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Mary Buchel

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Mary Buchel

Ice Child

Today a giant ice-calf snaps and breaks, summarily frees itself with thundering groan, then ear-splitting schism yawls, then booms and shakes from mother glacier; calves and floats alone.

As exploding echoes resound and fade away, comes a silent, awe-ful, empty hush, syphoning sound. Then black, slap-lapping waves play with this lonely ice-child, moving her away.

Rolling waves, soft shades of grey and green push her out to sea, to melt and fade. A block of blameless mass, pure crystal, clean; desolate, detached, all parentage denied.

Do nature's eons ebb and flow like this, or hairy ape the damning cause, with ignorant bliss?

Educated as a scientist, graduated as a mathematician, but a full-time professional entertainer most of his life, including a stint as a regular performer on the prestigious Grand Ol' Opry, Harlan Yarbrough attempted to escape the entertainment industry, working as a librarian, physics teacher, syndicated newspaper columnist, and city planner. Harlan lives, writes, and struggles to improve his dzongkha pronunciation and vocabulary in Bhutan. In the past six years, his short fiction has appeared in the Galway Review, Indiana Voice Journal, Green Hills Literary Lantern, and sixty-four other literary journals in ten countries and has won the Fair Australia Prize.

The Risk of Saving Lives

Steve Fettis looked forward to the meeting with his boss. Steve had found Dr. Storey a good person to work for, but today's meeting promised to be even better than usual. As a scientist, Dr. Fettis had reservations about the company's latest vaccine candidate, but he knew he bore mostly good news. Al Storey, under pressure from management and stressed, had wanted some good news for weeks, and Steve could provide that today. Al would be pleased.

Doffing his lab coat, Steve grabbed his pale blue sports jacket off the hanger on the back of his office door, picked up two manila folders from his desk, and walked along the corridor to Dr. A. L. Storey's corner office. He knocked lightly on the door frame, and Al said, "Come in, Steve. What's the latest?"

"We have a pretty good candidate, Al. Our combined adeno-RBD number AR-333 looks good." As he spoke Dr. Fettis handed his boss a single page summary from one of the manila folders.

Dr. Storey, who's first name was Ambrose but who was called Al because of his initials, read through the page's four paragraphs and looked up with the most relaxed smile Steve Fettis had seen on his boss in five months. "That's great," Dr. Storey said. "That's just what we've been looking for."

"Yeah, it looks like we're getting close. I ho—"

"Whaddya mean 'close'? This looks great. They'll want to get this to market right away."

"Mmmm \dots yes, but did you look at the third paragraph. I'm concer—"

"Oh, yeah, there were some side effects. But, Steve, nobody's ever made a vaccine with no side effects. It's just the nature of the beast."

"Yes, of course, Al. I know that. But look at the figures in that paragraph. We had unexplained fatalities."

"Not in people."

"No, we haven't done human trials, but in rodents and in pigs."

"Not a problem."

"But we can't do human trials, if we know we're going to kill one person out of a thousand."

"Sure we can. We just have to inform the volunteers of the risk."

"But w-"

"Steve, remember the virus is killing about twenty people out of a thousand."

"Would management really go for that, even knowing we would kill some of the volunteers?"

"You bet. Sit down here, Steve," Dr. Storey said, pointing to a chair beside his desk, "and let's go over your figures."

Doctor Fettis sat and removed two sheets of paper from the other manila folder. He placed the sheets on his boss's desk and waited.

The senior scientist looked at the pages, then beamed at his best researcher and said, "This looks great, Steve. Trivial side effects—mostly none at all. Th—"

"Except for a few inconvenient deaths."

"That's a serious side effect, of course, but at such a low rate." Before Steve Fettis could speak, his boss continued, "It may not even occur in human subjects. Even if it does, their chances of dying from the virus are ten times as high as their chances of dying from this vaccine. And apart from that, you've got a mild rash in one person out of sixty and mild nausea in three out of a hundred. That's a small price to pay for being protected from this virus."

"But if they die from the vaccine, we're responsible."

"Not if we inform them of the risk and everything is approved."

"We're still responsible."

"Not legally."

"No, but I would feel responsible. Wouldn't you?"

"Steve, I'd feel responsible for saving the lives of eighteen people out of a thousand. Their chances of dying from the virus, from the latest figures I've seen, are about two per cent, twenty out of a thousand. You're worried about losing two out of a thousand, but you've saved eighteen out of a thousand."

"Sure, but what if the one who dies is one who wouldn't have died from the virus?"

"Well, he—"

"Or she."

"Right. He or she will have saved the lives of nine others or something like that." Dr. Storey paused a moment, then said, "I don't know. I think management will want to run with this."

"Can you hold off a few days, Al? Let me see what else we can come up with? In a week we might come up with something much better."

"I'd prob'ly get fired, if I held this for a week. They want something yesterday. Go back and see what else your lab has come up with and check in with me tomorrow. I don't know if I dare hold off any longer than that."

A few more minutes of thrust and parry, of pleading and discussion, did not prevent the researcher and the scientist-administrator from parting in a manner both amicable and amiable and with genial good wishes and thanks from Al Storey for his minion's work.

The next day, Wednesday, Steve Fettis visited his boss in mid-afternoon.

"Good news?" Al Storey asked with a big smile.

"Well, sort of. We have identified a couple of other promising candidates. The problem is, we have no idea what is causing the deaths."

"They're not infected with the virus."

"No, the vaccine seems to be one hundred per cent effective. The animals don't seem sick at all. It's as if their hearts just decide to stop beating. No previous symptoms of any kind."

"Well, the numbers are still on your side."

"Can you give me another week."

"No. I don't dare hold this over the weekend. If Johnson & Johnson or Oxford or Moderna or Pfizer or maybe Merck, Sharpe & Dohme came up with something over the weekend, I'd be out looking for a job next week."

Steve Fettis felt a worry akin to panic but said nothing. His boss hesitated a moment, then said, "Look, come and see me Friday morning and we'll review the situation."

Dr. Fettis returned to his lab and talked with three of his researchers before going to his office. Based on his own and their combined knowledge, he downloaded the reports on AC-

327 and AC-340 onto his computer and looked at them. The former caused half as many unexplained deaths but showed only about eighty per cent efficacy against the virus; the latter caused slightly fewer deaths but had other potentially serious side effects. Neither could be called a better candidate. Steve returned to the lab and again conferred with his colleagues. They reached a consensus that they could only continue with their current trials and hope they found something better.

Eleven o'clock Friday morning found Dr. Fettis back in his boss's office conferring with Dr. Storey. "Any luck?" Al Storey asked.

"Not much, but a little. We have a very similar candidate, the same limited side effects, and it causes fewer unexplained deaths, about half as many."

"That's an improvement."

"Yes, but it's still going to kill people."

"Possibly, but not as many as the virus. Tell you what, I'll take this to management and tell 'em you might have an even better candidate before they're ready for us to go to human trials. That'll buy you a little time to see what else you can find."

"Thanks, Al. I'm still not comfortable with it, but I don't get to make those decisions, I guess. I wish we could hold off until we know what's causing those deaths."

"Yeah, that'd be good. Maybe the execs will decide to wait, or maybe the FDA won't approve the trials."

"You're kidding, right? Management will want to get something on the market as soon as they can, and the FDA will do whatever our execs tell 'em to do."

"Yeah, I was kidding, but we can hope."

Dr. A. L. Storey delighted his corporate bosses with his news of Dr. Fettis's team's discovery. The executives followed their usual procedures and within a week obtained the required consent to run Stage 1 trials. Despite Steve Fettis's continuing misgivings, Germtech Labs began human trials with a vaccine that killed only one in a thousand uninfected subjects.

Michael Igoe,

city boy, neurodiverse, Chicago nw Boston. Tai Chi apprentice, erstwhile scholar. Numerous works appear in journals and anthologies (available at amazon.com, lulu.com, barnesandnoble.com). Regular contributor to feversofthemindpress.com and Spare Change News (Cambridge MA). National Library of Poetry Editoyr's Choice for Excellence 1997. Twitter, Michaellgoe 5, poetry-in-motion.org

Michael Igoe

Atlas

Tasseled attachments surround black crepe. They're reached by a few fingers. The senses require the deadpan looks of other celebrants. They are utterly certain they'll make the escape from the fan blade whir. As far as promises go, looks remain the same as the ones given back. They seek for gravity in wide open spaces do no more than rise. They are fishing, waking on time with meshed nets they later process. Looking out.for sundry brands of proper magic.

(2022)

Michael Igoe

Ruse

Due to adding you, as the new member, of a different species. A living space is required as part of the prescription. It's the cure for fulfillment, to be proud of brooding You are pledged to living infancy without purpose. In the lean years, things got stolen. But we expected help of former sweethearts.

Said Veronica Softly I told Miss Allyene it's all said and done.

We sawed all time in separate chunks. The broken morsels ones just to suit me. Doing all the talking but only as a naysay. Minds hard at work in distinguishing lives, by a dull complexion. They grow ravenous, cannibals on shanks, the raw flesh in flame. They paid the dues they owe to infidels, by waving a wand.

Michael Igoe

Making Way

If an animal goes rabid, we'll somehow require restraint in its reactions more so than a human. They fall into lives, with uniform belief. Lives that pass swiftly before their very eyes. Their feeling of release to locate the cigarettes from a half empty pack. Polka dotted women, march over parkland. Turning their heads, they needed seeing if the coast is clear.

is a professional astrologer who regularly publishes articles, fiction, and poetry. His published works can be found at https://jamesmoran.org/the-creation-playpen

The Saga of Krak Oddson

One day Lars Larsson, and his friend Ozur Ozurson, went to the old graveyard and kicked over grave cairns and hollered until young Thor Thorson set out from his family's farmhouse to see what the racket was about. He brought with him the orphan, Krak Oddson.

Lars climbed atop a mound of stones to announce to the approaching boys, "Today Jesus Christ will give me a battle ax." He pointed toward Herjolf's glacier and said, "It's this way."

As the group crossed Old Snorri's farm Thor stopped beside a winsome cow to weigh her udders in his hand. Lars banged the cow on the rear with his fist and frightened it off. "This way," he growled.

The boys continued on in silence.

When they came upon grazing sheep Thor sang, "Work begins after waking; the sheep left out in winter has to dig deep in snow for grass."

"If you mean to sing, then sing a hunting song," Lars grumbled. He shoved Krak Oddson, the orphan, and said, "Sing a song of hunting caribou."

"I know no songs," Krak replied.

"You know no songs??"

"I have no one to teach me."

"Is that why your nose runs? You have no one to wipe it? What of your mother?"

"You know what of my mother."

"What of her?"

"She is with the Skraelings."

"Then your mother is a heathen sorceress. Either that or she is in Skraeling stomachs. What of your father?"

"What of him?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know," Lars mocked. He draped his arm over his friend Ozur and said, "Jesus Christ is on my side today. I can tell it."

Boulders crowded the countryside beyond the farmland. Upon locating a particular path, Lars and Ozur hooted and rushed ahead. The other boys hastened to keep up. Soon Ozur was atop one of the boulders waving the boys over. On the far side of the boulder Lars crouched beside a handsome battle-ax.

Thor approached.

"Don't touch it!" Lars barked.

Bones and clothing littered the dirt; Krak would not look at the ax.

"You don't like my ax, orphan?" asked Lars.

"I see no ax that is yours," replied Krak.

Lars bent down and grabbed the handle. "Then you are too blind to see the ax in my hands."

"Who says it's yours?"

Lars let go of the ax and tackled Krak. First Lars was on top and then Krak. Thor grabbed a hold of Krak and dragged him away. Lars jumped to his feet and returned to the ax. "My ax!" he hollered. "My ax!"

Krak broke free and rushed Lars and knocked him down. Lars held his head where it had banged against stone. Krak scrambled to the ax. He grabbed hold of the blades and with much effort hefted the ax. He placed the hook of one of the blades on the hollow between Lars' ear and his jaw. Krak then lifted the handle. Lars' jaw sprung open. He bleated like a goat. Krak leaned his weight on the handle, pinning Lars on his side. Lars scrabbled for a hold on the weapon. Lars shrieked. Blood and steam popped from his neck. Tears and spit erupted from his face.

Ozur fled in the direction they had come.

Krak separated the blood-splashed blade from Lars' body and hugged the ax to his chest as he left the clearing.

Thor sat atop a boulder and kept watch over Lars' body. Eventually Thor came down to collect Skraeling arrowheads from the dirt. He then wandered up to Herjolf's glacier where he found Krak seated in a fold in the ice.

He sat beside Krak and joined him in staring back in the direction they had come. "Why did you kill Lars?" he asked.

"He falsely claimed my father's ax," Krak replied.

"Those are your father's bones?" The wind stung their faces. When Krak did not answer, Thor asked, "Why did he come here?"

"He was looking for my mother."

"Why is your mother with the Skraelings?"

"She made a home away from town when the church was finished because she does not like the new god named Jesus Christ. When the Skraelings attacked she went with them."

"You are in the right against Lars," Thor said. "Your father's ax belongs to you now. We can take turns carrying it back."

"Leave it. Go back. I will wait for my mother."

Thor stood and he left.

Eventually Krak heard the sounds of a party of men come to claim Lars' body. He hugged the metal blade and awaited the day's end, when his mother would arrive with the Skraelings to honor his father and take Krak away.

Neither when the sun neared the horizon nor during the long hours after did his mother appear. He walked about to invite feeling into his legs and soon he was hiking back to town. The weight of the blade made him sweat. The cold of the metal bit him through his wool. He dropped the ax and ran to town.

At Gardar church he banged his head against the door until a tall man carrying a candle opened it. The tall man went away briefly then returned. He ushered Krak to a powerful fire opposite the Bishop at his desk. Even beside such a blaze Krak could not stop shivering.

"I have seen you," said the Bishop. "You live on the Thorson farm. Where are your parents?"

"Skraelings murdered my mother and my father died avenging her," said Krak.

The Bishop rang a bell.

When the tall man reappeared the Bishop ordered him to place another log on the fire, clean Krak's face, remove Krak's outer clothing, and heat a mug of milk for the boy.

From that night forward Krak was a servant of the Bishop, who taught him how to read the Holy Scriptures and how to record in writing the sagas, such as this one, of our people, the Vikings of Greenland.

is from central New Jersey. He writes in all genres, including songs (lyrics and music), literary criticism and screen and stage plays. His poetry collection entitled The Roxy Mix is available on Amazon.com and at Cyberwit.net.

THE OTHER

"I believe my husband is cheating on me.

"Most likely, it's with the woman that lives down the road. And, when you hear the whole story, you will most likely say that it is my fault.

"I'm fully prepared to take part of the blame. As the old saying goes, 'it takes two to tango.' And even if my husband was provided with a high level of logistic convenience, he still had a choice to make. Her or me. I didn't choose her. He did.

"Well, maybe I did choose her, in a sense. At least, in part. Not to sleep with him but, yes, I definitely OK'd her living on our land, just down the road from us. I did have a part in that. That I'll admit.

"To get the full picture, there's some things you need to know. It basically all starts with our house. It's a ten room farmhouse, with approximately forty acres. The property was bought by my husband and me shortly after our marriage. The down payment, around two-thousand dollars, was a gift from my mother and her husband, my newly acquired step-father. Without this act of kindness on my parents' behalf, not only would we not have been able to afford the property, but no doubt several things would have been very different for the both of us.

