



Variant
Literature
Journal

Issue 5 | Autumn 2020

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Variant Literature Journal - Volume 5

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Letters and Comments

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Letter from the Editor

I can't put it into enough words but reading work—submissions, for our press and journal have always come as some sort of reprieve for me from everything else. In this vein, I have been especially grateful for all the writers who have trusted us with their work this year, which has been tough and nothing short of depressing to say the least. We are not only wowed by you, but we are also learning from you and we are glad you are writing. No one is going to say it like you will. So, say it. Show us your variant!

And of course, this would all be impossible without the lovely team that has agreed to work with me. I wish we weren't all so far apart but it's continually my pleasure to collaborate with you all.

I hope everyone enjoys the issue! Again, I forgot to ask for social tags on the submission forms so please find us on Twitter @VariantLit if you'd like a boost in getting your work out!

Best regards,
Editor-in-Chief
Tyler Pufpaff

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Barbara Alfaró

Even Indigo

The Lovers card in the Tarot has all
the colors of a rainbow, even indigo.
Raphael, winged and unsmiling,
blesses a naked woman and man.

You brought the battered woman
to my dorm room as if it were
some sort of shelter for the sad.
Listening, I memorize your face.

I could not stand near you, or
the middle-aged English prof,
yes, him, without knowing
what others must feel often.

Augustine tells when you speak
a sentence one word must die
before the next word is born.
I keep ghosts of former loves too long.

Kirstie Brown

Self-Sabotage

Evading the wilt
With the angst of withering
—She will never bloom.

Adam Burgess

Charm, Offensive.

You thought it was a compliment to say things like
 your body moves like the ocean
So I left, slowly, seeping salt and
Mostly hopeless,
 gone to the desert to dry up.

The Yoke

The house is quiet
Because everyone has left
And the sound of the clock,
The furnace's small cracking
Are beneath my notice,
Unremarkable as the air
I turn into my breath, released
With the subtle perfume
Of my ordinary corruption,
Crude oil, fish heads scattered
Like arrows, nourishment.

How will I know when I am done?
People are always leaving things
Behind, gloves, strands of hair,
Dishes to be cleared.
There's another universe
Running backwards, the future
Melting like a hyacinth glacier,
Slow first and then too quickly
To arrest; the past is coming for me
Implacably, kindly, a bondage.
I need an abolitionist,

One with deep pockets.

because your body next to mine, when she beckons,
grows into a leech i turn stone playing host
i wear her your skin;

because, she makes eleventh hour chimes ring in
the aisles of my ears, like onomatopoeias of fluttering memories;

because, when my proboscis wander down her *linea nigra*
i find a flower to pollenate mother's prayers:
child, may we always be remembered

b. in loinclothes of euphemism,
you lead me where we hope God's eyes will not see;
to curse you with speechlessness; i, with slumber.

1:35 a.m., i awake from a dream where you shape-shifted
into a bleeding girl stretching to me a tiara of thorns in an inkwell

Grace Alice Evans

motel, revisited

words flow from overcast synapses / swelling our longings / the
motel in the hands of which we dream ourselves to sleep.

the neon signage gashing through our skins / microscopic daggers
flung into your tenderness / we keep our eyes closed and voyage into
the night-scape / the buzz of the lights drowned by flies / feasting on
roadside chapels; they wish for sustenance—you wish to leave the
desolation of motel halls.

i wish for the decay to reverse its course.

i can hear them outside our door / searching for a blind spot where
life comes to lay / i have learned to worship the beasts / which slink
through these carpeted passageways.

Frank William Finney

Decoys

The smooth, glossy mirror
of four wooden coffins.

The gash in the gut
of the burly old oak.

Jessica Kim

Nightmare as Reincarnation

Witching hour & I dream of thieves
wolfing for my limbs. My fingers
severed by the flick of a switchblade.
They ask me if I want to live. No

answer. The night spills decapitated
bodies into my mouth, agape with
unsaid testimonies. Exhale as the faint
flapping of moth wings, mistaking

quietude as a wish to be born a butter-
fly. Clasp onto daylight in finale.
Ask again if I want to live & I will tell
you how mother was murdered by a

kaleidoscope of butterflies at twilight.
I imagine those bodies crushed by
some hand, a cacophony of ruptured
exoskeletons. Since when did the

food chain undo itself, how insect
kills human. Prey on my body & I
will surrender in darkness, wingless.
Blooming as flowers from stalks of

limbs, bleached in scarlet.

Prague

Prague I remember as a week of ache. We were young and on a budget and had booked an Airbnb in Old Town; the remainder of our funds would go to cocktails and covers. By then, though, I had been half a year sober, and I spent my evenings either asleep or on walks. It was on these walks that I learned that Prague was a city of ghosts, and nowhere more so than the Golden Lane. Between the street's faux-gilt fronts they manifested most potently: old Europe, Kafka, a time when the Vltava did not run slow and brown. The memories of simpler wants. One night, just past two, I met a sadder iteration of my grandfather lying on his back on a bench. Worn linen jacket; time-dulled Oxfords, off. He spoke as I was passing without turning his head, as if addressing the sky. And so I stopped and I listened as he told me of a philosopher, a contemporary scholar—I forget his name—who argued that visions of utopias, of idyllic hereafters, were preserved by their elusiveness. That which never was could not and might not ever fail. Hence Prague Spring's '68 quashing. Thus the city's retroactively-accomplished goal of turning lead to gold, or at least enacting the illusion thereof. Therefore ghosts. Later that night, then, when I arrived back at our flat, I held back my friend's hair from her forehead as she puked. She told me she envied me, wanted to be me. She sobbed, and I did not respond. I stared not out the window but at the floor—jaundiced linoleum, rot encroaching at the tiles' edges. There were no stars inside that dark, and, although I did not look, I knew there would be none outside. Polluting light—that was all—leaking gold.

Zahra

throws her cardamom on the hot oil and the house fills with voices. A new cooker arrived this afternoon: gas hobs instead of electric plates. Zahra likes seeing the fire. I am happy because this house is ours now and we can sleep more safely. At 9:50pm we walk down the stairs. The stairs squeak always. We chew mouthfuls of stuffed aubergine. We drink wine and look into each other's eyes. We remember to keep breathing. At night our nightmares interweave: the man chasing me suddenly moves into Zahra's dream. I run to find him before he gets to her. We wake up screaming with no sound. We have started sleeping next to each other. In the morning we buy whole milk and one papaya to celebrate Zahra's birthday. We smile knowingly at each other but neither of us knows what it is we're smiling about. We move slowly. Zahra walks with her trousers rolled up to her knees. At 8pm we cut open the papaya. Tonight our eyes are huge. Tonight with sticky fingers we make. We make everything again.

E. Samples

Downstream

When the air in my lungs
is the grey bear of winter
and my skin is unsuited for the weather,
I watch the current carry dead sheddings
to the meeting place.

Cold tea poured down the sink
drains; infrared sky sparks rain;
hit, spit and split the earth.

I open windows and listen
to a breaking dry morning.
An autumn unmade departs single file.

Beyond the crossroad
a temporal loop walks along the river.
Shadow fetches the stick again and again.

Ashley Sapp

This Is No Invocation

I fill my bedside glass,
wonder at its contents,
clear and cold, satisfying.
This is no invocation.
I have nothing to proffer,
and my hands are obscene,
shaking in repose, mimicking
the movement of the muted.
The broken sigh of prayers
lingering in a pause meant
to be swallowed like water,
quenching something
angry and starved and alone,
hover in the aching night.
The tired have a way of waking.
I can hear their hands unclasping,
a quiet refrain of surrender.

Anindita Sengupta

Involuntary Silence

Weeding means wrangling
roots from soil
Nature does not know permission
and what is more peripatetic than a forest,
more languid? Sometimes, love comes
like a swirl of asteroids—
only a matter of time before collision.
Sometimes, a melancholy
tune in the evening, insinuating
from some window,
a question like: what if we met
in another decade
and I still couldn't put a face
to his name?
Like watercolors on glass,
we shift and blur.
Our bodies slip through
the rabbit holes of our bodies,
sprouting twigs and leaves,
want to be stones
clutched warm, the night's release
of weed, part of someone's memory.
Vellichor. Chrysalism.
The aisle in which old mysteries
are lit by argentum,
the window misting against rain sound.
The world is a clock and we, the hands
on its face. Through grief,
love appears as through a window,
small and detailed,
and we imbibe as if we are at a museum,

plant it in soil as if climate
is something we can count on,
as if each tendril is a watercolor,
a held silence.

Candria Slamin

The Timeline Where I Didn't Become Robin Hood

I

I was eight the first time I held
a bow and arrow. My tiny stick arms
did not shake under its weight,
and though I did not hit the target,
the sudden, rapturous joy of loosing
the arrow into the open-air split
me in two like a ripe summer melon.
My giddy laugh was the pink, juicy
pulp. I dropped a seed with each
subsequent arrow, planting myself
anew in that forest above the James River.
Each summer after, I would grow again
amongst the poison sumac, blooming
in the sticky heat. Planting myself
each time I was handed the trusty bow.
pollenated when I first hit the target,
just a little off center. For nine years I
grew, breathing in the river air,
singing the songs of Scouts and God
alike. Then finally, one summer
I never touched the bow again.

II

he did not split
me open in a fully

lit hotel room in texas.
i split myself that night

hands grabbing for anything
they could hold. somehow i

was more naïve than i
had ever been, staring

up into eyes. into ceiling.
ignoring that nothing felt

right. i wasted away
the next morning, sitting

in the aisle seat on a plane home.
i would welt again,

the next summer. welting
in apartments in san antonio

dropping little leaves.
dropping it all away

until i was a fairy
ring of nothing. fungus

growing in a patch of dirt

Sophie Furlong Tighe

On Sex Beside Our Sleeping Friends

Quieted breath
through fingers
/into pillows.

Waking sounds:
soft yawns
bones cracked.

Hands receding
to the tempo
of the sunrise.

Alla Vilnyansky

DUENDE

For Lucie Brock-Broido

When I first heard of your passing,
I froze and then, on the following days
I tried to reconcile the thought of you
mortal
How dare they place you there
with all of the other people
who also claim to be dead
still living, breathing

Haunted

The Irish danced as if they were underwater. They moved languidly to the music, their limbs stretched and quivering to the melancholic beats, lyric-free, just notes that spun out and hovered in the air before falling onto the dancers' shoulders like a misty rain, turning them in gentle circles. I splashed between them, winded myself around their movements, wanting to fit inside the music, inside those moments. The tempo picked up and I found myself lost in the current, rocking between the foreign dancers, alone but not alone, and okay with being lost for a while.

When I was spit out onto the edge of the club's dance floor, my friends fed a gin and tonic into my hands and I talked with an Irishman who was just shy of seven feet tall about why crows are associated with death. "Crows are just too smart," he said, "they should be feared, flying to battle, waiting to feed on the fallen."

"How do they know that death is coming?" The obvious answer was learned behavior. But maybe there was something else.

"Crows are communicators between this world and the spirit world. The gods speak to them, maybe speak through them." He had his head resting against the wall, and the peeling wall-paper caught in his hair when he tilted his head back to look up at the ceiling, as if searching for a passing bird.

"I think I'm writing a story about a death goddess," I shared. I didn't know why. My stories were never easy to explain. He rolled his eyes away from the ceiling to my face and quirked his lips at me. Looked me up and down.

"You're a death goddess," he said. He finished his drink, handed it to me, and wandered into a different room of the club.

I found my friends on the dance floor, pulsing, the room was pulsing, the building was pulsing, the whole city was pulsing.

A friend of my friend, an Irishman who wore his long hair in a bun and who smiled like he held a secret in his mouth, singled me

out and brought me back onto the dance floor. He slid his arms along mine, brought me close then spun me out. Twirled me around the room, I didn't have a thought of what was happening to my feet, they moved on their own, it felt like swing dancing but with a twist. The Irishman swept me back to him, dipped me, and then swooped in for a kiss.

I let him kiss me, I think I wanted him to. I was in Ireland and I was kissing a local; how wonderful, I told myself, this would be a story to tell. We danced some more and I waited until the music lulled itself into a softer tempo and I slipped away to the bar.

I paid for another gin and wandered through the rooms of the club. The building was old, Europe was just so old, and I looked for my friends in the faces I walked past. I found them on the patio, my passionate American friend was arguing with an Irishman about Bukowski, she looked ready to throw her drink in his face. "He is a misogynist and goddamn overrated!" she shouted, her knuckles whitening on her glass. One of the girls I'd walked over to the club with caught my eye. She had the buttons on her blouse purposely misbuttoned and I overheard her tell my friend that she was an opera singer. She leaned her elbows across the wooden barrels used as tables. The Irishwoman sighed deeply and pouted. I knew she wanted me to ask so I did, "What's wrong?"

"No one here is gay!" She threw her hands up in disbelief.

I laughed and caught one of her hands. "I'm gay!" I said. The Irishman who still wore my lipstick on his face had just joined our table. His mouth fell open in shock at my proclamation.

"Well, come here then!" The Irishwoman said, bringing her hand to my face. I tasted her lips and tongue and decided that Irish women were better kissers.

