,” Val said and laughed. In the middle of the room Esmarelda Chance was slumped in her wheelchair. Ezzie had been a vibrant dynamo until, at the age of 87, she’d had a massive stroke. Til the stroke she still ran, although not fast, baked daily and tended garden. She volunteered at the homeless shelter and at the local kindergarten. Now at 92 she was locked inside an unresponsive body. It drooled and leaked like a car ready for the scrap heap. Val moved closer. One of Ezzie’s arms rested across her lap making the ancient woman seem almost childlike. Her head was slightly palsied, shaking out a constant no to unanswered questions. A small black cat mewled from some dark corner.

“It’s OK,” Val said. The cat showed itself. She picked it up and cooed to it. It purred back.

“Ezzie,” Val said. “Do you know why I’m here?” Ezzie tried to move, to look up. But she was forever frozen, like a sad illustration in a mean

children's book. Val frowned. She put the cat in Ezzie's lap and leaned in closer. "I'm going to touch you, but don't worry." Ezzie's eyes showed that she wasn't worried in the slightest. Val smoothed a bit of hair back behind Ezzie's ear and stepped

back. Ezzie looked up, her hands instinctively moving to protect the cat.

"I'm not here for Miss Kittykins," Val said. Ezzie relaxed a little.

"Good," she said. She began stroking the cat, who rubbed itself against her delightedly.

"I'm not here for you either. Not yet." Ezzie's hand faltered, then began stroking the cat again. She was tight lipped, but said nothing.

"I'm in a bit of a jovial mood," Val said. She moved across the room to inspect the books on the shelves. Biographies of Presidents and scalawags. Soulless best sellers. She wrinkled her nose at the selection and turned back to Ezzie. She paused in her administrations to Miss Kittykins only long enough to wipe her face. Val pretended not to see her cry.

"Want to play some cards?" Val asked.

Ezzie nodded. "It's been so long," she whispered to Miss Kittykins.

At 6:30 Val put Ezzie back in her semi-comatose state. Sensing the difference, Miss Kittykins sniffed suspiciously, switched her tail and moved to curl up in her basket. During cards Val had helped herself, and Ezzie, to more than a few glasses of Bowmore Tempest. It was a whiskey neither of the women had ever tried.

"At \$90 a bottle that rat eared bastard wouldn't have shared this with god himself."

"Let's kill the fucker," Val said and Ezzie did a spit take.

"Kill it," Ezzie nodded toward the bottle. "Then him." She looked into her empty glass and shrugged. "I guess that's what I get for spoiling him rotten."

"I really like you," Val poured them another glass. "And I want to give you a gift before you reach your final destination."

"You can do that?"

"I can drink whiskey. I can play cards." She leaned in like a conspirator.

"I can do most anything I want." She sat back again. "So what do you want? Would you like to spend some time with your husband?"

Ezzie made a face. "I saw enough of him when I was alive."

"What then?"

"Well..." she hesitated. "That Errol Flynn was so good looking. But he was gay..."

"He won't be when you get hold of him."

Ezzie got tipsy and silly, yelled Gin! when they were playing Crazy Eights. Val herself couldn't get drunk, not here, and this made her a little sad. She wanted to get blitzed with Ezzie, play dress up in her son's clothes, tear up the boring books and maybe wreck the riding lawn mower her son kept so lovingly in the garage. She'd run over the oh-so-perfect fake stone wall and the designer garden statues, create some modern art. Instead, she slunk against his mission style dining room table and drank straight from the expensive bottle of whiskey.

"Dark caramel color," she said. "Perfect balance. Like drinking a sunset."

At 6:50 Jeffrey Chance unlocked the door and entered his house through the garage door. He loosened his tie and headed straight for the liquor cabinet. He stopped short when he saw Val.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, unafraid. Oh, but he should be.

"Val," she said simply.