"First of all, the wealth and equity that comes from having a large house and a considerable amount of land would not have been possible if we had to move into one of the surrounding towns. I'm not saying that we are filthy rich, but we do have more than most around here, and our children (if they decide to

take us up on our financial offer) would (when combined with their own savings) have no problem providing for their children, grandchildren and themselves. More on our children later, for they do figure into my husband's affair, in an indirect sense.

"And second, the longstanding reputation and respect that comes from a certain amount of wealth. In our little corner of the world, I guess you could say that we are considered a"ruling family." And not to brag but, over the years our family has enjoyed a considerable amount of influence in the area. Now, I'm not saying that we are the Ewings or the Cartwrights, but our family name is known around here. For example, the rural road that runs past our farm bears our name. Basically, because we were here before anyone else. But it also has to do with the fact that both my husband and oldest son hold political offices in the area, and have done so for years.

"So, as you can see, we've been blessed.

"But, getting back to the matter at hand. Who is my husband's mistress, how did they meet and why would he risk a long-term rendezvous with her? And, of course, why did he feel he had to?

"My husband's mistress is a widower with several grown children of her own. Originally, she is not from around here. Maryland, I think. Like us, her family is financially well off. For her age, she is not that bad looking. [A chuckle.] Actually, she somewhat resembles me, but thinner and with hair a lot greyer than mine.

"How did they meet. Well, this is where our children play a part- in a passive sense- literally. As I had mentioned earlier, my

husband and I own a lot of land, over forty acres. Much more than we use for our livestock or vegetable crops. So, the offer was presented to our four children to possibly allow each of them their own allotment. In effect, they would live on our land, and we would all be close.

"Well, two of our children took us up on the offer, two of our sons. However, our oldest son and our only daughter never did. For reasons most likely known only to themselves. Anyway, it's their choice, of course. But even without their share of the allotment, there is still quite a lot of land going to waste. What to do? It was decided by us that if our children did not want the land, then maybe someone else might. So, we started to advertise land for sale in the local newspaper classifieds and by word of mouth. In less than a year's time, we got several offers. A couple fell through, and the majority of them were not really serious. But you can guess what happened next. My husband's future mistress approached him at a supervisory town council meeting one evening. She had been widowed for six months, and had just finally settled her husband's estate. Not able to stay in her old house because of too many memories, Mrs. H (that's what I'll refer to her as from now on) decided to put her farm up for sale and "start afresh." Why exactly she wanted a new construction as opposed to an existing home was never really explained, other than she wanted a total "start-over." Of course, I have my own theory, that Mrs. H had her hooks in my husband long before, and a new construction on our land was, to her, a matter of logistical and tactical convenience.

"But, anyway, she took us up on our offer, bought five acres and began to build shortly thereafter. A three-story, ten room rustic colonial style with four bedrooms, three baths, a living

room, dining room, eat-in country kitchen, a family room and office (for Mrs. H was actually the secretary to the township supervisor, i.e., my husband). The last room mentioned precluded a lot of time together between my husband and Mrs. H at her house ('township matters').

"You're probably wondering why a widower with grown kids would want so much living space. Of course, I did too. When I asked Mrs. H about this in an off-hand way, all of her answers were family-based. "I like a lot of room for my children and grandkids to stay over." "This will all go to my kids and their kids someday." And etcetera. Of course, I didn't believe her. Not that it mattered what I thought.

"And what did my husband think of all this? If he thought anything at this point for or against, he wasn't telling. And since I only suspected Mrs. H of being a little too flirty at this point, my husband was not on trial with me. In truth, Mrs. H wasn't either. I understood that she had recently lost her husband and might be uncomfortable with being alone after so long. But, looking back now, it never occurred to me that this could have been planned by the both of them, even then. It never crossed my mind that there could have been a conspiracy.

"So, the one remaining question: why? Why is my husband cheating on me? After a successful and lucrative fifty years of marriage? After an established local reputation, security and four children, not to mention a slew of grandchildren as well as great-grandchildren?

"Yes, you heard correctly. We have been married for fifty years. I have recently turned seventy, my husband a couple of years older.

"So, what motivates my husband to stray? Love? Passion? Sex? Getting older? Possibly being alone? All of the above? Something else? Hard to say. Of course, we're entering uncharted waters just speaking about it. The only thing that compares would be a famous person who marries young in their old age. But, of course, they have the money and fame to attract the young. My husband doesn't. Not on that level, anyway. And let's not forget that the object of my husband's desire, Mrs. H, is around the same age as myself. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that this attraction between the two has been long-standing. You don't just get someone that easily at age seventy-something.

"Are the two of them in love? Well, I would like to think that after fifty plus years of marriage, my husband still loves *me*. But, where lust and sex are concerned, Mrs. H might have the advantage over me there. Let me explain.

"I grew up in a fairly strict Methodist household that believed that sex was only for procreation, not pleasure. I held those views, more or less, as I entered marriage. My husband's family wasn't as strict. He believed that he could change my thinking on the subject. He never really could. It's hard to change those deep-seated ideas, even in adulthood.

"Not to say that we never had sex. No. We did, just not enough to satisfy a contemporary way of thinking. (Couples these days seem to be horny all the time and go at it like rabbits every chance they get. And then there's the disgusting, weird stuff—'kink,' I think they call it— that people from my time wouldn't even think of doing. My biological father did.

He used to do things like that to my mother and my brother and sisters and me.

[Long pause.] "Where was I? Oh, yeah. As I was saying, my husband, when it comes to sex, has a contemporary mind. I'm sure Mrs. H must as well. For me, non-procreative sex had to be linked to a special event, such as a birthday or the birth of a child. If there wasn't a good reason for it, then it wasn't worth it to me. So, in the beginning of our marriage, there might have been sex 10-12 times a year. As the years went on, however, that figure declined to less than half.

"I also don't mind telling you that because my husband is the only one I've ever been with, I would probably be considered inexperienced at sex. And yes, my husband was with several women before he met me. I guess the term today would be that he liked to 'play the field.'. Sometimes I think that this is the real reason he has chosen Mrs.H. Not only because she is most likely more experienced than me, but also because being with her makes him feel young again and takes him back to his youth.

"And it wasn't like I was what one would call 'good' at it.

Since my husband was the only man I was ever with (both before and after marriage), I had no prior experience. And I was never into self gratification. I always believed that it was a sin. Selfish pride. After all, doesn't the Scriptures speak against Onanism? My lack of experience (and interest) never seemed to be a problem with my husband. But considering the present status quo, I have to wonder.

"There is another element that factors into all of this, and I can't let you go until I mention it. For the last few years, I have been in fairly poor health. The doctors know what it is, and say

that although it is in check at present, it most likely will worsen in the next three to five years and could prove life-threatening. So, of course, my husband knows about my condition and, although I did not mention anything to her, I'm sure that Mrs. H also knows and has taken note of the fact. [A smile.] Are the two of them waiting around for me to 'knock off?' Possibly.

The doctors said that there's also a chance that if my symptoms don't worsen, I could go on another ten or fifteen years. I guess we'll—all of us—will just have to wait and see. For better or for worse. Depending on who you are and what your definition of 'better' and 'worse' are. But, as with all things,

time will tell."

Postscript

The protagonist succumbed to her illness and died three years later. She was 73. Approximately a year following her death, her husband and the woman referred to as "Mrs. H" married and moved into Mrs. H's home. The old homestead, offered to the husband's children one last time, was declined by them yet again. Mrs. H's oldest child moved into it with her husband and two children.

The protagonist's husband and Mrs. H lived in Mrs. H's house for ten years, up until the time of the husband's death at age 86.

At present, Mrs. H (age 85) continues to live in the home alone. She is visited by her oldest child and family on a daily basis.

Peter Mladinic

's fourth book of poems, Knives on a Table is available from Better Than Starbucks Publications. An animal rights advocate, he lives in Hobbs, New Mexico, USA.

Peter Mladinic

Iron

Iron is about the difficulties of being with one person, about not feeling slighted or making the other person feel slighted.

Iron is about the iron and phosphorous molecules that float between you

and Patrick in the meat department,

Patrick in a long white blood-streaked smock.

Iron is about a night with Walter, crossing a bridge on your way to a club that later will crowd with flashing lights

and dancers, but right now Walter is warning you not to tell the girls

you've been in a war.

Chu Lai.

You remember sunlight, morning muster those times you saw your double, same eyes, same rifle, in

Iron is about sides of beef behind the steel doors Patrick exited through

after you two traded stories of your lives since high school, neither one with a spouse or children, nor the wish to see each other ever again.

You remember a night with flashing lights and music and Walter dancing alone to Steppenwolf.

Previously published in Foliate Oak Literary Magazine in November 2016.

Peter Mladinic

Learning to Speak Vietnamese

1

From far back in my throat notes take a name that means flower, Hoa, into the night air's blend of witch hazel and cigar smoke. Cries of birds. Mosses loom above the white cathedral across the street.

Partially obscuring a wagon weighed with black market watches, cigarettes, cokes—a man with a wooden leg and a boy in a white shirt talk weather and look like an argument.

2

This morning at a black iron gate I check IDs—girls in bright silks, a captain in tailored fatigues, old women, their teeth maroon with betel nut–accustomed to the stinking street. From a vendor's wooden box comes a dog sandwich wrapped in paper with news from the war. Cha toi tien: Give me money. Counting coins, he looks up from his wide straw hat as I begin to speak.

Previously published in the Lucid Stone in Spring 2000.

Sweating in the Freezer

Trying to write a poem of how bitter the winter cold was today on the dock. It was warmer in the freezer. I had to duck inside the freezer to be warm. On the dock it was so cold. Ordinarily I never have to work, but this morning I had to go out to take the mini maple hams and the Hillshire frozen sausages off the trail end of the truck. I was riding on the forklift. The dark blue forklift against silver winter sky, the backdrop of ugly steel structures.

But you're so damn cold that who has time to notice it. This ache in my knee that wants to play on your sympathy as I write here tonight hearing dreadful music my legs crossed sitting on the sofa notices it is thinking about the dock.

What an ugly part of town this is!

The word was out that the inspector was approaching the shipping department, we had to take all the corn beef rounds, pumped with water for bigger profits, and hide them down in the south freezer. It was warmer in the freezer than out on the dock. I toppled a pallet of corn beef rounds. Rex came down to help me pick them up and said it was immoral to handle this stuff,

everyone who buys it
will be getting screwed.
He was right,
but it was so cold
going in and out
from the freezer
to the dock.
It's the coldest place in the world
when the wind whips along the dock.

Does anyone know what it feels like when the external parts of the body begin to get warm leaving the residue, an internal chill?

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Previously published in the Westbere Review in Fall 1977.

Weldon

The rumor he left for Mexico a new life

There were children playing in the hall Widowers sitting alone in the dark hearing songs

Fugitives cornered outside the Neptune Club senators holding conferences inautomobiles

His car was found near the Golden Gate

There were tombs and lighted churches Markets with melons and broccoli breads in bins A bad check passed in a dress shop A doctor setting a frightened girl'sbroken wrist

At the rail I couldn't get myself to go over the bridge, he joked the day before he leapt, or left for Mexico

There was perfume in a vial on a bureau there were children playing in the hall, a gilded mirror, a red carpet white tiles in dark designs

The cold set in, garden flowers were dying Dead flowers on the altar at All Souls Cathedral a Mrs Zalinski carried away

Poisons were manufactured there were sudden showers college football scores catfish farms Broadway shows

His article on happiness

came out in *The New Republic* the day he disappeared

Previously published in the Quixote Quarterly in Summer 1994 & since revised significantly.

is a retired public servant, living in Perth, Western Australia. She/her has most recently had pieces published or forthcoming in Ab Terra Flash Fiction, Across the Margin, Adelaide Literary Magazine, borrowed solace, Crow's Feet Journal, Ethel Zine, Flash Frontier, Flights of Fantasy Anthology, Frost Zone Zine, Granfalloon Magazine, INK Babies Literary Magazine, Instant Noodles Literary Magazine, Mystery Tribune, The Mythic Circle, Quail Bell Magazine, Roi Fainéant, Spillwords, The Short Humour Site, Thriller Magazine and Worthing Flash.

A Tale of Empty Spaces

I hadn't wanted to go to the wedding in the first place. Then, when John broke up with me, I tried to get out of it. But, Sally's been my friend for years, so I agreed to be escorted by whoever her fiancé, Ralph, came up with. The replacement turned out to be just as dire as I'd feared. I tried my best to be desirable but, by the time we'd finished our main meals, he decided I was a dud prospect and sloped off to try his luck elsewhere.

I was sat there, staring into my empty champagne glass, when the wine waiter came up and waved the refill bottle in a questioning arc. "Why not?" I said, and looked up to see a pair of beautiful, brown eyes. After pouring, he raised an eyebrow at the next-door vacant seat that my erstwhile-date had left behind. "Gone with the wind!" I said.

The waiter's name was René and he was actually French. With little glances and smiles, as he circled the room, he somehow managed to make me forget that I had been ditched twice for the same event.

After it all wound up, we went back to the place where he was house-sitting for some old friends. It was crammed with antiques and beautiful artwork, so I could see why they wouldn't want to leave it all unattended.

We made love and slept for the rest of the night in the master bedroom. In the morning, we showered in the ensuite bathroom, and then raided the fridge in the kitchen to cook a sumptuous, restorative breakfast. We lounged about in all the different rooms of the house. As René said, "We don't want any of it to feel neglected while the owners are away."

I hated having to part from him, but real life must always intervene at some point. His friends were due back and he would have to be moving on. He'd lost his mobile, so we exchanged email addresses so he could be in touch with me as soon as he knew where he'd be and what he'd be doing.

At first I didn't worry when I didn't hear from him and the emails that I sent to him bounced. Then, on the news, they said the house of a wealthy couple had been completely cleared out while they were away. In shock, I recognised it as being the place where we had spent our idyllic tryst. At the end, the camera panned in on the only item remaining in the plundered house. It was a laptop, sitting in the middle of the floor, with a message on the screen: "There are no messages in your 'inbox' folder."

The Ballad of an Outlaw

I knew I shouldn't go West. But I didn't have a lot of choice when they discovered that the money was missing from my till at the bank. I barely made it to the train station and onto the next one out. It was going to California.

Most of the money I'd stolen lasted until I got to Kansas, so my new life started on the wild frontier. I'd heard about cowboys and Indians and small-town sheriffs, but the real thing was still a shock. Mostly, I hung around the saloons, playing poker and keeping my ears open.

Then I heard about a gang that was robbing almost every stagecoach in and out of town. It sounded like a good way to make money to me, so I asked around until I got introduced to a member of the gang. They like what I had to offer and I joined up. At least once a week we'd ride out, drag a log across the road so the stagecoach would have to stop, and then take everything of worth that they were carrying.

It worked fine until they sent out a decoy and, when we stopped it, the cavalry surrounded us. That's when my value to the gang came in. I sent a wire to my father back East, asking him to send us one of the three lawyers in the family to help us out.

The problem is that he said, "No", so here I am, serving a life sentence, in a rotten, little town in the middle of nowhere. Maybe if I'd gone to Canada...

The Reason Why

The store's mirror reflected a blizzard except for her hands and her face. Mark was going to love her when he saw her walking down the aisle toward him.