I drank more and danced more; I kissed and tasted so much more. I wandered through the many rooms of the club, swimming past so many fashionably and daringly dressed bodies, past different DJs and jukeboxes blaring unfamiliar music. I took a shot with new friends while making eyes at a man by the door. I followed him into

a quiet hallway and let him touch me without ever getting his name. When I found my friends again, the first Irishman I had danced with, who really needed to get my lipstick off his mouth, shouted and clapped with glee as I approached the table. My passionate friend later told me that he kept saying, “I’ve lost Shanna!” and I was glad I didn’t let him find me.

But I danced with him again and he asked me to go home with him. We sat on a velvet loveseat, it seemed old, Europe was just so old, and I ran my nails up and down his arm in contemplation. I tried to imagine myself sleeping with him. I felt detached and removed. He kissed my neck and I watched the Irish people dance underwater.

“I can’t, I’m sorry,” I said at last. His lips stopped moving on my neck and I met his eyes briefly before looking back to the dance floor. “I have medicine to take at night, and I don’t have it with me. I can’t stay anywhere.”

We sat a few moments longer. I continued to run my nails along his skin, my fingers itching to spell a name out, but I resisted. I gave the Irishman one more kiss and when I walked away it didn’t look like he held a secret in his mouth anymore.

I went back to the room with the jukeboxes. The people in the room looked like Beatniks, all dressed in black, smoking cigarettes, and head banging to the blaring music. I sat on a wooden bench propped against the wall and laid my jacket across my lap. I connected to the Wi-Fi and tried to slow my breathing, not understanding, not wanting to comprehend why I felt so worked up.

A man leaned across me and spilled brown beer in my lap. He didn’t notice and I did nothing, watching as the liquid rolled off the leather of my jacket. I felt my throat tighten, my body preparing for tears, so I shook my head to shake myself clear.

My phone buzzed. *Hook up with any Irish dudes yet?* My friend sent a gif of a winking leprechaun. I laughed and a tear escaped.

Two dudes, one lady, I wrote back.

Proud of you!

It felt good and now I feel less good, I sent. There were so many other things I wanted to type and say, but my friend understood.

I know, I'm sorry, babygirl, she sent with a picture of two cats hugging. I laughed and it felt nice, so I laughed some more until I realized I was sitting alone on a bench in a room full of people laughing to myself. I stood up, deciding to try to find my friends again, but I shut my eyes, moving through the rooms blindly before I stepped onto the patio, knowing that if I opened my eyes I would only look for a person who wasn't there. Maybe if I'd had them opened I would've seen the crows watching me, preying on the fallen.

I spent the rest of my evening talking about Game of Thrones and Viola Davis with yet another charming Irishman. He told me I was very haunted to be visiting Dublin.

“Haunted?” I asked, struck by his cheery tone.

He smiled wide and kissed me on the cheek, delighted to share with me. I touched my face where his lips were, that touch the most remarkable one of the evening.

“Haunted. Here it means you're lucky,” he said.

When we went back to our temporary Dublin home, I sat in a taxi and ate the candy I'd bought from a corner store whose cashier, as I handed over my change, said, “you've been kissing tonight!”

My passionate friend was making out with an Irishman in the backseat of the cab and the Irishman who she had been arguing with about Bukowski sat next to me. We offered each other our candy and I watched old buildings blur past my window. Europe was just so old and I loved how it made me feel old too. But suddenly I felt too old. I handed over the rest of my candy and tried to think about anything but my own existence, feeling both haunted and lucky.

In the morning, I woke to my friend and the Irishman from the night before whispering and kissing on the couch right next to me. I didn't open my eyes, and I tried not to listen, instead clutching back at my dream of all the things I could have if maybe I really was a death goddess.

21 Questions

How do you tell a once-estranged mother that the book she is about to read, your very first, is not something that she will particularly enjoy? How do you clarify that she might appreciate the story, and some of the characters, but that she inspired the book for reasons she will not be proud of? How do you tell her that despite the thawing now, that all you saw and felt then was ice, that you wouldn't change that now just because the reality has changed? Do you send her a copy and ask her to read it before you talk again? Do you warn her about the characterization beforehand, or just let her find out?

How do you separate the true moments from the fictional? The feeling from the memory? Doesn't memory itself lie? What will you say if people ask these questions of you, if they want to know if this all really happened, if you're really as scarred as your character is? Will you say too much or too little? Settle for somewhere in the middle? How will you continue to heal when you keep tearing internal wounds open? Can you survive all of this? Isn't it all just so very hard? And hasn't it always been?

When you come back to the city after so long away, just like the main character in your book, what will you say to her when you see her again? What could erase the old pain and bring you closer when everything's already been said? How will the reconciliation mean something this time? How will it become a connection instead of just a ceasefire? How will you go about having your mother back again? Is again the right word to use when you've never really felt like you had a mother to begin with?

Are you ever going to get to a place where you feel okay? Will the hole seal itself, or be filled with something else, or will it just be? Will you be okay with living in this pain if that's what is to happen in the end? Do you accept that there will be an end to all of this somehow? What will you do when illness comes for her? Will

you stay there with her no matter what? Will you be on good terms by then? Will it matter? Can the familiar old pathways in your brain be cleared for something else to take their place? What will forgiveness feel like in five years' time? Ten? What kind of person will you be then? What kind of person will she be? Are you okay with not knowing everything, the permutations and possibilities and places you'll be? Will she even read this thing if you give her a copy? Does it matter?

Do you know what you'd give to have the easy, don't-have-to-think-about-it, completely natural parental connection you've been seeking your entire life? Would you even know what to do with it if you had it? When it all comes through, can you be apart from the pain and watch where it tries to lead you? Can you interrogate the voice in your brain that tells you you don't matter, that your work doesn't either? Can you track its source and hear its timbre, accent and tone not yours but the source of yours? Can you water and till this endless garden of forgiveness? Can you tend the wounds that will come from pulling out mental weeds, blade grip, slip, and prickle-cut? And if you can't right now, will you keep trying?

All Parties in Hell

“You look like shit,” Carrie threw out bluntly as I rushed into eighth-grade homeroom right before the tardy bell rang. The devil on my shoulder agreed with her, but Carrie wasn’t supposed to sit on the same side as my low self-esteem.

“I didn’t have time to put makeup on this morning,” I snapped back, “but tha...” Mrs. Jones cut me off with roll call and I turned forward abruptly in my desk.

“Thanks for that,” I finished my thought soundlessly.

The rest of my morning was spent mentally absorbed in the question of why my so-called *best* friend felt she had the right to tell me I looked like shit. I would never have said the same to her, at least not out loud anyway, but a little makeup would definitely have improved her pallid complexion. By lunch I was exhausted from the effort of lobbing silent insults. Also, I had the sneaking suspicion Carrie had intentionally pissed me off in order to deflect an otherwise uncomfortable discussion.

I had gotten back from my father’s funeral the day before, but the devil on his shoulder had not been buried with him. I had brought it home with me to lurk in the shadows and scare off theoretical conversation.

Suicide was a devil too uncomfortable to confront. An extreme level of unease was written all over the back of classmates’ heads as they quickly turned away, just as discomfiture was embedded in the weak, sympathetic smiles that teachers offered to me from the front of their classrooms.

“He made a choice,” their muteness told me. “Now put some makeup on and get over it.”

My dad had already been absent from my life for eight years, but not by choice. Not long ago I had told Carrie my dreams of turning eighteen and finding him again so he and I could laugh and cry and walk down the aisle of my someday-wedding together.

Carrie had hurried the discourse along; she didn't like to be uncomfortable.

Carrie never spoke of her own father. She put valiant effort into tuning out the bad in the world, and I allowed her the tactic out of gratitude for her willingness to stand by my side. She had been the only person to acknowledge me the first day of eighth grade, although I couldn't really blame the other students for not. I had shown up looking like a middle-aged saleswoman in my mother's animal print, hand-me-downs and a frizzy perm, free from the local beauty school two days before my eleventh new school since kindergarten. I didn't like curly hair, and I didn't want a perm, but free was free was free, and my mother never turned down free. The crispy results were so horrid my mother decided I would have to get my "fried" hair cut off at another beauty school two weeks later. As I sat in the chair watching the clippers outline the shape of my head, I unsuccessfully fought back tears in anticipation of the names I would be called the next day. Carrie had continued to walk the halls by my side.

Last week, I had explained to Carrie that my father was dead, and all my dreams of reunions along with him. I had been careful not to shed tears; I didn't want to make her uncomfortable. She listened distractedly, and then changed the topic immediately. She felt the one-sided dialogue should have been enough, and our lives should continue as they had. We should talk about boys, music, and forging notes to get out of PE, just like before. I should simply get over it, or at least have the decency to pretend I had so as not to make everyone uncomfortable.

When school let out for the summer, I took my aunt up on an invitation she had extended at the funeral and went to Atlanta to stay with her and my cousin. It was my first taste of freedom. At home with my mother, I lived a life of little choice. As she dropped me off at the Greyhound station with a purple duffel bag of clothes I hadn't been allowed to pick out on my own, my mother told me I was

making her uncomfortable by “choosing” my dad’s side of the family. She was “disappointed” that I didn’t appreciate the sacrifices she had made for me.

Despite the time and distance between us, Aunt Nadine and Karen were immediately my closest family, and their larger-than-life personalities made them the two coolest people I’d ever met. Their apartment was in a mid-sized, gated complex, but I loved how stylishly big-city it felt compared to my own small-town existence. Instead of competing with the white walls that make most apartment dwellers uncomfortable, Aunt Nadine embraced the color with an overstuffed, white living room suite. It was sophisticated furniture you could sink into, with glamorous, red throw pillows you could balance your plate of pizza on. Even the small balcony was fashionable with two short, red director’s chairs where my aunt would go to smoke her cigarettes after work. By mid-summer Karen and I were smoking cigarettes out there too. Aunt Nadine had insisted after she’d caught us hanging out of Karen’s third-story, bedroom window late one night. She decided that smoking was not a crime worth risking our lives over.

Nothing made my dad’s youngest sister uncomfortable. She was open and honest, telling me both the good and not-so-good stories about my dad, and reassuring me that he loved me so wholeheartedly that it made her jealous. Aunt Nadine asked me questions about my life, and indulged my theories about what the lyrics to REM’s “Losing My Religion” actually meant. I was in awe of her.

My cousin Karen, just two years my senior, was a blast of excitement in the blandness of my existence. Life was filled with music every moment we were awake; one corner of her room was devoted entirely to a CD tower and a stereo. And, although the space she carved out for herself wasn’t quite as urban-chic as Aunt Nadine’s, it was entirely hers. Karen’s bedroom floor was made of clothes, her bathroom amassed beauty products, and her car exploded laundry, hair scrunchies, and myriad more CD’s whenever the doors were opened.

Karen was kind and free-spirited and fantastically amazing, my long-lost sister and my partner-in-crime. She could pass for eighteen at a couple of stores that were too negligent to card, and we stockpiled cigarettes for languid tube rides down the river.

“I’ve got towels,” Karen said, Pearl Jam’s “Alive” radiating from the speakers, “just pull some out of the trunk.” They were still wet from the last use.

A liquor store once sold her a bottle of low-end wine, but that was a fluke. At any rate, we discovered that weed was easier to get our hands on than alcohol, and cheaper too. She had a part-time, minimum wage job as a hostess at Applebee’s, and I had a few twenty dollar bills that well-intentioned relatives had slipped to me after the funeral. We saved money on snacks by making the rounds at the local grocery stores for free samples whenever we had the munchies. I don’t know how we didn’t wind up in jail, or even dead, considering Karen’s propensity for cutting across six lanes of interstate traffic, joint in hand and music cranked up, to make a last-minute exit. It wouldn’t have mattered to me; I had never before felt so alive, or so completely unafraid of death.

I counted down those disappearing days with silent resignation, aware it was all just a brief diversion from the uncomfortableness of my “real” life. I knew that someone like Karen would never have been friends with someone as geeky and unfashionable as me if we hadn’t been related. Society would never have allowed it; she was beautiful and popular, and I was not.

By the time I entered high school as a freshman that fall, I had metamorphosed from the prior year’s nerd, whose biggest crime was ditching gym, to a rebel with a sense of self for the first time in my life, although still not beautiful nor popular. I found I could fit in with the parking-lot smokers in their concert-Tees by wearing ripped jeans and black T-shirts and proclaiming my love of Metallica. My mom found the thrift-store look cheap enough to support and didn’t care when my eye liner got darker and wider. I was goth before “Goth” had a name.

Happy to still live in the same school district for a second year, I rode the bus home to an empty house and spent my afternoons talking on the phone with Carrie, who had begun to wear makeup that year. Carrie's stepdad didn't let her give out their number or tie up the phone line when he was there, but he worked until five and we talked until then. The black-and-white TV with rabbit ears did little to distract me from my solitude after we hung up.

One weekend I asked my mother for music. She purchased a single cassette of my choice. Carrie gave me two additional tapes from her own hard-earned collection, and I borrowed my mother's boombox to play them on. Accordingly, my evenings were full of homework, phone gossip, and hair bands, over and over and over again. Poison, Skid Row and Guns N' Roses would have prompted noise complaints from the neighbors, had there been any neighbors close enough to hear.