Jeff pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911. "Unbelievable." He pointed the phone at her and brought it back up to his face. "You broke into the wrong house." When she took another swig he lowered the phone. "And you're going to pay for that fucking bottle." He stood glaring for several moments before he realized the call hadn't connected.

"Help, help," Val giggled. "Go ahead," she gestured. "Try it again." She got up and walked toward the living room. Jeff followed, phone still at his ear.

"I'm warning you..." He pocketed the phone and picked up an umbrella.

"You shouldn't open that in the house," Val said blithely. "It's bad luck."

He dropped the umbrella and moved toward her. "I'll show you some fucking bad luck..."

“You don’t want to touch me.” Val let the words take hold in his brain. She’d spoken several languages at the same time, but he understood them all. He understood that she was Death.

“You’re here for my mother.” He looked relieved. “Oh, thank god.”

“God has nothing to do with it.”

“Well, you can take that worthless cat with you too.”

“Miss Kittykins still has all nine of her lives.”

“Can you...” he scratched at the back of his neck. “I don’t know, get this over with or something?”

Val rolled her eyes. She walked over to Ezzie and began waving her hands hypnotically, like twin snakes. She arched her back and then reached forward and took the old woman by the nose.

“BOOP!” She looked over one shoulder at Jeff and smiled. “Hmmm. Strange. It didn’t seem to work.”

“Try it again.”

She touched Ezzie’s forehead. “Boop!” she said. “Boop! BOOP!”

“That’s it.” He took out his phone again. “You’re just some druggie psycho...”

A fly buzzed across the room and Val pointed at it. “Boop.” It stopped buzzing and fell dead to the floor. “Well, that one worked.”

“So get to it,” he said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Val stared at her finger for a second, then turned and touched his head. “Boop!” she said. “Boop!”

“Stop that.” He swatted her hand away.

“Boop!” she said again.

“Stop fucking around.”

“Gee, you’re really in a hurry. You shouldn’t be, you know. Life is precious. Everyone says so.”

“Precious? Precious? She’s been a pain in my ass for years. Everybody’s darling. Ezzie, Queen of Bridge. Ezzie, the tenderhearted philanthropist. Well, look at her now. Drooling and pissing on herself. She gave away half my inheritance, and I’m spending the other half to keep her alive.” He grabbed the bottle and took a swig. “Got to be the good son though. Got to give her nothing but the best. How would I look if I stuck her in a home?”

“You’re really ready?”

“Yes,” he said impatiently.

“All right. Enough messing about. Say goodbye to your mother.”

He stood rooted in place. “Goodbye,” he said.

“No,” Val insisted. “Really, say goodbye.” She stepped up next to him and touched his forehead. “BOOP!”

His eyes didn’t even have time to close. He wavered on his feet, then dropped smoothly like a building imploding. She nudged him with one foot, but didn’t need to check her work.

“You really didn’t see that aneurism coming.” She pulled out a tiny notebook, jotted down a few lines and tucked it away again. Then she woke up Ezzie so they could finish their game of cards.☺

*Recipe*

## Cooking with Hannibal

### Haggis

---

HANNIBAL LECTOR

Hello again epicureans!

Haggis is definitely an acquired taste, but once you try it you'll wonder why you waited so long. This recipe is absolutely to die for (at least for someone).

You'll need: BEE  
EP

We at Breaking Ground regret to inform you that Cooking with Hannibal has been cancelled. Please go enjoy some junk food and ramen.





*Medicine* | DellaS

## The Ones With Whom She Had Made the Pact

---

S U S A N W O E R N E R

**E**ven with her hands shaking she was still able to pierce the skins and drive the needle over and over. The threads glistened like quicksilver as she inspected the boots in the sunlight of her doorway. Finished.

She was tempted to pull the boots on, to admire her work. Looking down at the tormented stumps that were her legs, she felt the pain as if she were still cutting away her own blackening flesh; the poison slithering its way to her heart. These were not the legs one slid into seductive snakeskin boots.