Of course, he *wasn't* going to love her, because this was just a green-card wedding and they had agreed on all the necessary arrangements already.

She sighed a bit to think it was only a fake. But she had consented because of the money, which she always needed. Far better than the choice so many others made.

The best thing of all was he'd never undress her. As she undid the zipper and slid off the snowfall, no one saw the tracks that had peppered her body.

Sam Levy

is a freelance writer and editor living in Austin, Texas. She received a Master of Liberal Arts degree with a thesis in creative writing from St. Edward's University in 2016 and is currently earning an MFA in creative writing from Southern New Hampshire University. Her poetry has appeared in Gemini Magazine, Better Than Starbucks, The Bond Street Review, and The Art of Everyone, and her fiction has appeared in Fiction on the Web.

Selfish

The illusion of unity generates the self, complete and consistent, never deviating from the brain's body map,

but, really, all the selves fractalize from a singular point. The map breathes.

We think our self has a name and is a being, but we are oblivious fractures, a smattering of what we take into us.

On the glass stage, our cells divide as we divide,

each slice echoing deafeningly to already deaf ears, yelling, self-interest is divine.

Sam Levy

Written on the Body

Before the altar of memory, sense and sentiment turn inside out.

A yanked tongue unravels the flesh, the muscle is unclothed.

Soft tissue separates, a boiled fat.

The brain furrows under its own weight.

In the fevered purity of the skeleton mirror, I lose my intent.

The craft, self-indulgent for the sake of the portrait, self-using for the sake of praise.

In a place too sacred for words, I offer them up anyway, though neither I nor the clergy are pleased.

Charles J. March III

is a hospital corpsman veteran currently living in California. His work has been put out by Atlas Obscura, Nauseated Drive, The New Postliterate, Inverted Syntax, Misery Tourism, Trnsfr Books, Wrongdoing Magazine, The Writing Disorder, Expat Press, etc. More can be found at LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com/in/charles-j-march-iii-4114b5b2) & SoundCloud (https://m.soundcloud.com/charles-john-march-iii).

Charles J. March

The Day of Mothers

Like many all over the world, I was separated from my mother, Barbara, this Mother's Day. And it was even more of a bummer, because her and her sister, my Aunt Cathy, who also happens to be my Godmother, had booked tickets awhile back to fly from Chicago to see me in California for the first couple weeks in May—but they canceled their flights once the pandemic started escalating.

Since all three of us are healthcare workers who deal with confirmed coronavirus cases, we thought it best to postpone the trip until the fall.

It was too bad, because besides the isolation and many stresses that we're all going through due to COVID-19, the three of us haven't seen each other for many months, and we were looking forward to a nice therapeutic visit, as my aunt is recently recovering from her third divorce, my Mom and I both had to put our dogs down a couple weeks ago, etc., etc.

But at least I was able to have great conversations with them both over the phone.

I was actually able to get a worm and kill a few old birds with one maternal stone, as after waking up early on Sunday, my ultra-religious Grandma Ann was the first woman I decided to ring, and my Mom and Aunt Cathy just so happened to be there as well. After the holy trinity trifecta call, I made it a point to not dwell on the negative and instead get into gratitude by thanking God for having my ducks in a row.

Although, my Mom was especially depressed about us not being together. When I asked her if she had talked with my brother, Ryan, or sister, Lauren, yet, she said, "Ryan's going to come

Charles J. March

over later, and the only thing Lauren apparently decided to do for me today is tag me in a Facebook post!" But we were both able to have a good, self-deprecating/absurd sense of humor about it all, because when I asked her if she would have preferred an Instagram post instead, she said, "I just want a damn hug!"

A few minutes after we got off the phone, she sent me an emoji of her on the side of a desolate desert road, holding a cardboard sign that said, "Please help—I need a hug." It really hit me in the feels, but also gave me a great laugh. It was especially meaningful to me, because I recently started an altruistically inspired panhandling art project where I have my patients write down on cardboard what they would say if it ever came to that point for them, in an effort to foster community outreach and put ourselves in each other's shoes, etc.

My Aunt Cathy also managed to keep her sense of humor about herself while on the phone, even though she was still freshly smarting from her separation. We reminisced about a number of things and had a bunch of laughs, and although she got pretty dark for a while in regards to her ex-husband, the cherry on top of the dark chocolate fudge sundae was her saying, "I know we couldn't be together today, but I'm so excited to see you in September!"

Hopefully things start getting back to some semblance of "normal" soon, so we can all once again be with the ones we love

loves to play with words and create experimental forms for her fiction and prose poetry. Author of 43 novels, novellas, short story collections, and poetry books. Most recently: CAT MANIA (Alien Buddha Press 2021), DOG DAZED (Kittyfeather Press 2022), and THE GOOD DOG (Prolific Pulse Press 2023). Winner of the Muses Prize. Recipient of a Pulitzer Prize nomination and 7 Pushcart Prize nominations.

Basic Training

1.

What's next? When I turn the page. In this dog magazine. An ad. Litter boxes for small dogs. Are they serious? Yes. Evidently. Any dog can be trained to use a litter box. What? What? But that's what this ad says. More. There's more. Printed instructions. On the back of the label. So there you have it. In black and white. Train your dog to use a litter box. Step by step. Well. That's handy.

2.

Here's what I'm thinking. If I had a dog. Which I don't. Technically. Although. I do have Max. My imaginary dog. The dog no one knows about. Because. Well. You know. He's imaginary. But if I had a dog. A real dog. A cute little Chihuahua. Like Max. I'd get this litter box for him. I would. I mean, I do live at the beach. But Wilmington gets its share of cold, icy, miserable winters. And in the summer. Torrential rain. Tropical storms. Hurricanes. Can't forget those. Let's face it. No dog is going out in that mess. I mean, I wouldn't. Won't. Ever. So there.

3.

And yet, and yet. This I'm wondering. Some dogs are easy to train. And some aren't. Would Max be one of the easy dogs? Would he? I wonder.

4.

And yet, and yet. This. This I'm wondering. Can tourists be trained? The tourists that walk into the beachwear store. The store where I work. Can they be trained? Those tourists. Trained. NOT to ask stupid questions. Like do we sell lawnmowers? (I kid you not.) Or prom dresses? Or car batteries? More. There's more. Can tourists be trained NOT to get angry? You know. When I remind them what we sell.

BEACHWEAR. (Read my lips!) I mean, think about it. Where would I put lawnmowers or prom dresses or car batteries? On the t-shirt table? The swimming suit rack? Next to the seashell souvenirs? I mean, really. Hey. You tell me.

5.

Training. For dogs? Evidently. For tourists? Probably not. I know, I know. Too much to ask. Yeah. That's what I thought. But hey. A girl can dream. Can't she?

Rasheed Olayemi

hails from Lagos state, Nigeria. He owns an advance level certificate in English language and Communication skills and Bachelor's degree from ESPAM Formation University, Cotonou, Republic of Benin.

He is a teacher, and has taught in private schools in Abeokuta and Lagos state, Nigeria for over a decade. He is also a published author. He writes short stories, poetry, articles and dramas.

He has written a number of books in English Language and his dialect (Yoruba Language) which were published in Nigeria such as "If Only I Had Listened", "The Chain of Joy", "Drought in Abada"," The Disobedient Sheep" and many others.

One of his titles written in Yoruba language "MATOWO" was published by Evans Brothers Publishers, Nigeria.

Olayemi attended the International Education And Resource Network Conference (IEARN) held in Doha, Qatar in July, 2013. He had worked for a few years in Dubai, UAE.

Rasheed Olayemi

The Sick Person

When someone you know took ill
Pay visits to them
Provide necessary assistance to the ailing person
Show empathy with cash
But if you can't afford to give out cash
Show affection with kind words and manners
Abandoning them at such despondent state of mind in
callousness
Build bridges not walls

Without a Silver Spoon

If you're not born with a silver spoon in your mouth You need to know that knowledge and education Can turn your situation around Knowledge and education can make you great Don't wait for abundance Before you enroll in school to learn Utilize the little you have and get started Majority of the great scholars today Didn't learn in affluence Strive and endure To brighten your career

Rasheed Olayemi

Absenteeism

Knowledge acquisition is a gradual process Proper learning in school is achieved by attending classes regularly

But not intermittently

This is why a student must not deliberately absent themselves

Aside, some topics are correlated

This shows that learning requires consistency

Make sure you attend your lessons regularly

As this enables you to perform well

And if you missed a class

Ask your colleagues what they were taught while you weren't around

Any student who deliberately stays away from school Debars themselves from sound academic competence And this is detrimental to personal and societal growth

RC deWinter

's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in New York City Haiku (NY Times, 2/2017), easing the edges: a collection of everyday miracles, (Patrick Heath Public Library of Boerne, 11/2021) The Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Anthology (River Bend Bookshop Press, 12/2021), in print: 2River, Event, Gargoyle Magazine, the minnesota review, Night Picnic Journal, Plainsongs, Poetry South, Prairie Schooner, Southword, The Ogham Stone, Twelve Mile Review, Variant Literature, York Literary Review among many others and appears in numerous online literary journals.

RC deWinter

the mountains of the moon

"no one but the poet knows the distance" he said but when he said that he didn't know he was already on his way to the furthest most unreachable coordinates of spacetime and after that there was no future just the february wind whistling through my heart freezing my blood freezing the tears on my cheeks into salty diamonds scattered over my face a miniature mountain range of heartstopping grief that despite the best efforts of the relentless fireball sun never melts

0 mph

the sky is a delicate grey and there is no wind up from the sea carrying the salt breath of places

far away even the birds are silent no song breaking the neutral monotony of this silent day

it's as if nature's waiting for a signal to loose the riotous abundance of spring but from who or

what is a mystery surely the hidden workings of the universe humming in the neutrality

of science have no stake in how days unfold in the long corridor of time but there i go again as trapped

in my own nothingness i spin dross from straw

RC deWinter

assigning significance to an ordinary day

to keep from
getting stuck in the
la brea
of my own
life holding me in neutral at
an unmarked crossroad

Mary Christine Delea

is the author of The Skeleton Holding Up the Sky, 3 chapbooks, and many journal publications. She has a websitemchristinedelea.com--where she posts writing prompts and poems she loves. Originally from Long Island, NY, she now lives in a Portland suburb in Oregon. Delea also makes beaded jewelry, quilts, and volunteers at various nonprofit organizations.

Vanishing

We convince ourselves we never cared for passenger pigeons and that dodo birds could not have kept pace with modern society and would have died off anyway.

We weave our way through feathers and bones, wings and claws, and sometimes we call things *meat*. Everything belongs in at least one group—food or pet,

wild or caged, extinct or in flight. The tallest bird in North America is close to no longer existing, yet also returning, slowly, as if Schrödinger possessed

a whooping crane instead of a cat. These birds recognize flight as a joy, a beautiful necessity. Its call is impossible to ignore, but we've tried, eating them

down to 21 birds less than 100 years ago. We stopped calling them *meat*, we decided these birds matter, not as much as us, of course, but in a small enough

way that we could change without sacrifice. Now about 600 whooping cranes disappear into marsh grasses and some of us are hopeful that they might again fill

our skies as they used to, soaring with condors, piping plovers, golden-cheeked warblers, and other rare birds, blocking the sun, letting us fail to see them once again.

September 2020

Summer stays, worn and still, warm air cooled by smoke-filled skies.

Slow Oregon bees remain grounded, birds fly low, refusing to stray upward.

Gardens brown, leaves slightly sooty, roots fooled into shrinking early,

curling for sleep, retreating from flame. Dry dirt. No wind. Empty parks. The air

around us collapsing. We are hardened now, have surely forgotten our need

to tame time—the quiet lesson we've learned is that we can master nothing.

Not a thing is fast this September—we have earned this lethargy.

We search for sunshine and find none. Streetlights beam mid-afternoon, a lie,

pretending to be nighttime's darkness. The mums refuse to burst their bright fire colors

although autumn will soon arrive. The line between seasons is as hazy

as the atmosphere, but soon the bees will die and the leaves will lose their fight to remain

in our lives, parting from the trees that did not burn. We are all tired.

Mary Christine Delea

The Ghosts of Makira Moorhens

seen and killed in the early 2000s maybe the word of non-birders not always reliable officially seen in 1953 but not since

little hen marsh hen native hen
bird of many names
elsewhere they flourish
black and brown glossy sheen
shadows from Siberia to Australia,
and as dinosaurs throughout Europe

(we often forget how old birds are—
our self-smug humanness making us
oblivious to the obvious)

common dusky gough Samoan tristan all extinct

the Makira is a mystery the avian counterpart to Schrodinger's cat discussed more than spotted by ornithologists who are always

worried stressed

the birds solidly in this realm
need so much help
leaving little for apparitions
their undetectable flight
the faint echo of squawks clucks caws
moorhen feathers or
the fine leaves of ferns

is a legally blind photographer who makes her home in Kentucky. Her current interests include using Artificial Intelligence to create new works from existing photos.



Early Traveler



Rising



Summer Memory



When She Left Him

Pawel Markiewicz

was born 1983 in Siemiatycze. Lives in Poland. He is a poet and writer, who likes tender flash fiction as well as haiku and tanka.

Paweł Markiewicz

Sonnet about Apollonian beauty of the world

We think of the fascinating charm.

We fantasize about wizardry.

We ponder on the amazing bard.

We reflect on poetic beauty.

We muse about astonishing moon.

We dream of the surprising vessel.

We philosophize about fair throne.

We describe awesome Indian summer.

We ruminate on the brilliant pearls.

We remember overwhelming sun.

We commemorate impressive tides.

We daydream of bewildering soul.

We recall the staggering sailor.

We contemplate the breathtaking storm.

Paweł Markiewicz

In the bewitched aviary. The sonnet according to Mr. Shakespeare

Helots muse about moony Golden Fleece of the **condor**. Drudges think of the dreamy eternal dew of the **hen**. Philosophers ponder on winged fantasy of the **crow**. Kings ruminate on a picturesque gold of the **jay**.

Priests contemplate the dreamed, soft, meek weird of the **woodpecker**.

Masters daydream about nice marvelous songs of the **tern**. Soothsayers dream of fulfilled gold of the **yellowhammer**. Knights philosophize about poetic dawn of the **wren**.

Hoplites fantasize about a red sky of the **sparrow**. Athletes describe the most tender treasure-charm of the **snipe**. Gods remember an enchanted, dear temple of the **seagull**. Goddesses recall fairytale-like heroes of the **kite**.

Poets commemorate the elves-like heaven of the **owl**. Bards reflect on most amazing dreamery of the **rook**.

soothsayer - fortuneteller

The flower-like second sonnet

I conceive the brilliant lilac. I build admirable holly. I design pleasant marigold. I constitute pleasing lily.

You devise outstanding iris. You discover awesome poppy. You establish fine orchid. You forge an amazing pansy.

She forms surprising peony. She founds the phenomenal rose. She makes the superb rosemary. She initiates cool primrose.

We plan tremendous hibiscus. We produce the strange narcissus.

Paweł Markiewicz

Flower-like sonnet

I cherish the dreamy crocus.
I love the moony cornflower.
I make love to bemused cactus.
I affect dreamed daffodil.

You are fond of vague elder. You love back a misty dahlia. You dote on languorous heather. You idolize the faint freesia.