My mother briefly worked the best job she'd had in years: evening shift at KFC. She got health insurance and any leftovers that were sitting under the fluorescent lights at closing. I ate biscuits for breakfast and cold fried chicken for dinner almost every day, and I loved it. Boredom abounded, but it could have been worse; my mother could have been there too, obsessively scrubbing the floors of our rented country house that had no furniture except two beds on the floor.

My mother often imagined I had wronged her in some way, but rarely deigned it necessary to tell me how, probably because of my sullen attitude and insistence that her reasoning was both trivial and ludicrous. I wanted to be my own person, to hang out in the movie theater parking lot with my friends. She wanted me to snap glamour shots of her for the pervert at the realty company who promised her a job with better hours and pay "as soon as a position opened up."

She begged me to call her "Mama," a southern term of endearment that she also considered a sign of respect. I countered that it was childishly beneath my fifteen years and insisted on "Mom." I begged her to act "normal" and quit embarrassing me by

dating all the cops in town. She countered that she didn't take advice from bratty teenagers and also needed a life of her own. Our uncomfortable conversations ended with my mother pretending I had ceased to exist.

When she changed jobs once again, her shifts at the convenience store brought her home less often than the fast food restaurant had. She considered it a perk of the job; it was easier to avoid me that way. She could go weeks on end without a single word uttered in my direction, and I learned to take advantage of her silence. If my requests to leave the house with anyone willing to drive the long, country-mile to pick me up were ignored, I considered it a "yes" and went regardless.

During one of these numerous weeks of silence, as the school day was coming to an end, an office messenger let me know that my mom would be picking me up. I rolled my eyes in response. When the bell rang, I gathered my belongings and went out to my mother's waiting car. She didn't speak. I didn't speak.

Pedestrians, unaware of my mother's lack of spatial awareness behind the wheel, barely escaped with their lives as she pulled out of the parking lot and sped through the school zone. No matter; she knew the police intimately. We took the long way through town in the opposite direction of our humble abode and halted jerkily at every traffic light that had the nerve to change unexpectedly in her path. I breathed a sigh of relief when we finally turned southbound onto the stoplight-free interstate. My mother's nerves also calmed and, as she turned the radio on to celebrate our safety, Dr. Dobson's voice filled the air. Mom listened to Christian broadcasting exclusively, and we'd heard this particular prerecorded program a dozen times before.

The words bounced around my head on repeat as we continued past the Montgomery exits, much to my dismay. The only reason to go further would be to visit my grandparents, who lived in so rural a destination that it made our own neck of the woods seem like a suburb. Directions to their residence included references to multiple barns and a single flashing light, and we'd never made the

hour-and-a-half trek on a school night before. Perhaps my mother had lost her job and was going to borrow money from her unsuspecting folks.

It was unfortunate that she hadn't let me go home and change clothes first, considering my typical school outfit was bound to make them uncomfortable. In addition to my normal ripped jeans and black T-shirt, I also wore a black suede jacket, matching boots, several layered, gold-plated necklaces and two pairs of long, dangling earrings in each ear after piercing a second hole in my ears myself with a safety pin. My mother had thoughtfully purchased the jacket from Wal-Mart as a birthday present and, when Christmas came along, she had gotten the black suede boots to complete the ensemble. Thanks to my somber attire, jet-black-from-a-bottle hair and sarcastic attitude, I was quite happy to have convinced a niche group of headbangers that I was one of them, but my grandparents didn't need to know that.

Focus on the Family had replaced *Family Talk* as we neared the exit to my grandparents. I sighed to myself. My grandfather's goats wouldn't care what I was wearing, and it would be nice to eat a meal that wasn't straight from the can, which was the way we typically ate now that there were no fast food leftovers. She drove past their exit. It was probable she'd missed it unintentionally and would take the next one.

But she didn't. And she still didn't speak as we continued south another thirty miles before exiting beside a Stuckey's into a nondescript town of azalea-covered, cookie-cutter homes. My mother searched her pockets while driving haphazardly with her knees until a red light suddenly objected. Stopped half a car length into the intersection, she dug out a paper scrap with scrawled directions and proceeded to make a U-turn despite a prohibitive sign. Ten minutes and several miles later we pulled into the crowded parking lot of one of the many megachurches that had ostentatiously sprung up, seemingly overnight, all along the Bible Belt.

The crowd made no sense on a Tuesday night until I spotted the banner announcing a "Teen Revival!" Oh joy. Just in case the

airwaves hadn't belabored the point that today's youth were all headed to hell in a handbasket, I was about to be treated to more preaching. The religious assembly would no doubt be more uncomfortable with my black eye makeup and matching nail polish than my grandparents would have been.

"No thanks. I'll wait in the car," is what I would have said if I had thought for one second there was any chance of getting away with it. But it wouldn't have worked. I'd done battle with Mom before, and she'd won every time. I surmised that my mother would have sent the entire congregation out to compel me in, all without a single word from her in my direction. So, as she exited the vehicle, I trudged along behind, hoping to keep my head down and avoid eye contact entirely.

As was par for the course, we were late. The octagon-shaped sanctuary was already filled to capacity around a pulpit situated directly in the center, stage-like. The second-floor balcony was packed full of adolescents, most of whom, I assumed, were lacking the means of transportation to take themselves anywhere else but there. Meanwhile the first floor was brimming with parents, grandparents, and church elders who had come out in support of teenage reform. There, on the main level amongst the diversity-deficient worshipers, I found myself uncomfortably awaiting judgement. Watchful eyes delivered it quickly as we crowded into an already full pew.

The preacher's opening prayer launched immediately into a denouncement of the music teenagers listened to "these days." It was the root of all evil. As proof of his theory he played tidbits of songs, all of which contained uncomfortable, thinly-veiled references to sex; because, as rock-and-rollers of every generation know, sex sells. My mother had never been a rock-and-roller, and it was at this point she threw her hands in the air and wailed. Mom had a natural ability to cry on cue; although, the outburst could have been from the uncomfortable realization that she had unwittingly purchased one of these albums for me herself.

Other sainted adults, so as not to leave my mother alone in

her discomfort, also threw their hands in the air with loud shouts of “Amen!,” “Hallelujah!,” and “Praise the Lord!,” while the preacher seized upon this opportunity to beseech the youth of the congregation to give up the devil’s music.

“Lay your burden down at the altar of Christ!” he called out.

Teenagers responded in droves, like the good sheep they were called to be, descending from the balcony to place tapes and CDs at the preacher’s feet so he could joyously stomp them to pieces. I was uncomfortable at the waste of good money, having only the three cassettes myself. I was also rather perplexed. For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why *anyone* would show up at church with Bon Jovi or Def Leppard in their pockets. The longer I pondered that detail, the more convinced I became that I was watching a rehearsed performance. Typical of my mother to drag me to a free show. Perhaps there would be dinner afterward; she loved a good potluck, uncomfortable as it was to show up empty-handed.

A snippet from Mötley Crüe’s “Shout at the Devil” stopped, and the energy in the room began to lag uncomfortably. The preacher wound down his own excitement with an alter call.

“Come to Jesus,” he pled. “Confess your sins and be saved.”

Feeling secure in my salvation, regardless of whether or not God approved of my musical choices, I remained seated in the pew with my head down. Conversely, fully half of the pews on the main floor emptied as their occupants crawled over each other to find space in the aisles in which to bemoan their disappointments with earthly life. My mother was among them, still not having looked or spoken a word to me for the entirety of the event.

From all directions, the adults who remained upright swooped in like vultures. They reached out to grab hold of my hands, wrap their arms around my shoulders and raise me from my seat, guiding my elbow towards my mother.

“Go to her,” they implored. “She’s crying. She needs you. She loves you.”

I rose to escape them and stepped out uncomfortably, trying to avoid the masses and forced to straddle some poor

woman's legs as I searched for a path back towards my mother. Mom's normally steely façade was twisted into mock despair, and I detected a smirk on her face as she finally looked up and caught my eye. It was now that the preacher saw an opportunity for glory, and wasn't about to miss out on the chance.

"You child," he sang out, "in the black!" as if there were any doubt as to whom he referred.

I turned uncomfortably to face him.

"Come forward and be healed!" he demanded.

I hesitated, weighing my odds of escape should I choose to make a run for it, but decided they weren't good considering I was already being pushed forward by the ever-so-helpful horde. I found myself, not of my own free will, at the foot of the pulpit with no direction to go other than up the three steps. The eagerly-waiting preacher sensed my obvious discomfort and called to a church elder to escort me the rest of the way.

"This young lady is possessed by a demon," the preacher declared. The congregation gasped; it seemed the show was going to be better than expected this evening.

"I want y'all to join me in praying for this poor creature's soul so that the Spirit of the Lord will enter her and reclaim her from Satan!" the preacher requested of his audience.

"Now, the deacon is going to stand behind her to catch her because, when the demon leaves her body, she'll faint!" It was a powerful claim to make. I was sure everyone would be disappointed when it didn't work out as promised.

"Lord, she is but your humble servant," the preacher began his prayer, "and she needs your help to be rid of this evil demon who has taken her over and caused her to stray from your ways..." The prayer rambled on, but I blocked out the rest as I prayed my own prayer that the rapture would come and remove me from this uncomfortable scene.

I was a painfully shy teenager who hated the spotlight. My dark wardrobe allowed me to be an extra alongside a cast of similarly-dressed characters. Usually. Today it had assigned me a

starring role in someone else's play.

Abruptly, the preacher's rhythmic plea ended and he lunged in my direction, bringing his face within inches of mine as he screamed, "DEMON, BE GONE!!!"

Shaken, I stumbled backwards to escape the spittle and hot breath. The deacon was prepared for this. He kept his feet firmly planted so that, as I tripped over them, I fell backwards into his waiting arms. A cheer rose up from the triumphant crowd, drenched in all their stained-glass glory and convinced that the demon had left my body as commanded.

Twenty minutes later I found myself holding butter cookies in one hand and a paper cup full of juice in the other, standing uncomfortably between the preacher and my mother in a long fellowship hall to the right of the sanctuary. There would be no dinner tonight.

The preacher leaned in closely and whispered, "You weren't actually possessed."

"I knew she wasn't," my mother offered in surprise defense of me.

Yet the two of them seemed determined to keep it their little secret as the conversation moved on to less uncomfortable topics.

"How about a free T-shirt?" the preacher offered.

He walked over to a folding table on the other side of the room where the church's youth group was selling T-shirts. They were fundraising for a mission trip to some third-world country that I bet had never seen an exorcism performed before.

The preacher spoke words I couldn't hear to a girl who looked my way in an effort to gauge my size. She dug through the pile and handed him a shirt. He handed it back to her with what must have been a request for any color other than black. She nodded and replaced the shirt in his outstretched hand with one in white.

Mom resumed her silence on the drive home, but extended the olive branch of gospel music rather than subject me to further radio sermons of fire-and-brimstone.

The next day I went to school wearing a brand new, white T-shirt proclaiming, “*All parties in hell have been cancelled due to fire.*” Thankfully my friends, in their dark apparel and matching countenance, were amused by the story of the white shirt, but only enough to hear it once as any more than that would have made them uncomfortable.



Interview With the Artist

Ethan Lee

Hi Ethan, thanks so much for sharing your work with us! I was hoping we could start off by hearing a bit about the pieces "Ishmael and Jason". In your submission you had mentioned that you wanted to capture the internal struggles that are common in day to day life and the struggles between maintaining individuality and fitting in. Was there something specific that sparked this project for you?

My art is very personal to me and my own outlook on life. There was no specific experience that sparked an idea-- it was more the fruition of a long-held idea I've grappled with. I think it's common for everyone, especially young people, to want to fit in. In my experience, that can lead to suppressing parts of ourselves that we don't think are socially acceptable. This has led me to identify strongly with that struggle. Trying to find a middle ground between authenticity and likeability is hard but it is ultimately a universal human experience, and I think that by drawing attention to it we can all relate a little more to each other.

Can you tell us about any of the other works that comprise this collection?

I have a third work that is a part of this collection, "Real Deal." It's much less structured than my other works. I sort of just went wild with that one, and ultimately, it's my least favorite addition. I think "Ishmael and Jason" are more authentic to myself and the message I was hoping to convey.

What artists if any served as inspiration during this project? What did you learn from them that you were able to take back to your work?



I'm always inspired by other artists and when it comes to learning from them, I don't want to replicate the techniques but the emotions that go into creating. Morteza Khakshoor is amazing. I admire his authenticity and I've tried to take that into my own art. Khakshoor inspires me because of the freedom he takes in his expression. No matter the medium or subject, all of his art is compelling because they all tell a story. That's something that I've tried to take back into my own work.

What is your creative process like?

My creative process is generally very lax and sporadic. I work when I find inspiration, generally drawing from a mix of personal experience, other art/artists I find fascinating, and my close friends and family. Since I want to remain true to myself and my art, I don't force myself to create, because I find that that can be stressful. Ultimately, I just have to give myself time and space and wait for the right inspiration.

Are you working on anything now or have any new projects on the horizon?