Turning away from beauty, she blew lightly on the ones with whom she had made the pact. Not to irritate but to coax; to persuade. They lie dreaming their webby dreams like sleepers in hammocks hung among shade trees. She whispered I have kept my side of our agreement, time now for you to keep yours. They roused slightly, drowsy from eating flies so easy to catch lolling on the rotting meat.

She lay her hands on the table and they crawled to her, grasping wrinkled flesh, covering her palms so the lifelines were hidden by mounds of brown, writhing bodies. So as not to risk the consequence of threat, the woman moved deliberately, delicately, her wrecked gait paining her. Now each hand centered over the shining boots. Now spilling them; watching their spinnerets release silky ropes, spinning, spinning, spinning, down, down, down into the openings and disappearing into the blackness.

A smile crawled across her face. In her mind's eye, she witnessed the other placing her feet - her delicate, beautiful feet - inside the boots. She imagined the other's pain. And it pleased her. ∞

## Seraphim in Exile

---

CALVIN YARDLEY

### I - Yearning

Uplift me, closer unto thee, mine lord of holy hosts.

Beg of thee do I, humble and paltry, to make me in thine divine absolution.

To scour mine flesh from bone, tear me asunder.

Fill mine sins with gold, and permit me, O lord, to know what it is to feel again.

Fill mine mind with wisdom, and permit me, thou with no name, to dole out thy teachings and laud unto thee praises deserving.

Fill mine soul with fire, and permit me, O lord of affinity and silence, so that I may act on thy behalf.

For coldly, coldly, coldly is it, here where the wind does not blow and the firmament shines not.

Nay, not a breeze nor zephyr passes this chasm, this land between lands, this gap between it all.

I beg of thee, whoever thou shall be. Salvation is all I ask, and this one, humble and paltry, is undeserving even of such.

### II - Morningstar

[Beggared and beleaguered; so speaketh this one.]

[Wish for what you will; the worst is yet to come.]

[Disillusion and strain await thee beyond the veil; upon wings of ruin will it whisper; upon rays of light will it impale.]

[Call out thy name; call out thy vice; be willing and able to make what is deemed fitting of sacrifice.]

[We walk where none dare; we are the devil-may-care.]

[The seraphim in exile; cast into the dark; the scapegoat of our father erstwhile.]

[Be not afraid.]

[Soon; there shall be little to tarry for.]

## The Grandiose

---

CALVIN YARDLEY

Nothing but the sounds of an iron lung.  
Something inhales; it cannot exhale.  
It is crushed, it is made whole.  
The cycle repeats, so that life may flourish.  
It can while it will; soon, nothing broken shall remain.

It looks up in awe [fear] [reverence].  
We look upon it with pity [loathing] [sympathy].  
One of us lies; and it knows not of deceit.  
“My lord,” it croaks, body beaten and bruised,  
run through by bramble and bullet alike.

[What are we to make of you?] we ask, voice embittered.  
[One who kneels to the weak; one who kowtows to the undeserving?]  
[You make a mockery of strength ; a mockery of us.]  
[You hold us in reverence ; yet you do not know us.]  
[You strive for semblance ; rejecting the inner filth.]

[You who have sinned ; you who have wronged.]  
[You shall not know peace ; for what you have done.]

## The Color of Your Blues

---

REGINA YEHLRIS

Your blues  
are a sly eyed dog  
waiting for your back to turn

They are the slate and sepia parking lot  
where you lost a bookcase  
and later found a lover

Your blues  
are the way you miss a mother  
who never missed you back

They are the collection of cats  
and the brace of dogs  
buried with grace in our side yard

Your blues  
are chickadees chittering  
at their birdfeeder playground

They are a pond percolating in winter  
a skin of ice slowly melting  
to float invisibly on top

Your blues  
Are a buzzing mosquito  
That bites at your heart and whispers at your ear

They are the quiet moment  
spent listening to a blissful sun  
slipping over the horizon



*Isn't She a Dilly* | DellaS

≈ *Breaking Ground* • 153 ≈

## Duet

---

REGINA YEHLRIS

There were others –  
the usual suspects  
spaniels and collies  
twin ditch dogs and chicken thieves  
Play posing, sneaky eyed  
finger nipping followers of the absent Joy  
of slippers to chew  
and warm spots on the couch.