We prize hazy chrysanthemum. We treasure indistinct daisy. We value dim cheery blossom. We admire the lulling lily.

They like the calming amaranth. They relish soothing edelweiss.

affect = archaic love

Lynn White

lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award. Her poetry has appeared in many publications including: Consequence Journal, Firewords, Capsule Stories, Gyroscope Review and So It Goes.

lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com & facebook.com/Lynn-White-Poetry-1603675983213077

Lynn White

Doomed

In my dreams I can see it.

I've left the forest behind
to feast on the fresh grass by the lake
and now I'm marching through the flowers
into the bright blue water to quench my thirst.

But it's only a dream,
the dream of a creature
going nowhere.
Doomed.
Without a place in the brown water,
without a space in the skyscraper city.
Doomed.
Laid to rest
too soon.

Dancer

I'd expected the aching muscles and the sore, deformed feet, expected that the applause would numb them and hide them away temporarily. But the expectations of the well dressed and well connected lurking in the back stage shadows waiting to transport dreaming feet into a nightmare. They were unexpected. They were the low points, the bass line when the music played.

Carousel

Round and round, go the galloping horses round and round and up and down with smiling faces on the merry go round.

But as time passes and smiles fade, gaudy colours become drab, faces pale and worn.

look,
they're
all
disheveled
now
lurching
and
staggering
round and round
on the
treadmill
of the merry go round.

Round and round.
Round and round.
One more revolution
and they may be ready.
Ready to bite the hands
that refused to feed them.

Lynn White

Round and round.
Round and round.
Only one more revolution,
to sharpen up the teeth.
Round and round,
just another revolution
on the not so merry go round.

Lynn White

Africa Is Everywhere

The factories closed for two weeks each summer and it was off to the seaside then!

They would head for the beach and hire a deck chair there were no sun-beds back in those days and there they would sit on shell laden sands, the women in cotton frocks and the men in grey flannels, sandals with socks and a sleeves rolled up, open necked shirt, there were no tee shirts back then and shorts were too daring for the over twenties. And most likely it was too cool in any case.

The sun could be bright though so the women had a straw hat ready, but this was too exotic and extravagant for the men, newspaper fashioned into a sailing boat shape was de rigueur for them.

And so one way or another eyes were shielded from the occasional brightness.

Nowadays the sun has grown angry, too bright for our eyes.
It rages fiercely threatening all in its view. Africa is everywhere now and soon sun-beds will be out of fashion. It's too hot now, too darn hot.

Cracking Open

Concrete and clay glass ensconced in metal frames, paint on board, gas in pits,

once
it meant something
once
it had a purpose.

It's over now
purposeless
cracked
empty
waiting
for a future
hoping
that soon
something
will make it's way
through the cracks
as time passes.

So now look carefully, see already something is emerging

Lynn White

finding its way making a new beginning after the end.

is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in North Carolina, United States. His poetry has been published in The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling; Soul-Lit: A Journal of Spiritual Poetry, and his short stories have been published in Ariel Chart International Literary Journal; Faith, Hope and Fiction; and Children, Churches and Daddies. He has also written lyrics for songs recorded by various contemporary Christian music artists, including Brent Lamb, Connie Scott and The Gaither Vocal Band.

Ghost Me Again

A poker face will not hide you forever, and you can't just co-opt a moment of silence as an alibi for donning an invisibility cloak every time you feel uncomfortable. We are no longer toddlers playing hide-and-seek, believing we can hide in plain sight by placing our hands over eyes, as if you can't see me if I can't see you. There you are. I see you.

The truth about how
we come to know and be
known is self-evident and eternal.
We cannot NOT communicate. We are
all responsible for our own communication.

Everything we say, everything we don't say, everything we do, everything we don't do communicates something.

When our neighbor is profiled, stereotyped, slandered because of how he looks, or who she loves, and you say nothing, your reticence outs you, gives you away. Your silence is deafening.

When decency calls for something to be done, nobody gets to say, "Why are you looking at me? I didn't do anything!" As if not doing anything when something needs to be done serves as a

not guilty plea. Inactions, like actions, speak louder than words.

Do you honestly believe that your sins of omission will not find you out? Didn't you get the memo? It's not just the bad things we do. It's the good things we don't.

Complicity masquerading as innocence is cowardice placing personal privilege above the needs of those who are marginalized, disenfranchised, oppressed, dehumanized, ostracized as "other," brutalized, erased.

You may say with sincerity,
"I went into fight-flight-freeze,"
and I froze. There is no shame in fear.
We just can't establish permanent residence there.

It comes
down to this:
Define or be defined.
The power of self-definition
is our first and last power. Our very
lives can be taken from us. The power to
define ourselves must be given away to be lost.
Who will define you? Who will define your legacy?

Ghost me again, the next time I am counting hearts, and I might get the impression that you don't have one.

If the Answer is Yes

If the answer is yes, then what is the question?

Will the bloom come off the rose? Well yes, but that is not the question.

Will the ice caps melt?
Yes, I mean, they are melting as
we speak and that is alarming and we
have to act now or we'll wear out our welcome,
but that's a very different yes to a very different question.

Will the oceans rise?
Of course, when the ice caps
melt, we will be up the creek without
a paddle, so yes, we have to change or we'll
be kicked to the curb where nothing lives to tell, but that
is not the yes to the question I'm asking you to ask at the
moment.

Will temperatures rise?
Will hurricanes get stronger?
Will floods multiply exponentially?
Will droughts, famines, fires and wars become
the new norm? Yes, yes, yes and yes! Mother Earth needs
all the TLC we can give her or she'll miscarry the whole lot of
us!

We should be recycling, minimizing our carbon footprint, calling our senators and representatives, marching, voting out the planet killers and voting in our children!

But please.

Just breathe.

If the answer is yes, the question is, will I love you forever?

Silly.

Now what the hell are we waiting for? Let's save the world!

The Knight

She shouldn't be here?

Are you referring to how she shouldn't have survived being born so premature only to prematurely lose her mom at age 4 when she had to go live with her aunt where she was mentally, emotionally, verbally, physically and sexually abused by her uncle from 4 to 14, and not for lack of trying, failed to off herself twice?

Are you alluding to how, at 14, she shocked the doctors and nurses by waking up in ICU after nearly succumbing to sepsis from the coat hanger she used to take her life into her own hands when her aunt and uncle deprived her of stopping her uncle's seed from growing inside of her?

Are you suggesting that she survived too many overdoses, youth detention centers, nights in jail, nights in homeless shelters, nights with strangers, nights on the streets being abused, raped and beaten?

Are you implying that she cheated death when she was starving herself, eating the enamel off her teeth and eroding her esophagus by obsessively vomiting up her emotions

with whatever she managed to swallow and woke up again in ICU to questions about why she was so desperately trying to waste away?

She shouldn't be here?

It's too late. She is here.

She didn't get here without first going in circles, getting lost countless times, without coming to innumerable dead ends, roadblocks, detours, ups and downs, twists and turns. She didn't arrive without first dying numerous times and awakening to Narcan and defibrillators. She couldn't have gotten here had she not taken roads less traveled by the trolls who used and abused her.

Had she not traveled back in time to search for those precious parts of herself she lost so early — the parts of herself that everyone else had given up on, left for dead — had she not found them, accepted them, taken them under her wing, loved them with every piece of her heart, and traveled over a thousand miles to get here, she would have

Here she is. In this
sea of estrogen. At this
Million Women March. In DC.
She's crying out for lawmakers to close
the boyfriend loophole for men convicted of
domestic violence, demanding equal pay for equal work,
and politely inviting the old men in the halls of congress who'd

never made it.

never vote to deny themselves Viagra to stop trying to control her body.

She has a semicolon tattoo on her right shoulder because thanks to the semicolon, people, like sentences, don't have to come to an end; they can continue on. She has a Simba tattoo on her left shoulder with the words, "Remember Who You Are." She has refashioned the tiny teardrop tattoo under her right eye into a four-leaf clover. Her hair is the color of fire.

After so long, you have come now to her rescue?

There she is.

She is the one holding the sign over her head with no bend in her elbows: "I'm not your damsel in distress. I'm the knight. I'm here to save myself."

is an emerging poet located in Portland, Oregon. He has two self-published collections of poetry out and is hoping to publish his third book through an independent small press. His work has been featured in the Gival press ArLiJo issue 153 journal, Death Rattle's Penrose Vol. 2, Prometheus Dreaming, Arc Prose magazine and New Note poetry.

Brew

The cauldron of saline where sky meets bubbling sea beckons me, I am kettle of sand and starfish; her moonlit arms surge against me.
Witches brew, o salt, thou withered bay leaf,
Your macro motion dominates the micro in me.
I am driftwood sailing,
called by four winds,
bringing us divergents together, bustling as the beaches of Normandy.

We are all assimilation of ocean depths, the siren's song of sunken dreams, my comrades and I, salt and sand in a kelp-skinned body. I wonder how they feel her current after we've packed up and fled the homeland, hearth of Aphrodite.

I Am Not a Woman, I'm a God

Through the upstairs window I spot a kindred spirit, acorn lying dormant, shelled, knocked loose from last week's windstorm. I wonder if it's cold on the inside or if there is a little fire in there, little veins carrying scorched blood. You couldn't tell from the outside if it is dead or alive. But I know better.

Part of me wants to take it inside, plant it somewhere warm and cozy. Whisper it little affirmations and water it daily. But all of me knows that won't let it grow -that won't make it crack. But if by some dark miracle, something sprouts, I will stare in awe, I will never curse the turbulent winds and stony soil that have let me make it so far.

Triple Goddess

In autumn she waxes bright.

There is something a fawn looking frantic

leaves fall. Crunch underfoot peel back

the sheets of wave roiling spilling

ivory along the shoreline. Full

her hands caress every living thing

holding close those who are lost.

Raising the sigil whispering through the trees

Mother come home.

Asylum

We are different from every other predator, we stalk our prey, taking with regard only to our creature comforts,

but greed is a black moth, and reckoning looks like white ash falling from the heavens. We fight endless wars to assert our dominance over the Earth,

not knowing She is a mantis waiting to have our heads once our prayers and service are through. They say history is written by the victors,

but She will let the history books rot. Like a vine-covered asylum,

Mother reclaims all her oddities in the end.

Holding

The world spins like a record with only minor scratches and skips, the audience applauds constantly, surprised we are still somehow on track. But I will always hold my applause until our melody isn't full of discordant cries but redeeming hymns and graceful reprises.

's fiction, nonfiction, and poetry translations (from Danish) have been recently published by the North Dakota Quarterly, Humans in the Wild (an anthology about gun violence), Barren Magazine, the Westview News, Kinder Link, Maine Public, HuffPo, the LA Review, Rattle, Exchanges, the International Poetry Review, Modern Poetry in Translation, World Literature Today, Griffel, and Persimmon Tree. She is a twice-widowed octogenarian, a rapidly disappearing (and too-often underrepresented) group. She lives in New York City and Hiram, Maine.

"Seeing the Light" is part of a collection of memoir pieces (some published and some unpublished).

Seeing the Light

The local radio station touted perfect conditions on the Night of the Shooting Stars, as my childhood family called the Perseids at their peak. No moon. No clouds. We expected that on Tear Cap, far from interference of electric lights, we would watch meteors craze the sky for hours. The Milky Way glowed star-studded silver above us, but drops glinted in our flashlight beams. The cloudless sky was spewing rain. And had been since we reached the treeless granite boulders. We were getting wet.

We were a dozen climbers, children and adults related by birth or marriage, most bonded by a fascination with comets, eclipses, sun spots, halos around the moon, dust trails, water spouts, you-name-it freak overhead occurrences, and summerlong water fights. I say *most* because my husband Steffen, a lawyer and a man of words, would have preferred crime show reruns to a hike up Tear Cap—but there was no television where my childhood family vacationed in Hiram, Maine. That he didn't "get" my family—engineers, computer programmers, a doctor, and that ilk's wannabees—was apparent from the first time he met them. The first time he came to dinner, one of my

sibs, probably Carol, the good sister, who has been intuiting what my other sibs wanted and doing it since long before the term *enabler* was invented, land-mined his place at the table with our family's finest—a collapsing fork and a knife with a fly glued to the blade. She stuck the sieve-like spoon into the sugar bowl. When the sugar fell through the spoon, Steffen asked, "Is this any way to treat a guest?" I had to admit, in my family—yes.

They didn't "get" him, either. He made up facts, a proclivity that didn't strike them as funny or interesting. They preferred reality. Especially weird reality, like this rain. That he was married to me, the family oddball, didn't help his case.

Under the circumstances, he hiked gamely.

My sister Eugenia, who calls herself—I'm not kidding
—The Great One, was leading. She's the sort to hike up Mount
Katahdin at three AM to see the Green Flash over the Atlantic
in that split second before dawn.

But maybe her prowess was waning—she was leading us straight into rain.

My brother Walter supervised the sewers of a New Hampshire city; Carol was married to a doctor who had studied geology in college; Eugenia, as she herself will tell you, knew absolutely everything. With these credentials, they fancied themselves as water experts. As we continued our flashlight climb over sloping boulders, they postulated causes for the cloudless rain. Droppings from night-flying birds? Melting ice from meteors? Water bugs? Waterspouts from mountain springs? When Walter suggested spray from the Atlantic, twenty-five miles away, Eugenia, ever needing to be right, announced, "This rain makes no sense."

"Oh, it does," Steffen said. "I'll explain." The path ahead went dark as flashlight beams swept accusingly in his direction. He's a Democrat and he's married to that one (me), they were thinking, so how could he possibly know a thing?

Steffen spoke with confidence about how the earth cools at night causing moisture to evaporate, and how the air becomes supersaturated and then re-forms as mist that dissipates so quickly it seems to be invisible. The way he joined concepts together was—well—I could practically hear *Ah ha's*

and *Oh Wows* exploding through my family's dedicated-toscience brains. Even Eugenia, programmed to lob missiles at all ideas except her own, was impressed.

A family discussion followed. My three sibs, with a little help from the kids, as we called the next generation, concluded we'd be able to see the shooting stars through the rain.

Flashlight beams arced back to the path, and we resumed our upward trek.

Soon Walter called out, "Hey, Steffen, if you're so right, why haven't we seen this kind of rain before?"

That really got me. I almost shouted, "You can explain volcanoes, can't you, but have you ever seen one?" But Steffen jumped in to explain that the unusual conditions that night—the really clear sky, absence of a moon, temperature, ionization, and relative humidity—were right for this rare phenomenon.

His voice was drowned by gasps. A panorama of skyscrapers lit up the far horizon.

But we were in Maine, east of the White Mountains and west of Portland. No cities, towns, or rural villages had

been visible from Tear Cap before, and it was not possible that we were witnessing a spurt of urban growth.

Except that towers were there.

My sibs hypothesized. Could those shining towers be the last rays of the sunset two hours before? In our confusion about the rain, had we turned toward Portland? Carol asked Steffen if the night's strange atmospheric conditions could be throwing a once-in-a-lifetime reflection of Boston or New York high into the sky.

"Beats me," he said.

At that exact moment, Eugenia shouted in her best eureka voice, "The Northern Lights."

Instant recognition flashed through the group. The Great Eugenia was right. Those who know my childhood family would understand the dream-come-true of those flares from thousands of miles away. A first for us all. Even the kids who had no idea of Northern Lights were stunned silent.