Yes! I'm currently working on a new collection, where I redraw old family photos and try to bring them a new life and meaning. I don't have a name for it yet, but I expect it to be very different from "Ishmael and Jason," since it's more of a sentimental project to me than an explorative one.

If you could paint anything and pull it out of your art what would it be and why?

If I could bring anything to life out of my art, I would really like to bring out someone from the past, like Cleopatra. I think it would be super interesting because even if it's more my interpretation of history, I love the idea of being able to communicate with someone across the boundaries of time and space.

Aiden Baker

Bristle Worms

He found a jar full of teeth in the backyard. His shovel had tinked on the glass and there it was, lodged in the earth. He pulled it from the wet dark soil and held it in his hands. Inside were what looked like ivory beads, all lumped together. Human teeth, yellowing. In his yard, of all yards. He'd just been digging up turnips, turning the soil, and *tink* there it was. How long had it been there? Buried between his root vegetables and rhododendrons? He stood awhile and examined it: long and thin and caked with dirt. He brushed the brown muck off on his jeans and held the glass up into the sun, determining. He put it to his eye. He shook the container. He listened.

Later, he brought some flowers inside, arranging them in a vase. He placed the vase in the foyer, sat the jar down beside it. The teeth sat quietly atop a crocheted table runner, tucked between the azaleas and a stack of junk mail.

In the kitchen he hummed, opening cans, slicing up carrots. He turned the gas stove on, heard it click-click click, and thought about teeth. Adult teeth, they looked like. He chopped and considered the mouth. The basic questions were why, when, how. Count Basie blared on the radio. Tickling ivories they called it. Right. About the jar: how long had it been there? Buried in the damp dark ground. Who would've? His mind oscillated between the teeth, the teeth and his father, both objects tumbling around in the pink flesh of his brain like tennis shoes in a drier.

His wife came in with a sigh and slouched out of her raincoat. It dropped to the floor with a plap. She did not see the teeth, sitting quiet. "What a day," she said. "What a day."

He served her a plate of vegetable curry and together they sat down to eat. He slurped from the spoon. She sighed heavily. "Long day," she said. "Nobody could find the right form."

He nodded, but he wasn't listening. He was busy, thinking of teeth.

That night, he dreamt of his father. Or, he was visited by a thing that looked like his father. He was lying in bed, and there was his father, standing, breathing, right there. "Dad?" he asked. It was him: tall and thin with wrinkled skin. Only now he was sporting a beard. "Why are you here?"

"I'm not your father," his father said.

"Oh."

"I am the ghost of King Leopold. I've come for your hands."

"Well," he said. "Here they are."

"No, no— I am King Ludwig II. You may come with me to Neuschwanstein."

"Thanks. But my passport expired."

"Let's have a picnic," his father said.

"Alright."

"Now I'm Charles the VI. Don't touch me! Don't touch me! I'll break."

"Dad," he said. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I am the ghost of your father. I've come to tell you the truth."

"Alright then. Okay. What's the truth?"

"I am Abdulhamid II. I've come to borrow a book."

"Dad," he said. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Tell me," his father said. "You must tell me what happens to Holmes."

"Goodnight," he said, turning over.

In the morning he woke to the smell of his wife's rubbing cream, a salve that was supposed to help with her cramps. She spread it over her belly. Lavender moved through the room.

"I think it's working," she said.

He said, "I'm glad."

As always, she was first to rise. She ripped herself from the

sheets and padded off to the bathroom. He could see in the mirror as she brushed her teeth, buttoned her blouse. Sprayed her wrist with a mist that smelled of orange peels, vanilla. "I love you," she said, and brought her wrist to her neck. Outside, birds charbled. He rubbed his ankles together beneath the sheets, stretching, spreading his toes. He remained there in bed while she left the room, and he listened to her heels heavy on the stairs; listened to the front door click closed; listened to the car's unlocking beep. He was still there, feeling his naked knees beneath the sheets, when the car engine roared away from the drive. Sunlight broke in through the shades. He kept his head on the pillow and wondered what the Haunting meant. What it could possibly mean. Why was his father coming to him? Why was it him, being Haunted?

For about a decade now The Dead had been popping up occasionally, unannounced, like polyps on the vocal nodes, bristle worms in the tank. Most were benign, some caused real harm— it could be difficult to predict. In the ten years since the first reported appearance, only a few things had been deduced. 1) the apparitions were invariably male, 2) spoke in a cryptic tongue, and 3) they liked to drink oil. We don't know where they came from, or why. A folie à deux, some psychologists say. Tech experts speculate: an invention that's escaped the lab, has terrible kinks, is sprouting all over the country like mechanical weeds. Watch out. The Dead could not be kept in one place for long; they could not be lured or caught. Their existence, it seemed, relied on a Host.

The day unfolded before him, impossibly flat. Ever since the University closed, his days had blended together. Bland and blank as parchment. Garden; cook; attempt to write. In the mornings he liked to sit at his desk. The routine was this: coffee, ground; cup, filled; the page, painfully blank. The blankness was making him sweat. He pulled at his hair. An hour or so of sitting, and then yes: that was enough. He stepped out to tend the flowers.

The Azaleas were in need of pruning. He snipped and sliced

at the browning, tore off the dessicated bits. Careful, he cut around all the pink. He filled the watering can, tilted its neck over the bed. The soil eagerly took in the water. He listened closely to the leaves, the stems. With nothing left to do, he knelt down in the grass and ran his fingers through the wet dirt. Hoping to find? Anything.

He ran over the details in his head, again and again. The body of Lily Jean Baker, found in a field. He thought about the boys who found her; the strangulation patterns on her neck; the contents of her stomach; the blow flies that entered the body. He had spent hours looking at photos of her, the famous murdered girl. Hours, too, looking at blowflies, their armored bodies, fragile wings. The story, he knew, would make a great book. He just didn't know where to begin.

By the time his wife came home, he hadn't written a word. "I'm starving," she said, and shrugged out of her coat. He prepared her dish and asked after her day. "Oh," she said. "The usual stuff. Bill breathing down my neck." They ate leftovers quietly, in front of the TV.

He fell asleep that night terrified. Worried, perhaps, that he wouldn't come.

But again, that night, his father appeared. Creaking awkwardly at the side of his bed. Tonight his father stroked his new beard, sucked in his teeth. He stood there and looked at his son, who propped himself up on a pillow.

"Have I ever told you about the onion," his father began. "The one about the onion."

"You haven't."

"Consider this: a woman, bathing in hell. Burning in a fiery pool. But! God offered her an onion. A big onion, a leek, with a long hairy stem. And she held onto the onion, and was saved. Angels pulled the other end, pulled her out of hell."

"That's Dostoevsky," he said. "And that's not how it ends."

"It only takes an onion."

"What are you trying to tell me?" he asked.

"I'm trying to tell you the truth."

“How’s the book?” asked his wife in the morning. “I haven’t heard much about it.”

“Oh,” he said. “It’s coming along.”

Steam rose off his cup. He cracked his knuckles, began to begin.

But he couldn’t get started yet. He left to wash his hands. On his way to the sink, he passed through the foyer. There was the jar, propping the mail. He picked it up again, looking close. Trying to figure a year. They were big teeth inside. Pale, brown, yellow. Remains of a sticker clung to the glass, an advertisement. For pickles, maybe. Or olives. He began to imagine the mouth that was missing these teeth. What horrible gums. Bloody pink holes.

Unable to write, he began in on dinner, snapping asparagus stems, rinsing chickpeas. Thinking of teeth. He thought of his father too, of the Haunting. He shamefully took pleasure in the visits. How lucky he was that they were so quiet, late into the night, with his wife sleeping beside him. Not out in the open, in public, where people could see. Thank the lord: it was private. He tossed the chickpeas in an assortment of spice, slid them into the oven. It was good to see his father, however mechanical or false. It— in ways— felt rather cathartic. He was desperate, he knew, for direction.

He was curious how long he could keep this away from his wife. People didn’t take too kindly to Hauntings. He’d heard stories. A math teacher who’d been Haunted by her great great grand uncle. He appeared in the halls of the high school, reeking of trout, shouting incomprehensible things. At first, the school board was sympathetic. It’s so strange, and rare, and who wouldn’t want to see their loved ones resurface? But this...is unprecedented. All those smells. The jabbering nonsense. The math teacher was sorry to be let go. It wasn’t her fault, per se, the vice principle explained. It’s just, the dead can be rather disruptive.

That night, he lay with his wrist on his forehead, trying to

think. He would come up with a plan. He would ask his father to point him in a direction. Any direction. He waited for it, for him to appear. Tracing patterns in his popcorn ceiling. Beside him, his wife had her back turned. Breathing heavily.

“I have a question for you,” he said, when his father appeared.

“Every day is lost,” was his father’s reply.

“I just don’t know where to begin.”

His father began slowly, awkwardly to dance.

“I’m afraid I’ve fallen ill,” his father said. “A bit of Vitus plague.”

“Can you give me some idea? Of where I should start?”

His father waggled his arms, shook his hips. Tapped his toes to the ground.

“Psychogenic,” his father said. “Psychogenesis.”

“You’re not helping me at all.”

“Come with me,” his father said, rolling his shoulders and hips, flicking his wrists. “Get up and dance with me, son.”

“Bah,” he said, and waved him away.

He was okay with being Haunted in a general sense. He was sure that in some intimately important, significant way, he could derive meaning from the bunk.

Later that night, he dreamt of his wife. Her vagina a large drooping orchid. The smell of rotting meat. *Bulbophyllum phalaenopsis*. Behind his wife were dripping vines. A horrifying green. He woke with a start, and ran to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

The coffee grinder gave him a headache. He was determined to get a start on his book. How to begin a book about worms. Larvae, for the average reader, doesn’t have much appeal. He didn’t know where to begin. He’d have to ask his father for guidance.

But the fourth night his father appeared, he wouldn’t speak English.

“Smrdět,” his father said. And, “Kdo hledá, najde.”

“What?”

“Kdo se moc ptá, moc se dozví.”

“Father,” he said. “English, please.”

But his father disappeared.

His wife ran out of rubbing cream. She said, “It feels like a little burning hell. Inside my uterus.” He said, “I’m sorry.” He walked to the store and retrieved another container. White viscous swirls disappeared in her skin.

At nights before they fell asleep, his wife would curl on her side and clutch her cellular phone, her face illuminated by the glow. She typed quickly with her thumbs, protecting the screen, hiding, covering. He didn’t feel inclined to ask who was on the receiving end. He didn’t want to know. But he did suspect something. In the mornings especially, when his head was on the pillow and he heard the front door click closed and he knew she was gone for the day, for the entirety of the day. But who knew. He just suspected. He didn’t see himself with horns, but who knew. She’d leave the house smelling of oranges and return smelling of daisies, of dirt.

He was prepared to ask his father, but the apparition was absent for days. When he finally appeared again and the question was asked, the only thing his father said was, “Gertrude? A rat?” The two words, over and over again. Gertrude, a rat. Gertrude! A rat? Endlessly those words: gertrude, a rat.

When his wife walked in the next day smelling of daisies, he served her the soup and shut himself up in the bath. The soap rose up like milk froth. His penis floated, languid flower.

A new Haunting on the news, a man visited again and again by his granddad. The old man wore rubber boots and communicated only through limerick. He’d follow his grandson around the town, dragging a dead deer carcass, speaking in rhythm and rhyme. It got so bad that the man had to move. Again and again. But his grandfather followed, dragging the carcass, shouting unbearable

rhymes.

Stigma blooms easily, with something like this. People tend to blame the Hosts, as if they asked for this. As if they have some moral defect, the Dead their punishment. Anti-Haunters gather on street corners with painted signs, preaching, spitting on Hosts. Others are more polite with their disdain. It's just unseemly is all. The smells. The cryptic speech. We don't know where they come from.

Hauntings appeared on the nightly news: like a lost dog, a car crash, a mugging. Things vague and distant; things that wouldn't, necessarily, happen to you— but they happened all the time. He knew he shouldn't, but he enjoyed it. The occasional apparition. They were fine in the dark, with his wife sleeping beside him. They were a private thing.

What he didn't approve of was a daytime appearance. A Saturday morning appearance. He didn't approve of being out on an intimate walk through the park with his wife and having his dead father appear, sporting a boater hat and blue glasses, whistling conspicuously beneath the shade of a plum tree.

“Pssst,” his father said, when he passed the tree.

He kept walking fast along the path and ignored his father completely.

“Psssssst,” said his father again. When his wife took notice, his father began looking around, whistling, attempting to look nonchalant. She pointed. “Doesn't he look like your dad?”

“No,” he said. “With a beard like that? Could you imagine?”

He pulled his wife along. It was a narrow miss. He kept looking over his shoulder just to make sure his father remained fixed there beneath the tree.

He didn't approve of his father appearing just anywhere. Not in public places. He definitely did not approve of his father appearing in the supermarket cereal aisle. He stood on his toes, reaching for the chocolate granola, and jolted when he heard his father's voice.

“I've told you about the great Czech general Žižka.”