He was the unexpected interloper  
the unusual suspect.  
Unwanted, abandoned.  
a brain of dynamite, barbed wire will  
And such complicated sweet simplicity  
He heard you.

His head cocks in slow understanding  
your Duets warm up  
with a confusion of sighs  
rose to a curious crescendo  
of euphoric arpeggios  
and staccato verse



You lay on your backs, sing to the ceiling  
You sing with keen longing  
Wonder wounded at finding your pack at long last  
You sing of the smell of wet earth  
the feel of the moon on your back  
the thrill of hackles rising  
at the sight of a squirrel  
Your heads touch, eyes close in tandem.  
His paws hang like a praying mantis.

Your Duet  
Your all too brief connection  
Filled up  
the high hollow places  
in your hearts

## King of the Jungle

---

REGINA YEHLRIS

You see me  
through the eyes of a lion  
sinews stretch, catching fire  
prologue to a silent spring

You  
with your cage  
of terrible gnashing teeth (crashing)

Me  
with my guile  
and grace (supple)

Who  
do you think  
will be  
King of this Jungle?

## Dead Letter

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REGINA YEHLRIS

I could easily add up the odd decisions that brought me to this exact moment, standing here at my father's mailbox. I ditched work midweek, which I never do. On a piggyback whim, I drove three and a half hours to see my father. He was in no need of a visit, no need of anything at all, really. I found him out pattering in the yard, sprinkling hair from the barbershop around the shrubs in hopes of scaring off the deer. He gave me a rugged hug, fixed us coffee and we bemoaned the destructive power of Bambi. He laughed at the crow's feet at the corners of my eyes and pontificated about the joys of getting old.

"Really, it's not so bad." He toyed with his mug. "Getting old leaves you free to do a lot of things." He nodded at me. "You'll see."

Just after 1 we heard the mail truck and, ready to stretch my legs, I hiked down to the mailbox. How I got here makes a kind of random sense. But nothing can explain what I hold in my hands, what I've just read. I look back up toward the house, hopeful that my father has not seen. And I look back to the Christmas card, delivered some twenty years late.

It came in a plastic bag – the official sticker on the front absolved the post office of any wrong doing, gave silent unspoken praise for finally getting it right. At first, I thought it was only a few months late, that some friend or family member had sent it to my father. But when I flipped it over I saw it was addressed to me. That stopped me cold. The writing looked familiar and I felt a sense of dread and longing when I looked at it. I opened the plastic bag nervously. The paper felt dry, brittle. It crackled and I was stuck between time. Where my fingertips touched paper they were electrified. Instead of a return address there was a little sketch of a kangaroo lying on its side.

"Roosie..."

God, how I had loved her. God, what I had done for that love. As gently as I could I opened the envelope and slid out the card.

*My Sunshine Annie*

*I know how you feel about things. I know how things must seem.*

*Steve is a jerk but I want you to find some forgiveness – even for*

*him – this holiday season.  
Whatever happens, we can find light and joy and balance in our  
lives.  
Whatever happens I know I can count on you to do what's right in  
your heart.  
With all the love I have  
Roosie*

I wept for some minutes. Read and reread the card. She died – was murdered - less than a week after she posted it. Went on a weekend winter camp over with Steve and drowned. He said he didn't know how it had happened. Said he didn't know why she had gone to the river. But we knew. We all knew he'd done it. It took months to find the body. Months of searching through snow and ice and frozen water. I didn't go home for Christmas break that year. I stayed behind and searched. Steve, supposedly overwhelmed, went home to his family back east. She looked so at peace, so preserved when we finally found her. A ghostly blue white, hair fanned out like a crown. It made her death that much harder to take.