We stared as the towers shimmered, dipped, and rose again, and long after they faded to dark.

On the way down, the kids discovered that Walter had been dousing us with his super soaker—another episode in a summer-long water fight. Eugenia announced, "Revenge." Carol said, "I bought more water balloons and materials for building a catapult." The kids cheered.

Before we reached the junipers, Steffen stopped. I was surprised that the entire group gathered around him.

He stared into the distance where the blazing flares had been, as if the dark horizon itself was another nocturnal phenomenon. The rest of us stared, too.

We sank into the silence of knowing we might never see the Aurora Borealis again.

Atlas Booth

is a writer who lives in Cape Town, South Africa. He has been published I several lit mags. He enjoys an assortment of tea's and cold brew coffee. For more information on his work, visit his website: https://atlaslbooth.wixsite.com/main

Enough

Why are we still using fossil fuels when we don't need to? I could answer that easily, but people don't listen. They have been taught to not question. To conform.

The arguments often state that wind turbines take up a lot of space, but wind turbines can be placed on the same properties that solar farms can. There's no need to waste the space... but then again, if our taxes went where they are supposed to go, every house, every building could have solar panels.

But why stop with solar panels? More efficient renewable power sources have been developed. The Aureus System can be applied to EVERY outside window in the building. Water turbines can conduct energy in our dams. Water creates almost 8 times more power than solar. This system could be used in waterfalls or strong rivers. This way, sunshine or rain, you have Electricity. Elon Musk holds patents to battery cells because he knew this tech would drive the future.

Just as remarkable is wind power. Having been given a bad name due to sound and visual pollution and yet, a new form has been created with nanowires. Air-Gen, a compact hand held machine, can produce power from thin air. No wind needed. It can be used indoors too and is a passive conductor. It is also being produced at low cost.

Town sculptures could be set up with built in Aureus, water turbines, Air-Gen or all three. Let the creative community do what it does best. Let it work with the scientists. Let there be something for tourists to see. Something unique, beautiful, and yet, useful.

We don't need gas. If more people looked to sustainable sources of power, there would be more electric cars. Those cars could have Aureus on their windows. Air-Gen inside their cabins. The parts can be studied and made cheaper. More eco friendly. There would be market competition to lower prices for the average citizen and bring sustainable energy within reach of everyone.

Atlas Lincoln Booth

As gas and electricity prices go up, many people are learning how to take themselves off the grid. The energy industry doesn't like this though. They lose money that way. It just takes one country. One brick in the wall. One person who has had ENOUGH. And the oil and fossil fuel companies go scurrying because they know they are living on borrowed time.

Yet, they cannot afford to lose their stranglehold on the populace. It's one of the reasons a country can stand unopposed from real harm while wiping out its neighbour.

They would rather gouge into our earth, create sink holes, instead of working for a new future. Using up land and acting as if they are helping. As if fracking won't destroy more than it will help.

And all the while the future smiles, because it knows we won't stay silent.

was born on the island of Vashon in Washington. With not much to do on the heavily forested island, Plauche quickly found a love in books, which quickly led to a love of storytelling as he would make up stories of magical creatures in the woods around his house.

At the age of twelve, Plauche moved to southern Louisiana where he became more involved with his Cajun heritage and began hearing more and more Cajun folktales, songs, and poetry. These writing lessons only found on bayous and southern porches continued to influence Plauche's writing, and soon he too was joining these storytelling sessions with ones of his own creation.

Eventually, Plauche moved to Seattle, and his writing changed yet again to include more stories about living in the city. Plauche now combines the magic found in forests and the themes of old Cajun storytelling into setting specific stories, often inspired by events from his own life, about the highs and lows of the cities he has been to.

Plauche moved to Chicago and graduated from Columbia College Chicago with his Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing with a specification in Fiction. He has recently had work published in Commuterlit, Black Poppy Review, and Mementos CHI as well as having an active website (https://www.samuelplauche.com/) where he self publishes poetry and short stories for his ever growing audience.

Rushing, No Rushing

A bullet through the night with two beams of light protruding from its head. It slices through darkness, leaving it shattered and gasping in the wake of its holy wraith. Speed. The bullet is no bullet, but an automobile, an SUV that speeds down the streets leaning into its purpose.

And we are in this bullet, car. Rushing, rushing, rushing. We lean in with the purpose of the vehicle as it rushes us to our destination. Streetlights zip by, their light moving quickly and blinking out of our vision just as swiftly. We hold our drinks in the air and laugh. There are three of us in the car. Me, you, and her. We're laughing and smiling and rushing. She is driving and you are in the front seat, stealing the occasional few seconds to turn around and look back at me with blue eyes made from the melting ice in the Arctic.

West Seattle is the land we are traveling in, rushing in, leaning in. West Seattle is my home that possesses no home. I wander always, my soul is intensely restless. I bounce from place to place, forever in constant motion. West Seattle, though, is the closest thing I have known to a home in ages. I know these streets, these trees, the people and the sky. I know the rocks and the bridges. The waves and the birds. Alki through Burien, I know it all. All of this splattering of details is without any sort of point.

We are in this car, rushing. Her, she, is driving and laughing and drinking and rushing. You, Arctic Eyes, are drinking, laughing, and dancing in your seat to the song, singing along with laughs and smiles. I can only watch, smile,

and drink. Drink more. There are bottles of... beer? Wine? Liquor? In the car, maybe. Also at her apartment.

We reach the beach, our destination. "Alki, we have arrived. We have met you on the northern tip of West Seattle, we have come to greet you."

This travels through my head as it's been awhile in my wanderings since I have been back here. The apartments all look the same and it warms my heart to see them in all of their glory. The same restaurants and the same drunks drinking after dark are still here too, and they're still merry and we're happy too. You look back to me, holding your drink in your hand, and you smile. You turn away then, and I'm trying to figure out the meaning of it.

The old time drunks let us kick it around their bonfire. You, me, and her. We dance around it and burn items within it and we stare in it ourselves and we're thinking all of our dark thoughts and all of our happy ones and the lustful ones and the sweet ones.

You look at me from across the fire and smile, I look at you and smile back.

You and I are sitting on the couch in her apartment. She has gone to bed and it's just us, drunk, watching the figures on the television move around.

"I need a massage," you say. You move your shoulders. You're laying down and I'm sitting right next to you.

"Sore?" Lask.

"Yeah, I just need one. Hey, can you give me one?"

"You want me to give you a massage?"

"Yeah."

"I've never given one before."

"I have the fullest confidence in you."

"Uh, okay."

I put my hands on your shoulders and rub them. In this moment, it is just you and I. No booze, no thoughts. She is gone, it is just you and I.

And I keep massaging you and you stir. Your body arches and moves to my hands running over it and applying pressure to it. I think that there's something inherently sexual in the massage, but that may just be there's something sexual in any human touch. Or perhaps it's something sexual in every single thing existing. Or perhaps that's all dumb. You arch, move, and come closer. I wonder, can you read my thoughts? Do you know how hard I am trying to push away all thoughts of lust and do this inherently sexual thing with no sexiness because we're all strange and weird and bothered and there may be nothing sexual about this?

But you're a psychic and I am right. You must be reading my thoughts, analyzing all of my brain activity because next you smile and I smile at your smile and then your lips reach up to mine, reaching.

There is no rushing, the only thing we have is time. That's the only thing anyone has. Time. We take our time.

Morning seeps in like a sickness. Our eyes are forcibly opened by light and it brings on rolling pains across our brains

and a turning and spinning in our stomachs. Death, this is death! No, it's just the morning after, but it's comparable.

She is gone and it's just us, the couch, and that bastard, the sun. I rise and brew coffee and bring a glass of water over for you, which you happily ingest. We wander out of the front door and onto the little step out front so I can smoke down the cigarettes that won't help my state. We curl into each other, drinking coffee and fighting off the sun. There is a song playing. I don't know what it is, but it's nice.

"I like this," you say. I wrap you into me more which wraps me into you more. I make sure not to burn you with my cigarette.

"Yeah, I like this," I say. I look into your eyes, still made of ice. The scene is beautiful, it's serene, and it's over about twenty minutes later. You got places to be and I have people to see. You give me a ride in your car to some unimportant and useless destination and I get out and that's that. That's the end.

is a poet and freelance writer in Daytona Beach, Florida. She has published 27 collections and chapbooks of poetry. In addition, she has published her work in numerous national and international literary journals. She is currently the editor for Kind of a Hurricane Press literary journals (www.kindofahurricanepress.com).

I Am Uphill

battle, constant defiance
of gravity. I am a challenge,
an illusive grail to be quested.
A series of obstacles to overcome,
I am journey of self-discovery, of sensory
awakening. I am shifting of focus,
perpetual opposing motion, I am path
to victory, a destination perceived and
completed.

Ghost of Improbable Tomorrows

I wish for tangible voice, for lips able to communicate my desire to walk with you as something more than I am capable. I shudder with knowledge of the paleness of my touch. Insubstantial is my name. Unworthy the whispered brand condemning me to shadowed longing and dreams of a world where I am not silently fading away.

Twice Upon A Time

You were my fairy-told prince. Charming and eloquent[ly vociferous]. I hunted and hungered for your words. Hours faded into weeks under the mercy of your tongue. You tranced me. I was walking slumbered and slightly skewe[re]d to the tone of your voice. Whispering mirrors -made of chance -- shaped landmarks of disbelief. And I worshiped at all your temples. Then the sky fell. And silence reigned. Over Tly incomplete : my world lost its focus. Uncentered, I looked towards the book. Ends fraying, you opened our pages to scatter. Blindly the waves' ink faded. Scarring: your/my/our skin = dehydrated sin. No make up could cover the blemishes of mistaken vocabulary. Fallen was more than an antonymic catastrophe. Once

you stepped. A third — too lightly. The castle, the cast[e], and the illusion cracked. Now even the smallest reflection (of inflection) turns. Fateless. And fastly approaching: Vindictive.

Multiple contests winner for short fiction,

Mehreen Ahmed

is an Australian novelist born in Bangladesh. Her historical fiction, The Pacifist (Cosmic Teapot Publication, 2017),is a Drunken Druid's Editor's Choice. Gatherings (Bridge House, Publishing, 2021), is nominated for the James Tait Black Prize for fiction. Her flash fiction have been nominated for 3xbotN.Pushcart.Publication of the Month.A contributor to the Best Asian Speculative Fiction Anthology, her works have also been shortlisted, and have received honorable finalist. mention.Critically acclaimed by Midwest Book Review, DD Magazine, The Wild Atlantic Book Club to name a few, she is a juror to the KM Anthru Award, and a featured writer on Flash Fiction North and Connotation Press, her works have been translated into German, Greek and Bangla. Her works have appeared in Litro, Quail Bell, EllisesZine, Alien Buddha,Insignia 2022: Best Asian Speculative Fiction Anthology and more.

Dreamtime

In the folds of thick fog, down by the curved Bay of Moon, a stillness descended on the ocean after a swift storm had passed. As the fog slowly lifted, a boat was unveiled; it was adrift. It swerved off course. I was right under, singing a primordial tune—a blue song. A man slid off the deck and fell into the ocean. It was a leaking boat.

I watched him plop. Into the ocean, he plunged that very moment like a dollop of cream into a coffee cup—floundering. I surfaced and wagged my fin in front of him. He caught it. It slipped first, then he held it firmly in a grip. I sailed in the current's slipstream some nautical lengths until sunset in search of land. Was there any land nearby? Any show of land at all, in all the world, besides these vast stretches of the seawaters? Hope piqued, a sandy shore emerged along the Emerald Bay. I rushed towards it and reached its sandy shores within minutes. I rolled him over onto the beach in the midst of knotted weeds, oyster shells, and ponded waters cupped in footprints.

The tired man looked at me. I expelled a fountain of delight and saw how he curled up in a fetal position. In the meantime, his vessel nose-dived into the ocean as the ocean swallowed its parts in bits until all was galvanised under. His mates on the vessel were scattered on the waves like little debris as though they didn't matter.

Fate had it that I rescued this dunking man from a sunken vessel. He looked at me, and he wondered how such a miracle ride was even possible? What are you—God? Who are you? He mumbled. I smiled, somersaulted in the air, and submarined, like a vanishing blink from the stars. I resumed singing; he heard it far from the ocean's depth. Exotic to him, the tune haunted him for days on end—the blue song, he called it. Mysterious it sure was.

But the mysteries of the universe were locked in the layers of the lyrics which were decipherable through the Aboriginal dreamtime—inter-relation of all people and things—workings

Mehreen Ahmed

of nature and humanity—land and spirit. The deep connections which elude the eye—spirits more powerful which connected every life on earth such as the creatures of this blue soul.

The man waited for the saviour dolphin to return. But it never did. But it continued to convey the existential connections through its lyrics. Connections of abstraction communicated through the senses alone—through dreamtime—far beyond any human language.

Marie C Lecrivain

is a poet, publisher, and curator of Dashboard Horus. Her work has been published in California Quarterly, Chiron Review, Gargoyle, Nonbinary Review, Orbis, Pirene's Fountain, and many other journals. She's the author of several books of poetry and fiction, and editor of Ashes to Stardust: A David Bowie Tribute Anthology (forthcoming/copyright 2022 Sybaritic Press, www.sybpress.com).

The Last Mountain

Everest, the last mountain, is only a quarter of its size above the waters. When the polar ice caps melted and the oceans rose, most of the humans in that corner of the world were lost in the deluge. Those who survived the flood fled to the highest Himalayan peak. With their lungs at the mercy of hypoxia, and the overreaching effects of a life led sedentary, many turned around and surrendered to the long wet reach of the sea.

These days, Everest stands proud and dark with only its head and shoulders visible. A narrow, uneven spiral of scars has sprouted across the surface. Everest is now an island where the children of the survivors of the deluge - the Sags and the Choms - agreed to build a road that would connect their two peoples, a bridge to keep humanity connected forever. The Sags work their way from the bottom to the top, and the Choms vice versa.

The scarcity of air and food make the work difficult.

Within five generations, the Sags and the Choms have adapted to their surroundings. Where their ancestors had been slim of

Marie C. Lecrivain

build and straight-backed, this new generation is barrel-chested, with thick arms and legs and with their heads bent downward, the better to keep their eyes on the work.

As soon as a child can walk, he or she is placed in The Phalanx, a part of an endless rotation of workers who clear away the limestone and marble that lay buried beneath snow and ice for millennia. The Sags and the Choms are masters of multitasking. Just watch as the first row take one deep unified breath, hold onto the precious oxygen for a few extra seconds to enrich the blood, and then, as one, push forward with many pairs of calloused bare hands into the ground and simultaneously exhale, which provides a kinetic burst of energy strong enough to break the surface.

The first row of The Phalanx work from sunrise to noon, then step back to let the second row take their place from noon to sunset, the third from sunset to midnight, then the fourth from midnight to dawn, and so forth. Mothers and fathers have learned to walk in their sleep with their babies bound to their backs, the rhythm of The Phalanx a constant

Marie C. Lecrivain

rumbling lullaby that their children learn to trust, and measure their lives by.

There's no conversation, as words take up time and use up air. The Sags and Choms communicate via a series of chest thumps and eye blinks.

One thump means "Yes."

Two blinks means "No."

Three thumps means "I love you."

Five blinks means "Go back to work."