There was his father. Donning a canary yellow tracksuit, a

panama hat. “We need to talk about boundaries,” he said. He put the cereal into his cart, pushed the cart away, ignored him. Clearly embarrassed to be seen with The Dead. But that did not deter his father the least. The apparition pursued his son through the store. People began giving looks. The dead father carried on, undeterred. “Led an army of rascals and rebels. Not a single battle lost. An artist with it, really.”

“That’s great,” said the son, and began to unload his cart at the check out. Above them, throughout the store, generic organ music played.

“What got him in the end? The plague.” His father laughed. “The plague!”

“Okay,” he said. He handed the cashier his debit card. The pimply cashier glanced at his father with a look of distaste. He pretended not to notice. His father followed him past the checkout and into the lot. “They turned his skin into a drum. After he died. His dying request was for them to stretch the skin of his back and turn it into a drum. A rum pa-pa-pum.”

When he was finished loading the groceries, he slammed the trunk shut. He thought the sound might be dramatic, but it was a rather pathetic little click. “You know,” he told his father. “This is all a little too much for me.”

“Imagine that drum! The sound!” his father yelled. “The power!”

He put his car into reverse and drove away, leaving his father in the lot.

They were eating dinner when the doorbell rang. He rose from the table, wiping his face, and swung open the door.

“Sing me a song of castration!” his father bellowed, entering.

“Who is it?” his wife called from the kitchen. “Who’s there?”

Here, he was caught. “What the hell,” he said under his breath.

“Budulinek,” his father chided, clicking his tongue. “You

opened the door.”

They stood awkwardly in the foyer. His wife, hearing the voice, popped her head around the corner. When she saw the dead father, she was delighted. “Oh, you! I thought I saw you there in the park. Come in, come in. Would you like any oil?” She had heard on the news how the dead liked to drink oil.

“A stuffed envelope,” his father said, patting his belly.

“How long have you been Haunting?” she asked. “Come in! Come sit.”

His father entered the dining room and took a seat at the table. He was dressed in a green leisure suit, a royal blue tie. He placed both forearms onto the table and leaned forward, as if he were about to whisper something coherent. “I don’t know why you’re trying to speak with him as if he’ll understand you,” he said to his wife. “You know how they are.”

“Come on,” his wife said. “It’s uncanny! And I *don’t* know how they are, I’ve never actually seen one in the flesh. Or the whatever they’re made of. What are they made of?”

The father leaned on his elbows and balanced his chin in his palms like a child. He made popping sounds with his mouth.

“See what I mean? Can you imagine my father, wearing this? Acting like,” he gestured to the old mechanical man.

“How long has he been appearing? Were you going to say anything to me?”

The father’s eyes were wide open, doe-like, as he listened to his flesh-alive son argue with his flesh-alive daughter-in-law. His chin still rested on his palms; he tapped his fingers to his cheek in full performative wonder.

“What has he been saying?” asked the wife.

“He’s only appeared once or twice,” the son conceded. “Speaking nonsense, you know.”

“They say it’s nonsense, but I don’t know— it always sounds cultured, at least, what they’re trying to say.”

As if on cue, his father began. “The word *culture* is senile. And it makes us sick.”

“Fantastic,” said his wife.

His father went on. “Human art has been with us for too long.” He was quite serious, waving his hands, as if he were talking politics at a posh dinner party or speaking on some specialized panel. “And it’s so worn-out and so for the newts, we will make a new art.” Here, he raised his arms, pumped his fists. “We, the young, will blaze the path for a new world! A world of salamandrism!”

“Okay,” the wife said to the son. “I see what you mean.”

“We wish to be the first newts, we are the salamanders of tomorrow.”

“It’s like they say,” the son said. “Just nonsense.”

The father creaked and continued. “Inspired by the shape world of jellyfish, fish and corals: the new art makes its appearance!”

“Does he smell?” the wife asked the son. “I’ve heard that they smell.”

“Curious,” said the husband. There was no smell.

“Hold on,” said the wife. She was getting a call. She went to take it in the yard.

“A game of craps?” asked the father.

He’d heard about a man— everyone had— that had been Haunted by his father, a very serious man. The Host was tortured and bullied, taunted, harassed, until one day he finally got fed up and in a fit of frustration, killed his own wife. Slit her throat open with a small paring knife. The way they told it, her neck fell back, releasing a gash that spat and sputtered.

He went to get water in the night, and there was his father on the couch, making popping sounds with his mouth.

“Dad,” he asked. “Why are you here?”

“You want to ride on my tail.”

“No, see, the riddles. They aren’t cute. I’m tired of— You know what you mean. Speak plainly to me.”

“It seems the leaves that were supposed to make you yourself have made you into a goat.”

“Dad— ”

“Son!”

“Please, stop coming to me. I don’t know what you want, I don’t care. Please stop appearing.”

“Budelink,” his father said from the side of his mouth, teasing. “You shouldn’t have opened the door!”

He had never been a violent man. But he saw how the Hauntings could push you that way: the pressing fatherly presence, the constant nonsense. Invasive. Belittling. And he was not a violent man. But he did one day, once, after weeks of these fatuous visits, approach his wife with pruning shears. He did imagine snapping them around her throat, pictured how her head would roll around on the floor, how her eyes would roll around in her head. In his vision, there was no blood. A clean and simple break.

It became difficult for him to sleep. He sat in bed red-eyed and waited for his father to come; Haunted still on nights when there was no apparition. He could feel the lack of sleep impacting his body; he could feel his blood vessels shaking, erratic cars racing through the highway of his bloodstream. There was a constant pulse in him, becoming urgent.

He began to brainstorm ways to rid himself of the father. He searched the internet for solutions, step-by-step tutorials on how to rid yourself of The Dead. Circle your house with lime salt. Spit on their grave. Carve a hole into a nearby tree and stuff it with iron and lead. None of the methods were proven to be totally effective. Still, he circled the house with a small ring of lime salt. He took down any hanging photos of the flesh-man. He prayed to be left alone.

One night while they were eating dinner, his wife’s cell phone rang. She left him at the kitchen table eating his rice and she went outside for the call. He couldn’t hear what she said but could see her through the kitchen window, pacing back and forth by the Azalea bush. He watched her while he ate his rice, and he thought about worms, their cocoons, not much larger than the white grain he

ate. He thought about their hatching, their all-gendered slime. He thought too about the corpse of the beautiful girl. It was time to get a start on the book. He chewed and watched his wife, pacing in the yard.

After enough time had passed, he rose from the table. He left the dishes and went to his desk and began to write.

In his heart, it was a book about worms. That true crime bit was a ruse, how it was pitched. The murder of Lily Jean Baker. Flashy, bright. The market responded favorably to stories of dead girls. But that wasn't really his thing. What interested him wasn't the murder per se but the entomology: a homicide solved by the humble work of worms. *That* was the story. He was having trouble, though, figuring where, exactly, to start. How to be fair and respectful to all parties involved: the girl, the worms, the detectives, the culprit. Most of all, he wanted to privilege science, to show its power, what it was capable of.

He had just finished drafting the first chapter, the gnarly spectacle of the girl's body, the white larvae boring in, when his father appeared in the room.

"Young man," he said. "We need to talk."

"Not now."

"You're having sex with swan spawn. That's dangerous business."

"I'm trying to work."

"She's sly, Clytemnestra."

"Please." He began looking, searching for headphones.

"The word clit comes from Clytemnestra."

"No it doesn't."

"I know things, you know," his father said. "The serpent that stung your father's life is slithering about."

"Ok."

"Agememnon, they're going to kill you." His father's voice was grave, expression stern. He wore a polka-dot suit and a wide-brimmed straw hat. "They're going to kill you."

He tried to continue on with the chapter, tried to finish a sentence,

but no, the words were lost. He rose from the desk and slumped off to the kitchen to grab a good drink, ignoring the father.

He lay under the sheets whiskey-breathed, trying to sleep, while his wife tried on outfits: dresses, blouses, slacks. “The meeting with Takahashi’s tomorrow,” she said. “I’m shit-myself level nervous.” She looked over her shoulder into the mirror. Let her thin hair out of its pony-tail so that it trailed liquid copper down her back.

“You look really good,” he told her. She did. She layed out her outfit, her shoes. Braided her hair. Crawled into bed, turned her back. And within five minutes, she was asleep. He, however, could not fall asleep, despite all his trying. He thought of his father’s warning, of what it could mean. The tone was clear. He was in danger. So maybe he knows things. Maybe— maybe— betrayal’s afoot.

His wife snored. Moonlight came in through the windows, striking her neck just so. He thought of what it would be like to saw through the flesh, to see the blood oozing out, bright like strawberry jelly. Like slicing into a donut. He could picture it, the color, glistening beetroot on his fingertips. Pooling syrupy on the sheets.

Right. He had to rid himself of the Haunting. These thoughts were not his thoughts, he thought. They were being thrust upon him.

The roads were empty as he drove, a late-night radio host talking to him in deep, gravely tones. He drove quickly, eager to get this all over and done with. It wasn’t that he wanted to rid himself of his father, exactly; he just didn’t want these feelings to build, these urges to grow. He did not want to act on a whim. Didn’t want to wake up one morning with his wife’s severed head. Blow flies in the house. There had been enough reports of husbands, influenced by apparitions, incarcerated for life. He could not picture himself in jail. It just wasn’t for him. Sure, he could write, uninterrupted. He’d be like a monk. Ascetic. Humble. But there would be no gardening. No time in the kitchen. No, prison wasn’t for him.

The streets were poorly lit by lamps as he drove. No cars out tonight. He was able to pull the car into a nondescript roadside and park it beneath a birch tree. He thrust himself awkwardly over the short metal fence and tumbled into the grass, stumbling around in the semi-dark, tripping over tombstones, looking for the right building. The moon was fat that night, casting the cemetery in its moldy milk glow. It took a while, a lot of jiggling, fumbling, finangling, but there he was, and there it was: his father's urn. His thoughts were red and raging. He broke the glass with his elbow, retrieved the ceramic blue thing. As he walked away, shards of glass crunched beneath his boot. He thought he heard a dog in the distance. But he could not feel bad. He could not, in that moment, care: so desperate to rid himself of The Dead.

He tossed the urn, a pale blue vessel with cheap gold trim, into the back of his car, and he shot away in the night, speeding towards Widow's Bridge. The bridge was old and rusted and loomed over the river, secluded and covered by lanky pine trees. He emerged from the car, the urn cradled beneath his armpit, and stalked off towards the ledge. Water roared below, black and daring. He held the urn in his hands and forced the thoughts out: the thoughts of the funeral, memories of his flesh-alive father, the film reel of family dinners and dusty road trips and the image of his father, sick, in that big red chair, the IV drip, the shriveled veins, his father's rasping voice...he ignored all those thoughts and thought only of ridding himself of the ghost. Hauntings couldn't go on forever. Eventually, something would happen. And he'd do what he could to prevent it.

With a breath, he heaved the urn over the ledge. There was a great splash. Now, at least, his father could return to the ocean. Now, at least, the visits would end. He tried to make out the vessel in the black nightwater, but it was lost to him. He took another breath, the cold air rushing in, and he felt a prick in the pit of his stomach: grief. The prick, like nails or needles, pushed through his skin from inside out, reaching his heart, his throat, his eyes. And then— there was the laughing. His father, behind him, patting his shoulder.

“You see this?” His father laughed a bellowing laugh. “Fangs of the serpent. Thrust!”

They stood together on the bridge with the black river beneath them, the jovial father and his young cuckold son, men above the night water.

Ryan Masters

You Got It Made. No Sweat.

The bed vibrates me awake. Bruce masturbates in the bottom bunk. I jiggle helplessly in the dark, a decoration atop his quivering, gelatin lust. Speaking would feel like participation, so I remain silent. When he finishes, Bruce whimpers with pleasure, possibly some sadness too, before returning to loud, apneic slumber. Dawn is an hour away, according to my phone. No use trying to sleep.

I am contractually obligated to remain in this house until the sun rises. I must also submit to periodic piss tests by House Boss, provide proof I have attended at least seven twelve-step meetings per week, and vigorously clean the bathrooms on Tuesdays and Sundays. Not exactly winning, especially for a 41-year-old man, but a sight prettier than the wheezing hog of a life I rode into rehab three months ago.

When dawn tinges the window, I swing my legs off the bed and step on to the bunk's narrow ladder. I'm a big man. Six foot, 240-pounds. The frame of the structure sways precariously as I descend. Bruce moans, trapped in the sticky horrors of his subconscious. I slip from the room full of sleeping men, quietly close the door behind me. The new kid is still awake. He sits cross-legged on the couch and exhales a huge cloud of vapor at the TV screen. That's not allowed, but House Boss won't be up for another hour. I fix my coffee and prepare for work.

Yellow police tape flutters in the breeze along the west bank of the San Lorenzo River. Uniformed cops guard the perimeter of the crime scene, staring into the distance with angry, flatulent expressions while detectives huddle around the corpse. The Santa Cruz County coroner's unmarked white van is parked nearby. A wildfire has been burning in the mountains for the better part of a month, bathing the crime scene in infernal light. The river flows like pancake syrup through downtown Santa Cruz. It's September now.