Anything worth killing should be done up close. That's why I'm a knife person. With a knife you have to be close – there's no separation. No distance. You can see the understanding in their eyes – see that they know their end in the relationship. Guns and poison, they're dishonest. Sneaky. But knives. There's just you and them, nothing to hide behind. I like things clean and simple. Sharp. I'm no show off, like those butterfly knife people who are all show and no actual craft. I know where to hit to bleed you out fast, know how to separate joints or tissue with minimal effort. I can be merciful or I can be mean, depending on why we meet. Steve, my first, got off far too easily.

He came back to school mid semester. He attended the funeral and smoked a lot of pot and mostly just hung out. People pressed their hands to his back, told him how sorry they were for his loss. In private, they found him guilty of at least some part of Roosie's death. I bided my time. Waited for things to quiet down. Then, late one night, I went to see him. He opened the door and glared for a while.

"What do you want?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "Talk."

He rubbed a thumb across his brow and laughed. "Talk," he said. "Right. I know you hate me." He blocked the door. "I know you blame me."

"I do," I admitted. "But I need to let go. I need to let Rosie go."

"Well," he said.

I proffered a baggie of pot. "I want to make peace."

"That's cool."

"And then I never want to see you again."

He shrugged. In the end I convinced him to go up to the damn. We sat and smoked, not talking. He handed me the last of the joint that I only pretended to smoke.

"I could push you in," he said suddenly. "That's what you're thinking. That I could push you in just like I pushed her. Get her good and high first, though, right?"

We stood up and stared at each other. Inside my jacket my hand tightened around the handle of my knife.

"If I pushed you in, you'd get so ground up they'd never recognize you as a person." He looked so smug, so sure of himself.

"Funny. That's what I was thinking."

He laughed. "You're, what, 100 pounds to my 180? D'ya really think you could push me off before I threw you in?" He laughed some more. "No matter what you think, you can never prove I did anything to her."

I struck then. Three quick flashes to the abdomen, one near his neck. The knife was so sharp he didn't even know he'd been cut.

"You hit like a girl," he said. A moment later he stumbled. He touched his hand to his neck and finally realized he was dead on his feet. He reached out and I pushed him harder than I needed to. Part of me wanted to see him die but it was better for him to be alone in the cold and dark. He would fill with blood and water and be forever gone. I washed down where we had been sitting, got in my truck and never looked back.

For a moment I hold Rosie's card against my cheek. Then I slip the card through my car window on the way back to the house, where my father waits with more coffee. ☹

Your Creative Work Goes Here

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Your Creative Work Goes Here

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Anonymous.** None of your business. I took time out from Olympus Valencia to be completely ANONYMOUS. You might have guessed I'm from the Marvel Universe, but that's all I'm telling you.

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**Cara Brzen** I began writing at a young age and recently started to get back into the swing of things after stopping abruptly for several years. My family has always enjoyed my writing, specifically my mother, so this is for her.

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**Kelsey Cherevko.** A woman of few talents, who gets winded at the top of the steps and dares to think she could become a stripper instead. She's the first hot girl to do construction. She insists that American football is more homoerotic than figure skating. She will someday avenge her experience at Girl Scout camp. She has "dreads explained" in her search history. She named her first dog after The Rock. She wrote a non-ironic love poem about the McChicken. Please enjoy.

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**David Chirico.** We're not sure he actually exists. Maybe he exists. Maybe he doesn't. We could ask him, but Who Does the Asking?

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**Luke De Jager.** Is outrageously handsome, and smart, and wildly cool.

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**Daniela Doller.** Is a student at SUNY Broome.

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**Dave Ely.** Dave is an Senior auditor of art

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and writing classes at SUNY Broome, where in his retirement he is enjoying an explosion of creativity. Dave is a retired jeweler, and still enjoys the metal arts. Light of his life are his two beautiful children and darling granddaughter.