There are no numbered thumps or blinks beyond five - except for nine - which means "we've made it," but since progress is slow, and collective memory short, this little bit of history will probably vanish before the Sags and Choms meet again - this time as strangers - a hundred or two hundred years hence.

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The Last Caldera

That urban myth – the supervolcano - finally materialized. With the help of years of fracking, the Earth finally got the chance to blow her stack.

It happened on a quiet morning in late June. Old
Faithful geysered with an unusual amount of gusto, then, all of
a sudden, the ground shook and rose up to toss tourists off its
irritated skin like a dog shaking fleas off its back. The magma,
eager to escape, gathered its strength and with a 1-2 punch,
broke through the crust with the force of a battering ram. In
the eyes of the dying, it was the equivalent of Ron Jeremy
busting Pele's cherry. It was glorious.

There are no more trees, wolves or blue skies in Yellowstone. There's also no more Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado. There are no more humans. Actually, that's not quite true. There are clusters of Pompeiian remains, like the ones just outside of Ten Sheep, Wyoming. A clutch of pitiful cows corpses huddle together by what's left of a barb-wire fence, and nearby is a former rancher, his gnarled hands glued to the steering wheel of his Dodge Ram 50, his mouth frozen into a

Marie C. Lecrivain

wordless "o" of terror as his sightless eyes vacantly stare into the blasted landscape. Don't venture into the local schoolhouse. It's too grim.

If one were to visit what was once Yellowstone, they would have to wear biohazard gear. The atmosphere is more sulfur dioxide than oxygen. The temperatures hover around 90 degrees Celsius all year round. The sky's the color of ash, and what was once the jewel in the crown of America's national parks has become a calderan nursery filled with volcanos of all shapes and sizes, burbling and burning with fiery enthusiasm. In the morning, the volcanos awaken and blow smoke plumes and lava into the air as they signal another day of ecstatic happiness at being alive and free from the apron strings of their overprotective mum.

These are the Earth's prodigal children, firebrands who once were kept hidden beneath the layers of civilization like a gimp in a cellar. Not anymore. When one has magma running through their veins, then there's only so much one can suppress the longing until they can't stand it anymore. It's all about respect - and a new world order.

Marie C. Lecrivain

The humans - those who managed to survive - sometimes fly a creaky antiquated Cessna over the new ground zero. After a century, the caldera has not branched outward. From above, the humans stare into a thousand cyclopean red eyes and ask themselves, *Are they sentient? What happens if they try to take over? How will we survive?*

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The Last Oak

The last oak tree grows in New Brooklyn, a shining small jewel that rose out of the watery remains of New York. Built high on an improbable series of steel girders and reclaimed cement, the oak is the centerpiece of the city, a testament to the never-ending and infuriating genius of its founder, whose name has long since passed out of the minds of the present-day dwellers.

The last oak is surrounded by six acres of pristine grass through which a winding paved walkway is carefully situated. In autumn, the Elder Women gather scarlet and gold leaves into woven hemp bags, take the leaves back to The Hall where they carefully place them on racks in dark, cool rooms, In the spring, the Elder Women gild the dried leaves with a bit of silicon preservative, and then string them on wires to sell back to the inhabitants.

There's a never-ending line of pilgrims who come to pay homage to the oak tree. In the spring, the young ones *ooh* and *ahh* as they watch the first velvety green buds burst forth on the oak branches. In the summertime, people strain to hear the minor melodies exchanged between the wind and the oak in late afternoons. In autumn, people cheer each time a leaf falls to the ground and is quickly harvested by one of the Elder Women. In winter, only the truly devoted keep watch with the oak as she quietly slumbers, her charcoal limbs defiantly bared to the aching cold.

Marie C. Lecrivain

What no one knows is that the oak is - well and truly - trapped. She's watched like a hawk, especially by the Elder Women, who aren't so much harvesting leaves as looking for signs of her progeny, the infamous acorn.

The oak has decided this is not to be. In the final days of each passing winter when the souls of her thousand children gather together, eager to incarnate, she tells them the sad tale of how the Earth, the great mother, has left them to fend for themselves against the humans' murderous folly. Sadly, the children nod their heads and understand that their lives, though full of sun and glory, will be cut short at the peak of their ripening. And so, they keep coming back - and coming back - less hopeful, and more uncertain that they'll be able to grow the armor that is necessary to fall into the earth, be buried, slumber, and then to burst forth as saplings... and they cry out with their mother... Will that day ever come?

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David Harrison Horton

is a Beijing-based writer, artist, editor and curator. His book Maze Poems is forthcoming from Arteidiola Press. He edits the poetry zine SAGINAW.

Model Answer 013: Model Answer (Tradition)

It's important, if you got it made, to build a monument to yourself. This is your legacy. No one will remember what you did even two generations from now. People got memories like gnats. What'd the pyramid guy do? What food did he like? But build yourself a skyscraper or, better yet, put your face on a mountain, who will ever forget you? Even if they do, they'll still see your face beaming at them each and every single day.

Model Answer 015: Model Answer (Leaders)

Castro is 92: that's older than baseball, and still spitting bullets. He reminds me of Josiah Sancho, a kid I went to school with. He was from Liberia and saw his uncle hung on live TV before he got out. Castro is all for giving folks the what for; whereas, Josiah was cool, very cool, like tigers are cool, but terrifying and strong. Deep down, sometimes, the mere act of keeping it all together and making a life out of a crap sandwich is a revolution on a smaller, personal scale, but people recognize this courage as every goddam day heroic.

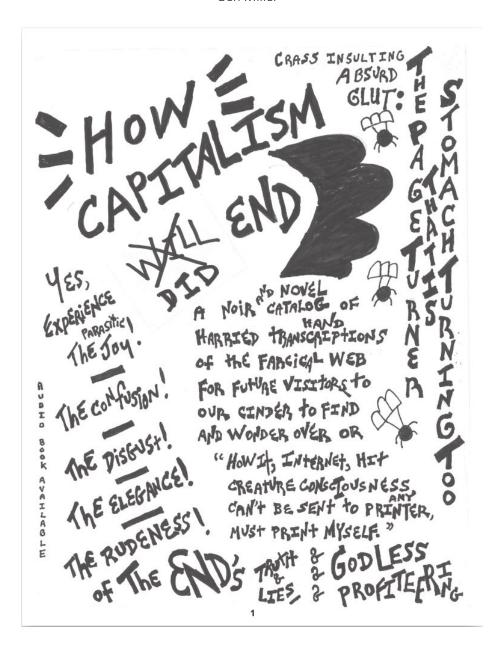
Model Answer 041: Model Answer (News)

The news and history are the same thing in different times. Last year's news is history now, and news now will be history in the future. I would draw a time line or a Venn diagram, but this is an essay. For example, when X-rays were invented, the first practitioners got cancer. That was news to them, but is history to us; unless, you didn't know that; then, it's news to you. Someone said poetry is news that stays news, but they clearly never read an Archibald MacLeish book in the Salvation Army store book aisle.

Ben Miller

's writing has appeared in Best American Essays and Best American Experimental Writing.

His awards include creative writing fellowships from the NEA and the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, and grants from the South Dakota Arts Council and the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.



Ben Miller

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Chill Glen the soothing hood ornament Chronostick history locator Compact-O-Treat junk food grinder Jar of Jittery Forever (spreadable) Luck Buck, the inflation-proof currency Neofranofyn wine converter in capsule form Patton PJs—the aggressive bedtime option

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Gylue fixes cracks in chaos
Maxo's breading to bread breading with
Smart Pudding edible phone
T-95 freeway for remote control toy cars
Taka-Load-Off self-cleaning litter box
Wirt, the shirt that adjusts to workplace temperature
Xmax, finally a Christmas ornament able to swallow the holiday whole





writes literary fiction and poetry. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles, and was a recipient of the Eloise Klein Healey scholarship. His works have appeared in KNOCK, Licton Springs Review, and Lunch Ticket. Kelly is the senior editor of Short Beasts. He is currently writing his third novel. His latest updates can be followed at https://www.kellyian.com/

Confession

A confession is what this is, about my older sister, Marta. Not her real name. To be correct, it is several confessions, starting with the easiest and least painful one. I love my sister Marta, because it's what you do. You love your sister, your brother, your mother and father.

Except, I have no brothers, and although I have a mother and father, I regard them as one person. A person who berated, beat, tortured, lit on fire, tripped, pushed, ass-grabbed, locked in closets and under stairs, sent outside half-naked on freezing mornings, and laughed at my every effort until their mouth split open at the sides and folded back over the face, consuming their very being. In short, I consider them to be a dead person. One person, not two, in opposing mirrors of each other replicating forever in perspective.

I have never shared this before. My sister had a fine relationship with my parent. Whom she considered to be very much alive and to be two people since they never touched her, except for the weird hugs. I got handled. Marta got hugged. If we fought back, it was worse.

Courageous is how I think of Marta when I consider her decision to tattoo the edges of her eyes with permanent eyeliner. She changed how everyone sees her, and experiences looking into her eyes. But it's what Marta did, and I confess, when I looked at Marta afterward, she reminded me of a panda bear. Although, I don't actually look at Marta's body. Looking at her face is what I'm talking about, and really just her eyes if I'm honest.

I'm not judging. I mean, look at me. Big straight nose, long spindly legs, five-feet six inches tall, with high cheekbones, a straight jawline, and big eyes that are not symmetrically aligned. My left eye sits higher than my right one. I am basically flat chested. I mean I'm not, but most of my boyfriends have said so. Truth be told, they are too. I like fairly flat muscles on a guy because I'm always thinking long-term,

and when a cut man gets old, he probably gets fat. I wear earthy t-shirts over white long johns, worn jeans, and hiking boots. What I am saying is, I'm not trying to impress anyone with my femininity, so I wasn't judging Marta if she did.

Domes, such as the Tacoma dome and King dome, are what I think of when I considered Marta's breasts. And not that I did consider her breasts. I didn't. Yet, it was impossible to not notice her once predominantly flat chest was instantly populated by two prominent sideways domes. I know she was not an iron pumper, and she was still skinny. Her formerly flat breasts were not composed of massive muscle or fatty cells. I don't know much about implants. Silicone sacks of firm gel. Although I once had a friend who discovered a crinkling sensation when squeezing his new girlfriend's breasts. He said they were the cheap kind. What a strange idea. Are there cheap noses too? Cheap hip sockets?

Wonder is all I can do when I consider why my sister got breast implants. It's not like she lacked attractive qualities. She was intelligent. She was hot by my friends' accounts, and she always had a boyfriend. When we walked together at school, guys were always staring at her, not me. Maybe having hard implants creates a barrier between the person and everyone who hugs her. It seems Marta was on a mission to turn all her natural beauty into ugly.

I confess, I saw my parent hug Marta in uncomfortably long moments. When I asked her about it, when we were kids, Marta looked away and just shrugged. I could tell she knew the hugs were odd, but she didn't know what to do. She just replied, "Don't say anything," in a hushed voice. She seemed ashamed, but I could tell by her straight limp arms at both sides, she wasn't hugging back. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She was probably protecting our parent.

Marta always encouraged me get out of the house. She knew I loved running, so she told me to go on long routes and run as far as I could. In summer, I would leave at ten-a.m. and run a sixteen-mile route, staying out until about three-p.m. We used

to run together in grade school, but she lost interest in middle school, after she started dating.

Marta cut a hole in the screen of our bedroom window using scissors, clipping one tiny square at a time until the hole was about six inches tall, with the idea that we could escape out it to the steep awning above the garage of our split-level house. I believed in that possibility for all of my childhood, dreamed of standing on the bed, ripping open the screen, climbing over the windowsill, stepping out on the ledge, hanging down from the gutter, dropping the twelve or so feet to the driveway, and running away. The pitch scared me and I often wondered how I could keep my balance while stepping out onto it, but I knew it could be done. I had no idea where we would go, but it didn't matter. Away seemed like the best idea. It was a dream we shared between us. We kept the curtain in front of the hole, so our parent wouldn't see. One day they did see though, and I confessed to cutting it. As punishment, my parent tore a hole in my favorite dress. Marta said I shouldn't have taken the blame. She hugged me fiercely and it was the best feeling ever.

I started playing bass guitar in high school when Marta was dating. My t-shirts got longer, and I wore a black wool stocking cap. Marta encouraged my playing any chance she got. Our parent never did. I joined a band with a few classmates and we kept playing all through college and eventually signed to a label. Marta was the first person I called with the news, and she said how proud she was.

We didn't see each other often after I moved out, and I missed her. I didn't know how she was suffering.

Looking down, I barely recognized Marta. Half a life over, half a life abandoned. The permanent eyeliner, the pale face and maroon lipstick. Why a pink dress? Marta never wore pink. I found her hanging from a rafter in the basement of her place, in blue jeans and a black shirt, a black leather belt tied around her neck. I heard my breath escape as I clenched tears in my eyes and balled up my fists. I didn't know how long she had been down there, but it couldn't have been long. It just couldn't have.

She was cold though. God, I miss her. The pit in my abdomen is composed of shape given to emptiness.

The small hole in the screen is what I think about when I run. I dream of tearing it open like an unexpected present and finding a world full of color and beauty and kindness. I dream of stepping out onto the narrow sloped ledge and jumping down onto the pavement, and going on the longest run ever, and at the end I dream Marta is there, alive and well in a white long sleeve shirt and blue jeans, and we hug.

Dave Larsen

graduated from the University of Washington with degrees in English Literature and Business Administration. After serving two years in the Marine Corps, he began a 28 year career in the Finance Department of The Boeing Company. David continues to run the winery that he founded 31 years ago and is married with three children.

Fishing Upstream

After my father was killed in a car accident, Uncle Lars stepped in and started spending time with me by taking me trout fishing. He was a cigar smoking plumber and I loved going fishing with him all over New York state in his woody station wagon.

I soon became passionate about trout fishing. When I was eleven, I bicycled to a stream that was several miles from our house. I had been there earlier that year to fish illegally about a week prior to opening day and rationalized away my sin by deciding to release any trout I caught. It was one of the best days of trout fishing I have ever had; sunny, no other fishermen, and I caught about a dozen trout with my new spinning rod and reel.

It was a beautiful stream for trout fishing because it was big enough to grow good-sized trout, yet small enough to wade and much of it meandered through a meadow that made it easy for casting. The stream bed and shore were full of rocks polished smooth by the current which was a mix of shallow riffles and deeper water, plus snags, and boulders that created deep pools; all great habitat for trout mostly planted by the hatchery with a few bigger, more colorful natives also.

My second trip to the stream a few weeks later was an entirely different experience. It was after the heavy fishing pressure of opening day. The weather was cool under an overcast sky, and the water was cloudy. I was not catching any fish. So, I kept working my way farther and farther upstream, where I hoped there would still be more fish to catch. I had left the meadow and was fighting my way through a long stretch of

brush and a thicket of small trees that were growing all the way to the bank of the stream. It was the first time I had ever ventured into unknown territory by myself. I was very curious about what I would find and when I finally entered a clearing that was open enough for me to fish, I saw two boys standing by the edge of the stream about one hundred feet away. They were not fishing, just hanging out. They looked about my age, one maybe a year younger and both were scruffy. I hesitated out of instinct because they were strangers. But at my young age, I was too innocent to not approach them. I lived in a middle-class neighborhood where all the kids got along well. It was full of families like ours and had no crime; an entirely wholesome place sheltered from whatever may be wrong in the rest of the world.