No rain since December. The world is coated in grime. SCPD investigators have erected a three-foot-high screen of black fabric and white PVC pipe in the shadow of Water Street Bridge. It conceals the corpse from view while they attempt to determine the how and why of its presence. Swallows dart out from under the concrete deck of the bridge, return to wattle-and-daub nests with bits of grass, twigs, and hair held determinedly in their thorny beaks.

Frank Curatolo rolls up beside me on the levee path, a kayak full of rotting stuffed animals hitched behind his miscreation of a bike. His shaved head glows like an LED bulb in the morning sun. Eyes vibrate as if plugged in. Minute beads of blood glisten along his recently shaved eyebrows. Bang meth long enough, it turns you to waxed fruit. The bow of the plastic kayak, once pumpkin orange, now a dingy ochre, is lashed to Curatolo's rear bike rack with bungee cords. Its stern is propped in a bicycle trailer, the kind used to haul children around. Perched atop the plush toys rests Beelzebub, Curatolo's mangy chihuahua mix.

"The river's sick. Like an ape in captivity," says Curatolo. "They trapped the river's spirit."

"Morning, Frank."

"Apes locked up their whole lives go murderous. They cultivate bad energy. Like Manson. This river."

"Who's dead over there?"

"Haven't seen you around. How long you got now? A month? Bee, don't you pick at that, leave that alone." The chihuahua has been noisily feasting on itself for some time now.

"Three."

"How many times you had three months?"

"Too many to count."

"That's right," says Curatolo. "So what's the point? Guys like us? At our age? We don't get it. We're...what's it say in that fucking book?"

"Constitutionally incapable."

"That's it," he says, snapping his bike brakes like castanets. "Constitutionally incapable. We should have that shit tattooed on our

faces.”

“Pass.”

A coroner snaps photos of the body, the flash illuminates the recesses of the Water Street Bridge, startling a handful of swallows out into the sun. They dart upriver, just inches from the water’s surface like flashes of light.

“Who’s that on the levee?”

“Just another dead ape,” responds Curatolo.

“Do I know him?”

“You did.”

“Is there a story?”

“Not one you haven’t heard before.”

Before I can ask another question, a cop saunters up the levee path from the crime scene. Curatolo springs into action, performing an ungainly six-point turn to redirect his vessel back the way he’s come. His bike is made of eighteen separately stolen parts at least. Beezlebub growls at the cop, clinging expertly to her throne of garbage. As the cop reaches them, Curatolo strains against the bicycle’s pedals. After a few painfully awkward seconds, he slowly makes his getaway. The cop watches him go.

“Friend of yours?”

“No.”

I pull a notebook and pen from the breast pocket of my wrinkled blue dress shirt.

“Can you confirm a few things for me, officer? Single victim, gunshot wound, deceased. Correct?”

“We’ll have a press release available later today,” the cop says.

“Male or female?”

“Press release available later today.”

“Gang-related? Drugs? Mental illness?”

“Press release available later today.”

“Suspect in custody?”

“You have a nice day,” he says, returning to his grim detail. A swallow hovers over the bank of the levee. The bird lights on the

ground. It picks at something in the overgrown reeds and grass. I lean over the police tape for a closer look. Pieces of eggshell like dirty, broken porcelain. I crouch and poke one with the tip of my pen. It's impossible to tell if something has been born from this egg or devoured within it.

"Can you see them in the shadow of the bridge?" asks Aaron Ramos, unwinding a cord from his KPQM Channel 1 mic.

The cameraman powers up the camera, hefts it to his shoulder, eyes the viewfinder. After a few moments setting the shot, the cameraman gives Ramos a thumbs up. "That'll work. Live in less than a minute," he says.

"He tell you anything?" Ramos asks, patting his hair with a palm.

"Press release this afternoon."

"Mark my words, won't be long before the cops report the news. Most people would never know the difference," Ramos says. "Am I right?"

"You're right."

"Ok."

"5, 4, 3, 2 and..." the cameraman counts.

As I walk away, Ramos snaps to attention, places a hand on his earpiece and brings the microphone to his mouth.

I give Bruce a two-hour headstart to bed. By midnight, it's just me and the new kid, who hasn't moved in a solid twenty-four now. We each have our own sofas in front of the television. Onscreen, salacious true crime. bad actors in gruesome murders of passion and insanity. When the detectives crack the case, the kid blows another vast cloud of vapor in approval. House Boss takes his trazodone at eleven. He'll never know.

"How much time you have now?" I ask him.

"Thirty days today."

"Hell, kid, you got it made. No sweat."

Zach Murphy

The Garden

The wildflowers wilt over their own feet as I trudge through the dusty, jaded soil. One of my legs is broken. My mouth is parched. And my stripes burn.

I wonder if the workers before me dealt with this kind of heat. I wonder if the workers after me will suffer even more. I wonder if there will even be workers after me.

The honey isn't so sweet here anymore. The dream has melted away. This planet is no longer my garden.

As I use my last shred of will to drive my stinger into the wrinkled ground, I pray that my final moments will be graced with a cool breeze.

Ants in the Rain

It took Lisa a long time to get to the point. While she rambled her way towards it, I chomped on my cuticles and hoped she would shut up soon. I had to pee. It's funny too, because I never answer calls from unsaved numbers, let alone return them. But that day, funny, like I said, I noticed the little red '1' icon indicating a missed call on my phone while I was closing up the arrangement refrigerators and I clicked it. For a single second, my thumb had a will of its own. This was another in a short chain of recent events I considered to be suspicious and unusual and I took note of it. For example, the night before, I'd woken up to see a woman in a blue and white robe in the corner of my room. It turned out to just be a pile of clothing that I'd tossed onto the chair, but it felt significant at the time. I thought maybe it was Mary the Virgin coming to visit me again like she used to when I was little, but I don't know. I'm not superstitious.

I didn't have to wait long for Lisa to pick up when I returned the call. Her voice was sharp and suspicious, demanding to know who was calling her. I don't like being spoken to sharply, especially when I'm doing someone a favor like returning their phone call.

"Rita Lake," I snapped, "and *you* called me."

I watched a fat fly bump its head against the glass door of the arrangement refrigerator. I hadn't even noticed it earlier. It would probably freeze to death in there.

"Oh. That's right." The woman said, grudging apology in her voice, "that's right, I did call you, sorry. It's Lisa. Ross."

Obviously it was unexpected.

The last time that I had seen her, Lisa had come knocking on my door to hand me a pamphlet about some new religion she'd just joined. I flicked through it, the pages were filled with people smiling into the sunshine and carrying wicker baskets of corn and tomatoes around. It turned out to be an offshoot of Mormonism with some new age, agrarian mysticism thrown in. *Celebrate as we Wait for the*

Harvest was the last line in the brochure along with a phone number and address located somewhere near the Coralville strip mall. *No fucking thank you*, I thought and almost said. Lisa told me I'd lost weight, but she hadn't answered any of my questions about her daughter, Lo which made the conversation more or less useless to me. In the end, I'd shut the door in her face.

"How've you been?" I asked Lisa over the phone, and without waiting for a response, "Hey, how did you get my number?"

"I've been doing ok, listen, Rita, something's come--"

"—I just don't remember ever giving my number to you that's all. I don't have yours, and It's not like I'm in a phone book," I twirled a pencil in my fingers, it was one I'd had made specifically for the flower shop and had '*Solon Seeds Greenhouse and Garden Supply*' printed on it in curly pink letters.

"It's about Gloria."

I took a loud slurp from my soda that sat beside the register. It had gone flat a while ago.

"Look, I've been up all night long calling a lot of Gloria's friends, and some family, because I want them to get the information from me, not someone else, that's the only reason. But listen, long story short there was some kind of accident."

Car accident. They probably had to scrape Lo off the pavement with a spatula or something. The truth of the matter however, was that it wasn't really an accident at all. Or at least not in the way that anybody besides Lisa thinks of one.

Lo had killed someone. That was all. Fatally concussed her ex boyfriend in his Dallas apartment about two and a half months earlier, hitting him over the head with an unopened bottle of *Veuve Clicquot*. Her dead lover, Martin Tovar had a soft spot in his cranium from a childhood injury that she didn't know about. Maybe that would help her wriggle out of the capital punishment practice in Texas, maybe not. What do I know? I'm not a lawyer.

Later that night, I combed through the internet for any news pieces relating to Gloria, but came across only one. The article was in the archives of a low budget local news page headlined '*Lawyer*

slain by ex-girlfriend.’ There was a mugshot included with the article and there she was, Gloria Ross, age thirty-one, looking pretty much how she’d always looked. Forever stuck between ugly and beautiful, thin-lipped and angry. Lo had more freckles than she’d had when I knew her, but there was still the little hoop hanging from her eyebrow that she’d gotten when we were sixteen. I didn’t finish reading the article past the essential details of what had happened. I wasn’t surprised.

“It’s not my fault, Rita. You know that right?” Lisa had asked me before our conversation ended.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“It isn’t my fault,” Lisa said again.

I didn’t know how to respond, and in the end, Lisa just hung up on me after I took too long to answer. For the better anyway, because I was thinking that maybe it kind of was Lisa’s fault somehow. Not directly, obviously, but it felt like she had a hand in it somewhere down the line.

Maybe I should have thought of something comforting to say to Lisa though, because that night, I had a dream about The Virgin Mary. She was sitting in the chair where I always tossed my clothing, probably wrinkling a few of my favorite shirts in the process. Her legs were bunched up to her chest and she had her muscular, brownish hands clasped over her shins. Just as she had in my childhood, The Virgin didn’t say anything, but she was giving me this pursed-lip, raised-brow look like she thought I could have dealt with the situation better.

“Cut it out,” I said to her, and woke myself up.

I had begun to see The Virgin Mary a little while after meeting Lo for the first time. The Virgin would come to me, very early in the morning or late at night when I hovered between sleep and consciousness. She’d have her hands in the pockets of her robes, and just lean on the windowsill humming a Beatles song I can’t remember and picking at her cuticles. I liked her because she looked

like a child, maybe thirteen and just a little ugly with a mole in the middle of her cheek and frizzy, brittle-looking black hair that would poke out from underneath the white hood she wore. I think it is a testament to my dedication to historical accuracy that she was tiny, perhaps four and a half feet tall.

The Virgin's visits, I believe, were spurred by a painting I had seen on a school trip to the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art. Our class had been trudging through the art galleries for hours. Lo and I were bored, or Lo was bored and I pretended to be. Lo had just been moved up two grades into my class and I'd turned my jealousy of her into admiration. Just as our class was about to leave, I saw the painting.

Near the gift shop was a display of Renaissance prints. I didn't know that they were just cheap posters for sale and not genuine pieces of artwork, but one stood out to me. Lo was holding my hand but I let it go, walked closer to one of the pictures. A grumpy looking girl with a book in her one hand and her other reaching out, like she was telling us all; *shut up, leave me alone, can't you see I'm in the middle of reading?*

I wanted to reach out to that hand and feel it, or kiss it. Our teacher had to come and snatch me away from the painting by the forearm before we missed the bus. Much later, I found the painting again, this time on the internet. It's called the Virgin Annunciate, by some unfamous, unremembered sixteenth century Italian artist. Donatello, Antonello, Martonello something like that. His work doesn't really do much for me anymore.

I started with the boxes on the first floor when I got home. I'd grown up in the house surrounded by the stacks of newspapers and belongings and had developed a geography through the maze. Baby clothes, photos and unfinished projects, cat food, fish tanks, my father's bibles and books on theology, I knew my way around all of it. I dug through boxes and trash bags in my search, lungs coated in dust. There was a bird house I'd made in the second grade, a t.v. that was never fixed and abandoned in the far corner of the living room, a

bag of outgrown shoes that hadn't been donated. Stacks and teetering stacks full of *shit*. Mom left me the house in her will, it had been her family's house for about a million generations. Dad moved into a pricey little duplex in Davenport when he could just live in my house for free. I guess there isn't much space for him in the house, anyway. I can never throw anything out. I know that it is pure laziness because I don't keep this crap around me for sentimental reasons. It must be genetic too, because the second and third floors are also crowded with junk that my grandparents and even great grandparents couldn't part with.

In the end, they were in my own room, in the back of my dresser. I should have figured that before I dove through three generations of trash, but there they were, seven slightly tattered scratch lotto tickets. *Home Run! SnowMan Millions, Easter Egg Gold*, stuff like that. Each ticket had a once-bright colored picture on it of baseball players or pink-nosed bunnies or a basket of fruit. I held them to my nose to see if I could still smell Lo's cotton candy perfume that she always wore or the smell of the rain that had soaked them, but I could only catch the smell of the house itself. Staleness, dampness.