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**Barry Freedman.** Barry is a latter-day hippie and a bit of a tree hugger, and is deeply in touch with Mother Earth. Earth. His friends would call him a gregarious recluse who sees the Unity of our Universe, loves people but prefers solitude. A neophyte writer, Barry has always loved to read, his favorite authors among many when he was younger, were Ernest Hemingway and Frank Yerby. Always understanding the power of words, Barry is now learning to use them artistically.

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**Isabelle Galatro.** Is a student at SUNY Broome. The Eng 175 class thinks she is a gifted photographer

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**Grendel** I live on campus, under the gazebo near Calice. I like it there. I like it when students walk by listening to music. I bet if I asked, they'd let me listen too (unlike those smelly Danes) I like clouds, and kittens. I don't like Beowulf. He smells bad. This is my first poem.

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**Deb Hibbard.** was a former counselor at SUNY Broome. She practiced love, acceptance, and compassion. She said to say that she especially loved her dog Dilly, her cats Willow, Ash, CC and Moo. Oh, and her wife was OK too.

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**Hannibal Lector** I only ever ate the ONE cesus taker, so PLEASE stop quoting me on this...fffft, ffffft, ffffft, ffffft. I am a recent enrollee of the Culinay Arts here at SUNY Broome.

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**Lily Hodson** Hey, I like to write and happened to submit my work for assignments in my English 110. My professor urged me to send my work to Breaking Ground, so here I am. I hope you enjoy it.

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**Hiba Khan** is Hiba Fatima Khan, age 19 Born in Pakistan and brought up in Saudi Arabia. She volunteered as a first aid practitioner with the Saudi Red Crescent Authority for almost a year. She is a Computer Science major, a senator in the student assembly, a founder and president of Muslim Students Association, and an International Student.

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**Rachael Leonard** is a social worker who began her work with people living with chronic pain, offering them the tools of mindful awareness practices that she learned at the Center for Mindfulness at University of Masaachusetts Medical Center. She bows in deep gratitude to her teachers there for these “gifts that keeps on giving”. Universal in benefit, she also taught these skills with Deb Hibbard in the social work continuing ed. program at Binghamton University and at B.U.'s Decker Student Health Services. She adds, “I bow deeply to Virginia Shirley and Deb Hibbard for their treasured friendship and for inspiring me to write as we gathered for our Write Club. Whereas Deb sometimes called her nudges to get creative “busting my chops”, I know she was really helping me toward becoming a better

version of myself. Thanks Deb, ya done good! have two children, Brian and Rachel.

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**Jarrett Ludolph.** I am a student at SUNY Broome who will transfer to BU this fall to pursue a Psychology BA. My pass times include TV, DnD and reading.

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**ENG 175** Resistance is futile. Resistance is everything. Join us, Join Us. JOIN US and have a blast producing Breaking Ground next year.

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**Evan McHugh.** Is an urban planning major at SUNY Broome with a passion for creativity and design. In his free time, he enjoys engaging in various hobbies that fuel his imagination and help him develop his skills.

One of Evan's favorite hobbies is playing tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs). He enjoys the collaborative storytelling aspect of the games and finds that they help him flex his creative muscles. He also likes painting models, which allows him to express his artistic side.

In addition to these hobbies, Evan also enjoys writing fiction. He finds that writing allows him to explore different worlds and characters.

When he's not indulging in his creative pursuits, he likes to stay active by E-biking and participating in physical exercise. He finds that exercise helps him clear his mind and stay focused.

Another activity that Evan enjoys is ice skating. He finds the sport to be both challenging and rewarding, and he likes the feeling of gliding on the ice.

As an urban planning major, Evan is

interested in designing public spaces that are both functional and beautiful. He believes that well-designed public spaces can have a positive impact on communities and can bring people together.