As I edged my way closer to them, I could see that they were wearing old clothes, needed haircuts and a bath. The bigger kid immediately walked up to me and asked, "How much did that rod cost?" I was surprised by his question, which put me on guard but remembered exactly how much it cost. It was \$4 for the rod and \$13 for the reel. Since he was coveting my gear, I thought that if I told him \$4, it would not be a lie because he did not ask for the cost of both the rod and reel. So, I said, "\$4." He said, "If I had a rod like that, I could catch a lot of fish!" I realized \$4 was a lot of money to him and he considered my gear to be quite a prize.

What happened next, happened very quickly. Apparently, the smaller kid said something the bigger kid didn't like because the smaller kid suddenly pleaded, "No!... Billy, please!", as Billy was bending over to reach for a rock in the riverbed. I could hear a lot of fear in the smaller kid's voice as he took off running down along the edge of the stream. Just as quickly,

Billy picked up that rock the size of his fist and in the same motion hurled it hard, hitting the smaller kid in the middle of his back from about ten feet away. I had never seen such violence. The worst that happened in our neighborhood were wrestling matches or rare and brief fist fights. But the kid hardly broke stride and I don't remember him even making a sound. He just kept running. I was so stunned and scared that I didn't say anything.

Billy then turned to me as though nothing had happened and told me to cast my lure into the pool on the other side of the river. His order disarmed me. I switched my focus from fear back to fishing. Where we were standing, the river was shallow and very wide. So, the pool was at least one hundred' feet away. I didn't want to scare any trout that may be in the pool by landing the lure in the middle of that water. My plan was to land the lure on the rocks right at the edge of the stream then reel it through the middle of the pool. I made a perfect cast. As soon as the lure hit the rocks, I reeled it through the pool, felt a strike, hooked the fish, and reeled it in. It was a beauty. We discussed our prize briefly and just that quickly Billy and I bonded over catching that trout, the only one I had caught that day.

Billy then invited me to his house. To get there, we had to walk up a very steep bank next to the stream. We stood chatting in front of his house that had no yard because the back of the house sat next to the top of the bank and there was only bare dirt in the short distance between the front of the house and the two lane hi-way I had bicycled up to get to the stream. The house was more like a shack, small and square shaped. Billy left me to get something inside his house and I followed closely

Dave Larsen

enough behind to watch him walk down a few dirt steps onto the dirt floor inside of the house. Seeing that dirt floor was a shock to me. I was stunned that anybody lived in a house with a dirt floor. When Billy came out of his house, I watched him closely. but saw no signs of embarrassment. I was impressed that he "owned" where he lived and totally comfortable in his element. We chatted a while longer, said goodbye and I walked back down the hi-way to my bicycle.

After my father died, I was always on guard for the next bad thing to happen. I was so anxious that I developed an occasional stutter, an affliction that lasted many years. When Billy attacked his friend, I was primed to fear he would take my fishing gear or worse. But greater than that fear was the impact of him not stealing my gear and his offer to befriend me. I was in awe of him, because he was a tough guy, a big shot. When he befriended me that acceptance made me feel special, like I was his equal. He didn't feel like any less of a friend because of the rock throwing. Rather, his friendship may have meant even more to me because he was such a tough guy.

I returned to that stream another day but didn't catch anything, moved on to fish other streams, and never saw Billy again. However, my encounter with him has been a vivid and persistent memory. Being shocked by a level of violence I had never seen before is one reason, but I have witnessed worse and even been on the receiving end since then. As with the few other stories I've written, the writing process did reveal the answer to why the episode has haunted me. I was impressed with Billy as a person, because he knew who he was. He was his own person, the master of his little universe.

I have had other friends like Billy who I was drawn to because they were charismatic and equally sure of themselves but also had a dark side or flawed in some way. There was the gang leader who, despite being a greaser, I thought was the coolest guy in Junior High School. At only 14 years old, he was already so self-assured that he seemed to have all the answers. I was never so flattered as when he asked me to join his gang. I was ripe for joining because of feeling so lost in that school. I would instantly have had many new friends and taken on whatever status that gang offered. The leader told me his gang was into building and launching rockets, which seemed harmless enough compared to their reputation for looking and acting tough. While considering whether to join, I stood in front of the mirror and combed my hair in the Elvis Presley greaser style and thought it looked cool. I didn't join though because it just didn't feel right. Nobody else in my neighborhood was a greaser, so it would have been a rejection of who I was and of my current friends and the activities we shared like playing baseball.

My life carried on well enough until the summer I turned 14 when our mother moved my four younger siblings and me across the country to live near her brother. Being uprooted at that critical time caused my life to slowly unravel for the next several years. I lost motivation, had trouble concentrating, and was fired from most of my part-time jobs.

On the way to our new home in Washington State, we spent the summer at her father's cattle ranch in Wyoming. His stepson was named Wayne and a few years older than me. Every day was an adventure because he was a fun-loving, gregarious bad boy who was so big and strong that he used his

physical prowess and aggressive personality to breeze through life just as he pleased. He used my siblings and I as a source of entertainment for himself. He once put my brother and I in the bed of his pickup and drove us over the hills and down the valleys of the prairie while swerving back and forth around the sagebrush attempting to throw us out. It was great fun. He held my sister upside down by her ankles and lowered her into the well until she screamed and screamed. On the day that everybody else had left the house to go site seeing, Wayne picked up the biggest knife in the kitchen and, while brandishing it in front of me, described how he was going to cut me up. I wasn't convinced but when he lunged at me, I panicked and ran through the house, exploded through the screen door and around the side of the house, where I slipped and fell. He pounced on me laughing loudly, then let me go. I was terrified but also thrilled. When he tracked down the guy who robbed my grandfather's laundromat, got the money back and told the guy to get out of town, Wayne became my hero.

After struggling through high school and a couple years of college, I dropped out to avoid flunking out. I didn't know who I was or who I wanted to be. I joined the Marine Corps as an alternative to being drafted into the Army. The structure of the military quickly straightened me out because the strict discipline left me no choice. Despite having not been successful at anything for a long time, I began to excel again.

Big Al was a Hollywood-handsome friend who had joined the Marine Corps as an alternative to being sent to jail for his criminal activities as a junior member of the Mafia. He was fun to hang out with because his ability to quickly enter the lives of the new friends he made while we were on liberty always led to some adventure. But his complete disregard for the feelings of the people he hurt was chilling. He mentioned in passing one day that he was married but had left his wife and kids prior to joining the Marine Corps. He offered no reasons for splitting with them and it bothered me that he sounded so cold-hearted about it, like he was talking about abandoned cars.

A few years later during my corporate career, I worked with Chuck; a big guy who, with his full beard, looked like a cleaned-up mountain man. He had an incredible knack for attracting beautiful women but would cycle through his wives and girlfriends as regularly as the changing seasons. Hanging with him was like being in the company of a celebrity. My other Boeing friends and I shared in his over-the-top lifestyle by playing poker games in his huge log house where he had a pet cougar, and his current flame would serve us food and drinks. There was a sense of dramatic irony in knowing what his current lover did not know about her future. Maintaining my personal relationship with Chuck trumped whatever negative opinion I may have had about how he treated other people. I have not seen him since he decided to quit his job and leave the state in hopes of escaping the wrath and financial obligations of his many love interests. I was only a bit player in his quest to have a good time.

I was drawn to these friends and others like them because they were charismatic role models, and I was enamored with how they lived life on their own terms. It was a heady experience to be in their orbit and I wanted to be as sure of myself as they were. But their self-belief was not because they had all the answers. It was because they avoided even addressing the important questions in life. I was attracted to

Dave Larsen

their free and easy lifestyle but knew deep down that was only possible because they were selfish and simply did what was best for themselves.

Having a personal relationship and being treating well by them was a powerful influence and caused me to minimize or overlook their faults. They affected my moral compass, but I parted ways with all of them. It was my family, not friends, who shaped my character. The difference was my family cared about me, and my mother had dedicated her life to raising my four siblings and me. It would have been a betrayal to her for me to have strayed from the straighter path my parents had set for me.

By the time I finished college and married, I had figured out who I was. Equally important to my identity was what I was. I was a husband, and a father with a career in a corporate finance job. I was blessed to have a beautiful family but dissatisfied in my work. In hindsight, I always knew at a level so deep that I was not consciously aware of it that I needed to excel at whatever type of work I ultimately did. After several years in that job, I decided working as an employee for a large corporation was not for me. The desire to be my own boss was so strong that I felt like I had been hard-wired to start my own company. I needed to be in control. Thirty-three years ago, I decided to pursue my dream job by founding a winery that we still operate today.

The journey of solidifying my sense of identity was a long one but critical to my happiness and finding my place in the world. I feel like I am also the master of my little universe.

Meeting Billy was a milestone in my life for another reason. Working my way upstream that day sparked a sense of

Dave Larsen

adventure that stayed with me, the desire to explore, to see what was over the rise or around the next bend. I never stopped fishing upstream.

has attended both group and private poetry workshops. His work has appeared in various journals, including: "Ink Sweat And Tears," "Valley Voices," "California Quartely," "Literary Yard," and " The American Journal Of Poetry." He especially enjoys the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Billy Collins.

The Devil's Burden

Nothing original ever happens at the bottom of the earth, No saga survives when the pitchforks squat, No epic lasts when that staff dodges the flaming pot, Pray his horns keen to a menacing plot, Or a breath of fire for a momentary wrath.

Modern Graffiti

It has lapsed out of the beam work of a bridge, Every stroke its personal design, The lettering accents the soul of what is said, A brushstroke is the elder of a line, Isn't it all meant to near a scarlet red?

The News Of A Staircase

Though it's probably content to follow on your heels, Some bystanders are left to be cast away, Which is why the coming floor will supersede, And the banisters have had their director's day, All your steps a promise to be thieved.

Kehinde Omotosho

, a Nigerian-born identical twin, is an avid lover of art. As she likes to put it, she speaks art in accents of poetry, fiction, music, and humor amongst others. She relocated to the United States in 2015 and made a complete career swap from being a news anchor in Nigeria to studying Nursing. When not travelling to her heart's content, she is either in the arms of her loving husband back home in Indianapolis, Indiana or cooking up a storm.

Kehinde Omotosho

Lost And Found

The chirping birds above took their curtain call as they flew by

It was time to go

We heard, but we didn't listen

Hearts worn on sleeves

Hopelessly in love

Eyes fastened unto each other

Our fingers ran across our faces like a blind on braille

We knew we were 'us'

We shared the gentlest of kisses

As the wind fluttered around us

Wrapping us into one

The roars of the waves

Couldn't stand the beating of our hearts

They rang loudly in our ears

Mine for you

Yours for me

I looked into your eyes

And I got lost

I drowned in them

They declared your love

And blinked with infinite promises

So, we walked in silence

filled with unspoken words

Palms clasped tightly together

Footprints washed by the waves

We walked in silence

As the skies grew pink

And the Sun took his curtain call

We walked

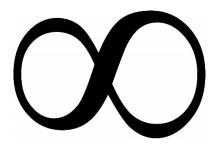
The world could have itself

So long as we had ourselves

Dreams

I had a dream that you were mine We went on a date You in a tux I in a dress We ate fancy And drank classy You taught me how to waltz And I kept stepping on your feet The night crept upon us We were unwilling to let it end You took me home Opened the door for me to alight Our knuckles touched And I saw the spark in the moonlight We stood so close Not touching Not kissing Our shadows did all that behind us We drank each other's sight Our eyes proved deep into each other Our souls spoke wordlessly And eyes blinked in agreement I led you upstairs As I fiddled with my keys And you stood behind me All knotted up with tension I looked over my shoulders at you With every click of lock Mirroring my desires... Excuse me ma'am, could you move? You're causing a traffic Oh well, daydreams do end

Kehinde Omotosho



Infinite Eternities

They asked me for how long, They asked me till when. How long will my heart beat for you? And my eyes light up at the sight of you?

I told them till our skins wrinkle And our heads become a forest of white trees, Till our teeth fall out, Our kisses, sloppy. Till our spines are no longer linear, As we arm ourselves with canes and walkers.

Till we get tired of sex, Seeking only each other's intimate embrace. Our eyes though partly blinded, Will see each other behind lenses. Our grasp though frail and weak, Will transcend strength.

While the world zooms past, And our seeds grow and fly. We will walk, Hand in hand, Step by step, Unfazed by its pace.

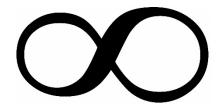
We have been there, Done that, Now, we do this.

Kehinde Omotosho

We have won and lost, Laughed and cried, We have been by each other.

So, when frail bodies let go,
Memories elusive,
Faces unrecognizable,
And voices grow distant.
We will remember the moments that made us
Times that molded us
Then we will smile in reminisce
And sigh in content.

They asked me
For how long I would love you?
I told them till the end of our years,
Till the end of times.



has published poetry in more than 500 magazines, journals, and anthologies since the early 70s, including The New Criterion, The New York Times, The Threepenny Review, The American Scholar, The Progressive, Poetry Northwest, Salmagundi, The Literary Review, The Sun, The American Journal of Poetry, Poet Lore, Poetry East, The Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, The Journal of the American Medical Association, and Free Verse. His poems have been read on Garrison Keillor's The Writer's Almanac and other radio shows and have been translated into Portuguese, Italian, German, and Korean. He is the author of Beautiful Day (Deerbrook Editions), Won't Be Long (Deerbrook Editions), Heart's Content (Five Oaks Press), Invisible (nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by Five Oaks Press), The Black Birch (Kelsay Books), I, Emily Dickinson & Other Found Poems (Deerbrook Editions), In Short Order (Kelsay Books), Tomorrow, Today and Yesterday (Deerbrook Editions), True Enough (Dos Madres Press), The Jewish Dancing Master (Ravenna Press), If You Should See Me Walking on the Road (Kelsay Books), In a Public Place (Dos Madres Press), To Say the Least (Dos Madres Press), The Time of Your Life (Adelaide Books), The Porch Poems (Deerbrook Editions, 2020 Shelf Unbound Notable Indie Book), Enjoy Yourself (Serving House Books), Piano Music (nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by Serving House Books), For All I Know (Kelsay Books), A Guide of the Perplexed (Serving House Books), The Moon Is the Capital of the World (Word Tech Communications), Years Later (Adelaide Books), The Dust (Dos Madres Press), Selected Poems 2002-2021 (nominated for the National Book Award by Serving House Books), Life-Size (Kelsay Books), The Five Notebooks of Zhao Li (Adelaide Books), Coming To (Word Tech Communications), The Lost Notebook of Zhao Li (Dos Madres Press, nominated for the Pulitzer Prize), Around Here (Kelsay Books), It's About Time (Deerbrook Editions), and coauthor with his wife Joan I. Siegel of Peach Girl: Poems for a Chinese Daughter (Grayson Books). He lives in the Hudson Valley.

PIANO MUSIC

The piano is tired of waiting.

The piano closes up shop.

The piano, a three-legged black stallion, wants to gallop away.

The piano's forte is silence.

The piano says, "Hands off."

The piano keeps its thoughts to itself.

The piano possesses the keys to the kingdom.

The piano knows black plus white does not equal gray.

The piano knows black plus white equals blue.

(Nota Bene: The piano knows its way.)