When Lo moved into the house next door, we'd already been friends since the fourth grade, which was as good as a lifetime when you're young. The place they lived in was a farmhouse, broad and white, like mine, but it had been converted into apartments. Even though we were only a five minute drive and a fifteen minute bike ride from the city, I often felt as though our houses were life-rafts. Thrashed together, our homes clung desperately to one another and to the highway that cut through the sea of soybeans, corn and flaxseed. Gloria, her mother Lisa and her brother Luke lived there with the Martinez's, on the first floor and a reclusive single woman called Mrs. Tweeten who lived on the third floor. Everybody kept to themselves except for Gloria's family. The day they moved in, Lisa marched over to my house to introduce herself and ended up launching into a complicated tirade about the orchestration of the

9/11 attacks with my mother who sat in stunned silence, and my father; disapproving silence. Without much distance in the way, Lo and I had spent every moment together. When she smoked Luke's cigarettes, so did I. When I bought dark blue eyeshadow and patted it clumsily over my eyelids, it was to imitate the way that Lo did hers. I always made sure that we had the same music on our iPods. I'd even sprayed cleaning bleach onto streaks of my hair to mimic Lo's white-blond locks that fell in wavy snarls past her shoulders only to end up with damaged, banana-yellow blotches in the bowl cut that my mother trimmed each month. In the end though, it was my idea to take the rolls of scratch lotto tickets from the convenience store in town, not Lo's.

"You're a genius, you're brilliant, you're a criminal mastermind!" Lo had crowed with excitement when I first told her my plan involving the scratch-offs. We were sitting on the splintery picnic table behind her apartment building where Mrs. Tweeten would go to smoke her cigarettes in the mornings. I think I'd seen the lotto ticket thing in a movie or something, but basking under the brilliance of Lo's enthusiasm I accepted her compliments humbly, like the brilliant, genius, criminal mastermind she'd transformed me into.

"I know exactly how I can get those tickets, too," Lo had said. I was relieved and hurt that she didn't let me in on this part of our plan, but it made sense given my own failed criminal history. The last time I'd tried stealing something with her was at the shopping mall. I'd hidden a denim skirt under the front of my sweater, but when I stumbled over my shoelace sneaking past a store clerk, the skirt had fallen right out and landed on the floor in front of him. Exhausted, the clerk had simply thrust it into my hands and said through his teeth, "pay for it." Which I did, teary eyed and blushing fiercely.

I remember secretly hoping that Lo wouldn't do it. I had prayed that she'd chicken out or, though I'd never admit it, get caught.

Dear Lord,

Please save me the hassle and commitment of this life of crime that I have chosen and forgive my trespasses thus far. I hate packing and that's something you have to do a lot of if you're on the run, plus, I don't even mind it here that much. Amen.

In spite of my nightly divine appeals, Gloria had come to school with the lottery rolls poking out of the front pocket of her sweatshirt. I never found out how she'd done it, but assumed it had something to do with her cousin Jason who worked as the cashier at the gas station in town.

"So there's probably gonna be about a thousand bucks in the tickets," I'd said. It had been a rough estimate that I conjured up from nowhere, trying to maintain my status as a criminal genius in Lo's appraisal.

"Then, all we gotta do is redeem them, maybe at a few different places, a couple towns over—"

"—Why are you talking like that?" Lo had snapped to me as I paced back and forth in her bedroom.

"Like what?"

"Like you're in Ocean's Eleven or something, I know we're gonna go out of town to get the money."

I sat down.

"What are we gonna *do* with it, that's all I wanna hear." Lo had passed me a lukewarm Twisted Tea from next to her bed.

Lo wanted to use the money to buy two one-way tickets to somewhere warm, somewhere interesting—Morocco or maybe Fort Lauderdale—and the rest would be history. We had plotted our escape daily and it changed just as often. In one instance, we'd planned on making a living stripping in Las Vegas.

"I'm too fat to strip," I told Lo.

"You're not fat," she was blatantly lying, which must have been intentional because Lo was a good actor.

"I *am* fat," I insisted, "let me be fat in peace,"

"Fine. you're massive, but plenty of people are into that. I think it's hot. More to love or whatever."

I'd been deeply flattered but relieved the next day when the plan shifted to us launching careers as flight attendants in Hawaii, then cab drivers in New York City, bartenders in LA. Nothing was certain except one thing; we could not stay here. In the end, only Gloria had stayed true to this part of our plan.

The fields that stretched out around our houses had always seemed solid, wall-like. They separated us from the known world. However, they were threaded with rough dirt roads and paths for fertilizing, watering and harvesting. Gloria's brother Luke would speed down these roads on his four-wheeler, sending up clouds of dust that I could see from my bedroom.

Gloria and I walked past the metal chain link fence and into the field, down the tire-gashed access trail. Despite the weather warning that we'd heard on the radio that morning, we had decided that the fields were the perfect place to begin scratching our tickets. The corn had grown high enough to conceal us, and although it was August and hot, scratching our lottery tickets inside the air conditioned sanctuary of our homes seemed somehow too unpoetic.

We were about six cards in, with a disappointing four dollars won when I dimly noticed that the sun was no longer burning the back of my neck. I didn't look up. Gloria didn't either, she was hunched over her stack of tickets and didn't even notice that the back of her shirt had rode up. Occasionally I'd take a short glance at the pale, acne dotted crescent moon of her lower back before returning to my task of scratching. We were so focused on our tickets that we didn't pay attention to the cold, angry gust that whipped through the field to tangle our hair.

"Gloria can you pass me another card? This one only has two dollars on—"

I was interrupted by a sound that I had known all my life but had never really gotten used to. The long howl of weather sirens tore through the open field from where our houses stood. It sounded somehow both animal and unnatural. We often heard weather sirens in the summertime, signaling bad weather of any kind; wind thrashed

rainstorms that could knock you off your feet, thunderstorms fierce enough to make the china on your shelves jitter or, more often, tornadoes. Despite their frequency, storms of any kind terrified me. I'd never admit it, but to this day, the sound of thunder makes me want to hide under the nearest table, to curl up like an animal and only emerge shivering and horrified once the sun is out again.

“Lets go. Gloria. *Let's go.*”

Gloria had ignored me. Kept scraping her penny over the surface of *Pot o' Gold Sevens!*

“Gloria!”

“Fuck off, I'm almost done!”

The sirens continued their hair-raising song, and for the first time I looked out over the cornfield where the stalks trembled in the wind. People driving through Iowa often remark that the farmland, which can often stretch horizon to horizon reminds them of a tranquil sea. The only time I can see any truth in this is during a storm, when the fields become fearsome and boiling, how I imagine the ocean to look.

I had snatched Lo by the forearm. My intention had been to break her trance, haul her to her feet and get her to run with me to safety. Leaving her alone in the field was unthinkable and staying with her was impossible for me. Fast and vicious as a cobra, Lo reached up and slapped me in the face. I froze in apeish surprise. It must have been her intention to shut me up, because I could not formulate a word or even a movement. To be slapped in punishment by an adult was one thing, but the way that Gloria had swatted me away like a fly she wanted to kill, turned me jelly-legged and dumb. I watched her continue to scratch her tickets while clouds far on the horizon began to swirl into a funnel like dirty, gray bathwater going down the drain. I didn't even feel angry at her for more than three days, long after the sting on my cheek had faded.

Cold, fat raindrops had begun to pelt us, and at last, Lo could scratch the tickets no longer without them getting soggy in the mud.

“Goddamn it,” Lo growled. Like an answer to her curse, a bolt of lightning stabbed down a few miles to the west, followed by a

clap of thunder.

“We need to go. Now,” I said, but my voice was drowned out by the wind that sent vicious, gritty gusts into our faces. Lo deliberated for a moment and before I could repeat myself she’d begun to run in the direction of our houses. Gloria was faster than me, and by the time I followed her lead, she was yards ahead of me.

I had tried to sprint, tried to catch up with Lo, but I’d lost sight of her far ahead of me. My lungs ached, my breaths trying to keep time with my hammering heart. My legs and feet throbbed with effort and I knew I couldn’t run much longer.

“Gloria, wait!” I screamed, I stopped running. A vicious cramp contracted my calf muscle into a knot. There was no reply except the sound of the rain hitting the corn leaves, and I was alone in the field.

After half an hour had elapsed, I knew that she wasn’t coming back.

From where I sat, clutching my leg and wheezing, I had watched a swarm of ants hurrying back to their nest. Much too busy to bite me, I could feel their tiny exodus tickling over the surface of my skin with their gentle footsteps. I had gazed at their molasses colored bodies, but what use was it to them to consider in turn the presence of the ugly giant that they tread over? The anthill, a sandy, nipple-like protrusion from the earth about six inches away from me seemed like an unfit match to the storm that was coming. The ants rushed to it. They’d be better off saving the effort and drowning in the rain above ground than in the tiny, useless colony that would soon fill with water. But ants aren’t aware of their own helplessness and I wondered if they felt fear. Felt it, as an emotion in their guts, or if they were spurred by something instinctive, animal and ancient. If the ants felt fear what else could they feel? Irritation at me for being in their way? Could they make an assessment of my weakness of character? Could they scorn me for failing to survive the storm? For a moment, I’d felt embarrassed, a massive and inconvenient lump in the way of harder working beings.

The rain fell harder, almost painfully hitting my head with marble-sized drops. Still wheezing slightly I had stood up and began to limp down the road. All I could hear now was the sound of the wind battering the cornstalks and whistling through them.

Lightning illuminated the field and I caught sight of something staring at me between the corn stalks. A millisecond's glimpse of a blue robe, crossed arms and hostile, glittering black eyes. I looked away, I knew who was there. I was surprised by the appearance of The Virgin, I'd never seen her outside before. I could feel her presence hidden in the greenery the way an antelope can feel itself being hunted by a tiger in the grass. It dawned on me that I'd never seen the Virgin's teeth, for all I knew she could have black, sharpened and gnashing fangs like a wolf or a shark. If she stepped out of the corn stalks, I was sure that she would sink sharp canines into my flank. For the first time I considered Her presence neither benevolent or religious but something ancient and impersonal like the storm overtaking me. A hallucination, a vivid kind of imaginary friend to be sure, but one that had given itself life over the course of my imagining it.

The sky had blackened as if the sun had gone down the horizon prematurely, and I could feel the hairs on my arms and legs standing on end. The fear spurred me and I ran like an animal away from the being that lurked in the cornstalks behind me.

I stopped again, almost in sight of the houses, covered in mud and gasping for breath with my hands on my knees when the headlights of Luke's truck blinded me.

We waited out the storm in Lo's basement, Lisa and Luke squabbled with each other while Lo and I sat near the boiler, both wrapped in scratchy blankets.

"You wouldn't have been able to keep up," Lo had broken the silence between us.

"Mmhm," was all I'd said.

I turned my eyes away from the sight of Lo biting her nails and spitting the clippings into her palm. In my back pocket, I still

had the unscratched tickets. Had I intended to give them to Lo? To continue scratching them in the safety of her bedroom and to recommit to our plans of escape? Did she even realize that I still had some of the tickets? Maybe, but I kept them to myself until the rain had fallen silent and the sky had dried. I didn't even remember that they were in the back pocket of my jeans for three days, when I found them again I'd just tossed them in the back of my dresser telling myself that I'd give them to Lo at some point. Maybe there was a big winner there, the thousand dollar ticket that we could use to start a new life in Morocco, New York City, Chicago, Paris, Maine. If there was, it wouldn't matter anyway.

A few more times over the summer, Lo would bring up stealing another batch of lotto tickets.

"Didn't work last time, I don't see why our luck would be any better again," I'd said, even though, in terms of probability, our odds might have improved with more tickets. In truth, I was grateful that our plan had failed and felt no need to conceal that anymore. Lo and I used the ten or so dollars up pretty quickly. We went to the convenience stores for slushies, Lo got one that stained her mouth bright red but mine was blue. She bought a pair of hoop earrings that turned her earlobes green but I had bought a can of WD-40 for the gears on my bike. We never fought, but when she, Luke and Lisa moved to a split-level on the other end of town in the fall, I'd only texted her a goodbye.

The last time I saw Lo must have been shortly before she'd left for Texas. I had just opened the flower shop and was at the strip mall looking for something to wear to a dinner hosted by the bible group that I drifted in and out of. None of the clothes looked good to me and I'd been losing interest in the group for weeks. In the end I'd chosen a red sweater, one that was probably still buried at the bottom of a box somewhere in my house. I was checking out when I saw her. Lo was standing with her back to me in the perfume section, but from the way she stood I could tell she was stealing the sample

bottles. I'd seen Lo steal enough times to know the way that she slumped her shoulders when she was about to take something. I told the cashier to keep the change and had left quickly. On my way out of the store, I saw Lo once again, arguing viciously with a security guard, I could hear the small glass perfume bottles clinking as she gestured wildly. Walking past her, our eyes met for a fraction of a second and I saw recognition in her eyes as I clutched my purse and walked faster. Whether the look in her eyes was hostile, or merely curious I couldn't tell, and didn't pause to ask, because who the fuck steals sample perfume bottles anyway?

The tickets were dry in my hands now, without a trace of mud or rainwater. There was junk all around me, scattered on the floor from my desperate search for the tickets. I had the idea that I would mail the tickets to Lo. I could look up the address of the prison she was in, pick up some envelopes and stamps and send them to her. They were all long expired of course, but Lo might like to have a memento, she'd always had a fondness for talismans of good luck and fortune. Without thinking much about it, I scraped my nail across the surface of "CherryCash." The goal was to match four of the same fruit in an either parallel or diagonal line. One small lemon appeared underneath my fingernail, I moved onto the next square and revealed another lemon. I could almost smell citrus when I scratched away the third and fourth squares. Four tiny lemons sat in a winner's row right next to each other. What are the odds? The paint was gathering under my thumbnail as I moved on to attack the 'scratch to reveal prize' square.