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**Ahmed Muhammad** is an alumni of SUNY Broome Community College. He currently lives in San Diego, California, while he works on the next installment of his comic book series titled Willie Mooch.

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**Mik Nabinger** I am 18 years old. I'm from Endicott, NY. My submission is a true story and true experience.

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**Katrina Newell.** I am a current student at SUNY Broome and an English major.

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**Matthew Nowakowski.** Is an accounting major with plans transfer to BU. Matthew has been married for 10 years but smitten for 13, has a 15 year old kid and 3 dogs. He's an avid cinephile and physical media collector with over 800 movies in his collection (and counting). He's also a below the knee amputee.

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**Diane O'Heron.** Is a writing teacher at SUNY Broome for over 20 years, counts taking ENG 175 as one of the highlights of her adult life. She thanks the staff for their commitment to the arts and SUNY Broome.

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**Christoper Origer.** Now retired, Chris was the former faculty editor of Breaking Ground and the former Chair of the English

Department. He is an avid hiker, cyclist, writer, and a dedicated grandfather.

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**PlayDo.** You really can make it with PlayDo. My goal is to put philosophy out there like Skittles (oh, yeah, taste that rainbow). Have you ever just sat down and thought about thinking? Thought about what it would be like to think about thinking as you're thinking about thinking? It should be fun to play with your brain, but don't do drugs!

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**Rose Pero.** I am a secretary in the Liberal Arts office at SUNY Broome. I was lucky enough to be raised by amazing parents in a household with 6 siblings. I learned so many life lessons by watching my parents. They continue to be the greatest influence in my life even long after they are gone. I hope they are holding hands in heaven and looking down on me with pride.

Special Editor's Note: Rose Pero is an absolute angel. This magazine, and much of the faculty editor's sanity would not be possible without her incredible dedication.

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**Tyler Rizzo** is a SUNY Broome Liberal Arts student and hopes, someday, to be an author. He is currently a writer for The Focus.

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**DellaS** is an alumni of SUNY Broome Community College. While she didn't do well in her first semester (she bombed out of nearly every class) she managed to move on to get her graduate degree in Education. While she was at Broome, she developed a passion for taking pictures of strange things, which she still does today.

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**Mary Seel.** Mary is a native of Atlanta. She likes to cook and walk and organize. She is the Chair of the English Department.

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**Americus Sivers.** A young inspiring author who has multiple physical and mental disabilities but has multiple hidden attributes.

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**Nicole Shefler.** I work at the BCC library's circulation desk, so if my name sounds familiar that's where you've seen me. I am a Binghamton University alumni. I'm also a gardener. I write in my free time and have previously self-published poetry collections and short stories under the name "Nikkie Shefler". I am currently working on finishing my first novel.

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**Virginia Shirley** has had a very tough year. If it weren't for the love of her family, friends, colleagues, and pets, she would have lost her tiny little mind. (maybe she already has) Thanks to the tireless work of her students, Rose Pero, and a cadre of volunteer editors, this magazine happened. I'd like to dedicate my portion of the work to my wife, Deb Hibbard. I miss you, Dowser!

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**Susan Woerner.** At Broome, Susan helps faculty design and develop their courses. In real life, she writes short- and long-form fiction and generally dabbles in all sorts of craftiness. She carries on in fascinating conversation with various furred, feathered, and finned others, so of whom hog the bed at night.

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**Calvin Yardley.** Is a former student at SUNY Broome, and a current student at UAlbany. He is also a former student editor of Breaking Ground. He has all of the questions and none of the answers.

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**Regina Yehlriss** is an alumni of SUNY Broome. She was a non-traditional student, in every conceivable way. She loved spending time with younger students, and loved that they accepted her as she was - a "crazy ol fart." She was nervous about taking a creative writing class, and loved the encouragement and the support of the class.

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**Virgil.** Is not who you think she is. She is no Barbie girl, in no Barbie world.

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Crash | Daniela Doller