Eight hundred dollars.

For a long time, I just laughed.

The morning sun had just begun to sear the layer of fog from the fields as I drove. The pharmacy would have stamps and envelopes. I kept reminding myself of that. But it's funny, even as I got closer and closer to the center of town, closer to the pharmacy, I knew that I wouldn't stop. It wasn't even that I'd made some type of decision, it

was just knowledge. The lottery tickets sat in the seat next to me like passengers, one scratched off and the rest left untouched. I wondered what Lo might think of the cards. Would she feel that I was gloating? Rubbing in her face a symbol of her earliest failure? Well, maybe that's exactly what I was doing. Maybe I'd only convinced myself that I was doing something kind. But even though the tickets had long expired, and I could never claim the eight hundred dollars, I was lucky. The scratched off ticket proved that odds were in my favor and I'd won a tiny, cosmic game of chance. I hoped that I could give Lo that feeling. I drove past the familiar world around me. I'd turned the volume up on the directions app and listened as the robotic female voice guided me, even though I knew my way out of town. I wanted orders, instructions.

Outside of the bar, on a rusty bench I caught sight of someone slumped, thumb out asking for a ride. I didn't give the hitchhiker a second glance till she was in my rearview mirror. Growing smaller and smaller as I drove, a tiny figure in a blue and white robe stared at me with dark eyes, thumb out. I looked at her for as long as I could, panic growing in my stomach. My eyes burned from keeping them open and staring so long. Just before the figure grew too tiny to see, I extended my hand out the window and waved. Or saluted, I couldn't tell. Sun rose on the highway and I squinted as I drove past the town limits, heading south.

Kyle Tinga

In The Beginning

Once, I lived in a room with no doors.

I stayed in this room with my brothers and sisters, all of whom were nameless as I was nameless. The room was completely white, stretching out to deep and infinite depths that I had never dreamed to travel. It was without embellishment because such things were meaningless, furnished only at the far end with an object we had never cared to examine. After all, we were busy with the Plan.

The Plan was purpose and necessity, the destiny written into our souls with a pen of our Father's making. The Plan was the fate of what was outside the door with no room, and we the architects of its creation. With pure will and the light around us we dreamed up nameless things like ourselves, dancing creatures and flourishing greenery and jagged edges of ice and stone. Many of these we allowed to fade back into meaningless nothingness, for they were unsuitable for the Plan. Too bright, too dull, too strong, too weak.

At times our Father would come inside the room that had no door in order to inspect the work He had put us to. It was He who would inspect the creations of our minds, and He who passed their final judgment. In each of these He would find some flaw, some little crack or aberration that consigned it to destruction. On one such occasion hid my creation behind me, for fear that it too would be erased and become a truly nameless thing as my brothers and sisters were. But He was no fool.

“Show it to me, child,” He commanded, beckoning me forth with a curl of his finger. With shaking hands I held out my precious creation and awaited his judgment. He took it into his hands, gnarled with age but firm with conviction, and in that room no one dared even to breathe. It was a sparkling thing, created from pure light expanded to share its guiding warmth with all who saw it. In my Father's hands it looked so fragile, pulsing with that gentle light as if yearning for life, and all I could think was that I wished that He could unhand what I had created for Him.

As if reading my thoughts, He gently placed the creation back into my hands and walked away, back through the place there was no door and out of the room. I looked to my siblings, and they looked towards me. They stared with their glassy eyes and without understanding, watching me wordlessly as I made my way forward. They stared as I began to walk to the room's other side where the blinding white faded to dull grey, fading further into a darkness illuminated by the dying embers of the kiln before me, until I could no longer feel the weight of their judgment on my shoulders.

The kiln, for that was what I knew it to be as soon as I saw it, was made of yellowing bone polished to perfection. It reeked with the faint scent of ash and blood, mingling together in the dull orange of its flames. Once, perhaps, it had been a named thing. Now it sat here, waiting to be used once again. In my hands the nameless creation shone brightly, pulsing brighter and brighter with every step I took. The light guided me, beckoning me to walk closer to the kiln as the dying embers roared to life with vigour. I had no fear of that which warmed my skin, for it had never been warmed before. I had no fear of that which assaulted my sense of smell, for it had never been challenged before. Instead, I pressed onwards.

On shaking legs I sat cross-legged before the open flames now threatening to engulf me in their heat, and with my feeble hands I held my creation deep inside its gaping maw. The fire licked at my fingers and palms, searing pain etching itself across my features, but still I held fast. Heat burrowed through me as my creation pulsed and surged within my grasp, but still I held fast. The pain was unbearable. The light was unbearable. I wanted to return to the far side of the room before knowledge and fire came to pass, but still I held fast until darkness fell over me.

When I awoke, my creation was no longer in my hands. My heartbeat was matching time with a pain jabbing deep into my chest, and as I looked down I saw that my glorious creation had embedded itself deep into my core. My brothers and sisters had returned to their work, but as I watched them craft and shape the components of the Plan I found my eyes instead drawn to the place in the wall

where there had been no door.

Placed perfectly centered was a rectangle, drawn in an ashen hand. Part of me wondered why I had never noticed it before, but the other part of me knew it was because I had never cared to. Without looking backwards at what I was leaving, and without understanding the future ahead of me, I pushed gingerly on the rectangle and was greeted with nothing but darkness. Into the darkness I stepped, away from the room and the nameless things that lived within it.

Once, I lived in a room with no doors. It was all I had ever known, and all I had ever wished to know. But I know better now. With these hands of mine I shall be beheld by that which I create, and they shall love me and fear me. They will have no other before me, for I am all that they have ever known and will ever know. So I have said it, so it will be done.

Contributors

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Barbara Alfaro is the recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award in Playwriting. Her memoir *Mirror Talk* won the IndieReader Discovery Award for Best Memoir. Barbara's poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in *Poet Lore*, *The Journal of Kentucky Studies*, *Boston Literary Review*, *Trouvaille Review*, and *The Blue Mountain Review*. Visit <http://www.BarbaraAlfaro.net>

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Aiden Baker lives in South Florida, where she writes, teaches, and gets really sweaty. You can find her work in the *Ninth Letter* and *Sonora Review*.

Kirstie Brown

Living in the cold, but breathtakingly captivating North of Ireland, Kirstie Brown is a working-class student of English and History at the University of Ulster.

Adam Burgess

Adam Burgess is a southern Nevada writer whose works have appeared in such publications as *Towers*, *Brave Voices*, *America's Emerging Writers*, and *Watermark*. Adam is inspired by the words and wisdom of writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, Joan Didion, Ocean Vuong, and James Baldwin. He lives with his husband in Las Vegas, where he is an English professor and frequent explorer of the Southwest's trails, mountains, and wetlands.

Daisy Bassen

Daisy Bassen is a poet and practicing physician who graduated from Princeton University's Creative Writing Program and completed her medical training at The University of Rochester and Brown. Her work has been published in *Oberon*, *McSweeney's*, *The Sow's Ear*,

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Martins Deep

Martins Deep is a Nigerian poet & photographer. He is passionate about documenting muffled stories of the African with his poetry visual art. Writing from Kaduna, or whichever place he finds himself, his creative juices tends to paint the spontaneity of his imagination, humanity, justice, truth and emotions, in different ways, bringing as much healing to as many wounds crying for balm.

Grace Alice Evans

Grace Alice Evans (she/they) is a LGBTQ+, mixed-heritage poet, writer, sound/visual artist and survivor, whose work explores living with mental illness, trauma, recovery, and the dichotomy between the inner and outer worlds.

Frank William Finney

Frank William Finney has recently retired from teaching literature at Thammasat University in Thailand, where he taught for 25 years. His poems have appeared Verandah, The Best of Vine Leaves Literary Journal (Australia), Orbis, Firewords, Poetry Nottingham (UK), Spillway, Grand Little Things, Red River Review (USA), and over 100 other magazines, journals and anthologies in print and online.

Jessica Kim

Jessica Kim is a writer based in California. Her works have been recognized by the National Poetry Quarterly and Pulitzer Center, and can be found in Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Eunoia Review, Minute Mag, Perhappened Mag, and many more. She loves all things historical and sour.

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Ethan Lee is a Bay Area student interested in the visual arts. He enjoys using art as a creative outlet and a tool to interact with others.

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Colin Lubner writes (in English) and teaches (math) in southern New Jersey. His work has either appeared or will appear, temporally speaking. Recent pieces can be found through his Twitter: @no1canimagine0.

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Ryan Masters is a poet and writer from Santa Cruz, CA.

Shannah Merceron

Shanna Merceron is a Floridian fiction writer whose work can be found in Philadelphia Stories, Mikrosmos Journal, Oxford Magazine, Coffin Bell Journal, and The William and Mary Review, among others. Shanna holds an MFA in Fiction from Hollins University where she wrote stories that explored the darker aspects of humanity and pushed the boundaries of the strange. She is currently at work on a novel that examines the layers of darkness in and outside of oneself.

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Laia Sales Merino is a poet from the Catalan Pyrenees currently based in Barcelona. Her work can be found in Ambit, Anthropocene, harana poetry, and perhappened mag among others.
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Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Adelaide Literary Magazine, Mystery Tribune, Ghost City Review, Spelk Fiction, Door = Jar, Levitate, Yellow Medicine Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Crêpe & Penn, Ellipsis Zine, Wilderness House Literary Review, and Flash: The International

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Nick Olson

Nick Olson is a writer and editor from Chicagoland now living in North Carolina. He was a finalist for Glimmer Train's Very Short Fiction Award, and he's been published in SmokeLong Quarterly, Hobart, decomp, and other fine places. When he's not writing his own work, he's sharing the wonderful work of others over at (mac)ro(mic). His debut novel, Here's Waldo, is forthcoming from Atmosphere Press. Find him online at nickolsonbooks.com or on Twitter @nickolsonbooks.

E. Samples

E. Samples is an Appalachian contrarian living in Southern Indiana. Her writing has appeared in Abridged, Crêpe & Penn, Lucent Dreaming, Twist in Time Mag, The Stillwater Review, Déraciné, Fearsome Critters, The Cabinet of Heed, and elsewhere. She is on twitter @emilysamples.

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Ashley Sapp resides in Columbia, South Carolina, with her husband and furbabies. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of South Carolina in 2010 and has written for various publications. Her work has previously appeared in Indie Chick, The Daily Drunk Mag, the Common Ground Review, and Elephants Never. She is a bibliophile who enjoys traveling, tattoos, and photography. Ashley has written two poetry collections: Wild Becomes You and Silence Is A Ballad.

Anna Schaeffer

Originally from Maine, Anna Schaeffer now lives in Boston. She explores themes of identity, belonging and place in her work. Her writing can be found online and in print at Amendo, Adelaide, and the Somerville Times

Anindita Sengupta

Anindita Sengupta is the author of *City of Water* (Sahitya Akademi, 2010) and *Walk Like Monsters* (Paperwall, 2016). Her work has appeared in anthologies and journals such as *Plume*, *580 Split*, *One* and *Breakwater Review*. She is Contributing Editor (Poetry) at *Barren Magazine*. She has received fellowships & awards from the Charles Wallace Trust, the International Reporting Project, Toto Foundation for the Arts, and Muse India. Her website is <http://aninditasengupta.com> and she is on Twitter as @Anu_Sengupta

Candria Slamin

Candria Slamin (she/her) is a recent college graduate from Virginia, who is trying to find her place within the writing world. Being a black and gay woman, Candria has taken to poetry and nonfiction to explore the social intersections of her life. In her spare time, she is busy being a nerd on the Internet.

She has been published by The Poetry Society of Virginia and is anticipating a publication by *Barren Magazine*.

Tara Thiel

Tara Thiel is a wife, mother and Visual Artist who is currently pursuing a master's degree in Creative Writing. She is a Southern transplant to the Midwest who writes poetry and creative nonfiction. She has been published by *Blue Mountain Arts* and is working to breathe new life into a writing career that was sidelined for many years.

Sophie Furlong Tighe

Sophie Furlong Tighe is a Dublin based poet and the chief editor of *Icarus Magazine*, Ireland's oldest literary and arts publication. She has work published or forthcoming in *DUST* magazine, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *Ghost City Press* among others. She tweets @furtiso.

Kyle Tinga

Bio: Kyle is a dreamer, writer, and full-time complainer from South East Asia. Her fiction has been featured in *Idle Ink*, *Mineral Lit*, and *Analogies and Allegories* among other publications. She's a big believer in beginnings, but isn't fond of endings.

Alla Vilnyansky

Alla Vilnyanskaya was born in the Ukraine and raised in the U.S. She came to Philadelphia in 1989 with her parents. She holds an MA from Miami University and an MFA from Columbia University. Her work has been published in multiple online and print journals including *Zaum*, *Poetry International*, *Saint Ann's Review* and *Boog City*. She is an alumni of The Home School and has won several teaching fellowships and other awards from Miami University and Columbia University. She is currently working on her first full length book of poetry.



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