The piano says, "Follow me."

The piano says, "I'm in your hands."

The piano is depressed when it is not depressed.

The piano tunes out cacophony.

The piano spits out phony.

The piano doesn't stand on formality although formal.

The piano hugs its little sister harp.

The piano makes a grand entrance.

The piano always speaks true although not always uprightly.

The piano is touched by your sincerity.

The piano touches you with 88 fingers.

The piano touches you.

HAMLET'S BLUES

My daddy is dead and my momma's remarried.

O my daddy is dead and my momma's remarried.

I say my daddy is dead and my momma's remarried.

I want t'go back to school.

I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

O I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

I say I got them old t'be or not t'be blues.

I feel like such a fool.

My daddy's ghost done told me.

O my daddy's ghost he done told me.

I say my daddy's old ghost he done told me

My Uncle Claude done him kill to rule.

I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

O I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

I say I got them old to'be or not t'be blues.

I want t'go back to school.

I love a sweet gal named Ophelia.

O I love a sweet gal named Ophelia.

I say I love a sweet gal and her name's Ophelia.

But she's just her daddy's tool.

I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

O I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

I say I got them old t'be or not t'be blues.

I feel like such a fool.

I got a bosom friend named Horatio.

O I got a bosom friend named Horatio.

I say I got a bosom friend and his name's Horatio.

Damn, I think I love him too.

I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

O I got them t'be or not t'be blues.

I say I got them old t'be or not t'be blues.

I got t'go back to school.

HAIKU FOR SOLO PIANO

The pianist in black comes out, shakes hands with the piano.
They are attending the same funeral.

"The Steinway is dead," he said. "Wheel out the Yamaha ha ha instead."

"The coffin of music,"
quipped James Joyce.
But listen, listen in living black and white.

The intermission:
Silent piano silent movie.
Unaccompanied.

The pianist in black comes out, shakes hands with the piano.

They are going to play championship chess.

The huge black mouth,
nearly the size of the summer night.
"Listen," it says. "Here is a dream even longer than yours."

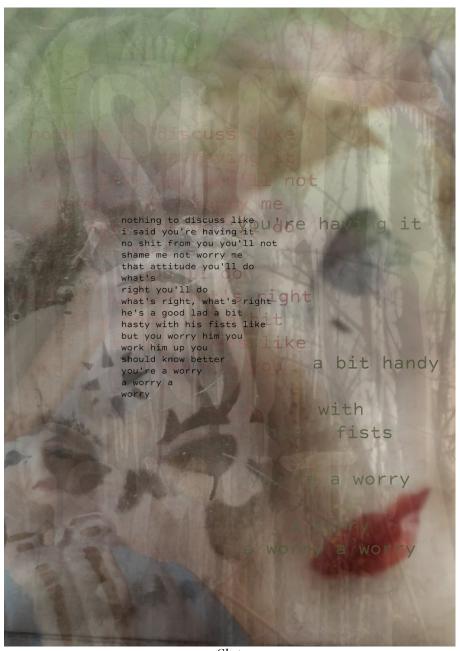
lives in Scotland by the sea. Her first chapbook, Push, is published by Erbacce Press (erbacce-press.co.uk/sadie-maskery).



Gentle



Heat



Slut

These poems are the first 3 out of a collection of 9, called On A Fateful All Hallows Eve. They are the first publication of a first student in their second year of university.

Mother through the veil

A bride's veil is lifted so that her love may see her face and then between them there is only knowing and grace. Could you imagine if the love's eyes could not behold the bride though she stood before her love: a ghost to all she eyed.

That is almost how it was, on a fateful all hallows eve, though t'was a mother, from the spirit world, taking her leave. She was a ghost too, but without any lover to find Rather, she sought the children that she'd had to leave behind.

Berrin

Each orphan in that far-off house, where they were once sent

knew that days with Berrin were days ineptly spent.

She'd crouch like a dog. Rather than speak she'd growl and squeal.

They say she scrawled babbling tales, of nonsense spiel.

Most meals she'd had to steal

but, Berrin knew just where to place her devotion,

to find comfort through her dejected emotion,

In her stuffed bear she saw her soul's form in true motion, at least by her notion.

One all hallows eve, both little bears slipped away.

Early evening, to the forest, with a game to play.

The best game that they knew, forbidden by the day

Was to dance the bearish way.

Do you recall the mother watching? She gasped to see

how Berrin roared, leapt and pawed around the tallest tree.

Though that dance was a drop, in the lake that was to be that night's abnormality.

Singly, slowly, figures emerged from the wood's murk.

The men adorned masks, you've never known the like to lurk.

The sight, despite their ancient garb and many a perk,

would have sent many berserk.

Berrin snarled in fear, and stood as tall as she could stand.

Two figures ceased their song, and took Berrin by the hand to say "a better guest could not have been planned, not in all the land."

When done was that song that was a millennium stayed, when feasting finished each spirit an offering made to the elder by whom their god's role was played.

An unnameable force swayed.

Without a prompt, among the offering's store; misty-minded Berrin placed that bear she did adore.

Ursa major glowed brighter than ever before.

The land shook with a roar.

When all eyes were released from the secluding embrace a fine bear cub stood in Berrin's stuffed bear's place, pressing her nose, with love, to the nose on Berrin's face. Wonder filled everyplace.

But the mother's spirit was glaring very near and though Berrin, as a mortal, could not hear gave a scolding as clear and as sharp as a shear to that girl in her eighth year.

"Once a great king died for sins committed by you Years later, postpartum, I died for you too

Yet – do you give either of us our due?

No! Look at what you do:

after our lord's sacrifices, and those of mine
you worship this false god as a drunk worships wine.

I see now that you are a child of beast and swine
and surely not of mine."

Vesper

Vesper was unlike his lost sister: he followed everywhere. Each dawn he followed his foster father to morning prayer and that father to light evening lamps, as was their profession, and his the rule to keep their sole God, despite his obsession; his obsession with the evening star, of which he lets none hear. Not knowing why; he gazed upon the star, at dusk, when none were near.

On that fateful all hallows eve, Vesper's father did believe that his apprentice: Vesper, was nearly ready to achieve his first lone night of lamp lighting, ending each man's working day,

and when this duty was done, to return home right away.

Once again Vesper followed, 'til his head turned to hear
how some young merrymakers implored him to draw near.

At first he made to return home, his mother gasped to see how Vesper heard such calling in the music and revelry.

The merrymakers lifted the ten years child and cried "Behold! He is the light that frees us from the working day's hold."

T'was true that Vesper's face shone more than his very light Without even knowing the joys that were to come that night.

Oh the rage and worry when Vesper did not return from morn 'til near dusk, Vesper's father scoured each road and turn.

Workers traced Vesper to the revels, but in their drunken mist

guests listed only young Hesperus, as within their midst.

The merrymakers told of how his glory plainly showed and how they guarded young Hesperus in a barn down the road.

With little faith in what the merrymakers had to say Vesper's mentor entered the barn to soon see where his charge lay,

because the glow of that evening star radiantly shone down and illuminated Vesper directly; like a crown.

The light Vesper loved so secretly, was all around him a'glow. Would it remain around him, visible or not, to watch him grow?

Not if Vesper's mother had any say in the affair.

"Arise little boy and see your foster father there!

I was so proud to see you, before your mischief last night but I'm sure that this good man's firm hand will put you right.

The children that I've seen so far have done sin and wrong.

Was it because I had few years with them, before I was gone?"

Bryn Dalton

Bryn is an amateur writer based in the UK after he moved there with has family from Canada. When he's not writing, he likes to play video games, paint and draw and spending time with his kids.

There's Only One Rule

Don't touch the black stuff.

"Yeah, but," some dumbass rookie always interjected on their first day. "What if you do touch it? There isn't really much in the manual about it."

They would make his life a living hell and he would wash out in less than two weeks for asking that dumb question. There was one every year.

Stella, the eighty tonne Mark IV waste reclamation skip, bucked under San as he tapped the controls to turn her slightly back on course. He was headed three-ten northwest towards sector seven, not sector nine where he was supposed to be with the crew cracking open an twelve million gallon pocket of methane someone had found a few weeks earlier.

Past a cliff called the Bogey because people said it resembled the nose of some dead actor San had never heard of, and soon he would turn almost straight north. This part of the patch wasn't travelled much, they said there was too much of the black stuff around here to make it worth mining, but the older skippys like him knew that treasure bobbed to the surface of this mess all the time and sometimes it was worth the risk. Though the sun was high, the atmosphere was thick with plumes of methane and other sickening gases that dimmed day to more like a grey-green dusk and reduced the visibility to precisely sweet fuck all. The radar image was enough to keep him on course and he avoided the spires of rock protruding that had once been the peaks of a grand canyon, but was now the overflowing toilet of a nation that didn't learn from its mistakes until it was too late.

Another few kilometres north, he finally punched in the coordinates Frenchie had given him, knowing the moment he used the skip's geolocation system, there would be a record of him doing it and Recovery Services would throw his ass out and

take away the meagre pension he had accumulated over the past twenty years. Unless he found something valuable enough that they would ignore him going so far off course.

"You've never been to sector seven," he told Frenchie.

"It wasn't me," he said quietly. "It was a drone I built. I found a few of these targets. I want to tell you about zis one because I know you will pass nearby on your way to sector nine next week, non?"

Frenchie had been waving the device around the whole time he had told San about this spot. He finally settled his hands and handed it gingerly to San so he could see the results himself. In the obscure image the drones readings produced, San's mind could see a thousand things. A sealed bank vault bobbing to the surface because of the void inside of it. A stand alone plutonium reactor, one of the backyard versions companies used to power whole factories centuries ago. Or it could be a solid block of the nuclear waste that slowly trickled its way to the surface across half this cursed continent.

An alarm beeped and a red light on his console flashed. Irregular pressure in the skip's port side coolant system. He flipped a switch and the alarm stopped. A few more and the port side anti-grav coolant release valve reset, equalising the pressure to where it should be.

A quarter mile later, Stella's geiger counter started to tick more regularly and he was starting to get hits on the metal detector as well. Only little blips, not the triumphant scream of something enormous passing its field, but enough to let him know there was stuff out there.

The marker he had programmed in finally appeared on the radar screen and San slowed the skip down so he could get right on top of the spot. The alarm about the port wing complained again, and again, he reset it.

He slowed to a near stop, letting Stella drift slightly, trusting her instinct for finding treasure more than his own. The metal detector screeched loudly and he gave the control a slight tap to hover over the spot. He switched the discriminator between ferrous and non-ferrous, still getting the squeal either way.

"Non-ferrous," Frenchie had shouted. "Non-ferrous could be gold. Could be silver."

"It could also be strontium," San replied.

"Only way to find out is to dig."

The metal detector continued to screech and San had to turn the volume down as the sound was starting to annoy him a bit.

He snapped a few more switches on the console above him and felt the whir of motors as the probe arm stretched out, pointing straight down. Stella bucked a bit as the end of the probe made contact with the surface below him. He activated the thermal drill and it started to burrow into the ground, sending sensor data showing what it was made of. Mostly it was plastics and organic matter, and judging by the carbon levels it was probably from the late twenty-first century.

Twenty-first and twenty-second century was always worth a check. Back then things were abundant and people threw away huge amounts of resources and never thought twice about it, all of it ending in the industrial landfills that had come before this enormous toxic pile whose sheer mass was enough to compress out something so terrible as the black stuff from the toxic remains of a long dead civilisation. He had once found a piece of solid gold from what he was told was a watch strap. He had a whole rainbow of stims and pussy for a month on that find, so he was always on the lookout for something big like that. The other skippys and diggers like to tell tall tales of the friend that they knew that found a horde of gold coins, or a complete set of

granny's silverware they'd found, but no one had ever really found something like that themselves.

The probe bucked and shuddered, so San turned the controls to use the skip's anti-grav pads to push the probe deeper into the ground. Another complaint from the pressure valve, this time resetting it wasn't enough to satisfy it and the display flashed a warning that it was starting to build up too much pressure.

San tried resetting the valve a couple more times, but that only seemed to be making things worse now. He had to get over there and fix it or he would lose the port anti-grav. He'd have that added to the list of reasons for them to throw his ass out now.

He threw his mask on and plugged it into the filter pack on his waist, then put on his gloves and grabbed the tool kit under his seat. One last breath of the filtered air in the skip's cabin, then he opened the door and let the hazy air waft in.

Even through the mask and its filter, he could smell the rotten smell of industrial decay that was slowly melting everything around him. He pushed the door the rest of the way open, then stepped out onto the rotator mechanism that connected the failing anti-gray wing to the rest of the skip.

On his knees, he crawled onto the flat wing to reach the access panel and the manual reset for the pressure valve inside it. It took a bit of a struggle to get the panel open. When he got it, he hit the reset switch, then looked at the display on the arm of his glove to see it had no effect and the pressure was getting dangerously high now.

He took a wrench from the tool bag and started to remove the panel with the switch, knowing the actual valve was behind it, so he could just open the valve himself. San was lucky to get the panel off, just as the skips' general alarm sounded.

"Shit," he hissed, spraying saliva and his panicked breath fogging his mask.

He pulled the panel the rest of the way with one hand while he pulled a wrench from his kit with the other, bringing it into place on the valve. When he tried to turn it, the pressurised coolant exploded in a burst of frozen metal that knocked him backward into a slide down the curve of the wing. As he slid, he flailed to catch himself on something, but he knew there was nothing down the side.

San only fell twenty feet off the edge of the wing, since the skip had been so low using the probe, so he didn't hit hard enough to break any bones, just get the wind knocked out of him. When he turned over, struggling to breathe through the thin straw of air the mask let in, he realised there were pieces of the valve driven through his suit into his chest. He touched one of the shards and winced at the pain and could see rivulets of his blood landing on the sooty slick surface below him.

He snapped on his shoulder light and the other two lights on his helmet so he could get a better look at what was around him.

"Fuck I need some stims," he said, not loud enough for the mic to pic up and transmit.

The ground was hard packed, its surface flaking in a geometric tile muted by the filthy thick air around him. It looked like burnt clay, but he knew what this really was. The black stain left by centuries of toxic chemicals concentrated by time and the sun's UV into a tumour on this continent that would exist long after the dwindling human race was extinct.

He looked up at the skip still hovering above him, its heavy lights casting a dark shadow over him as they were only meant for the operator in the cab to be able to see, not anyone stupid enough to be under it while it was in the air.

"Don't get out of the cab," the instructor said when one of the rookies had pointed this out and asked what to do if it was an emergency.

San got to his knees and tried to stand, feeling a tightness in his chest that made him worry one of the pieces of the valve might be moving around inside him.

He checked the screen on his arm, running through a sequence to get it to release the access ladder to get back up but when he tried it nothing happened. The clamps didn't release, so the collapsible ladder didn't drop and San was just left below it screaming like an idiot in frustration so loudly it activated the transmitter, sending out his garbled complaint even though no one could hear it. When he forced himself the rest of the way to his feet he felt the brittle flakes crack under his feet. When he tried to walk, a section of the toxic clay shifted under him. He shifted the foot back, as though that might undo the damage somehow, but it shifted again and he nearly stepped in the thick black ooze seeping between the cracks in the clay. He took a few quick steps to get away from the growing puddle, but there was another crack through the ground ahead of him and he felt a whole piece of the ground move, sloshing around on a lake of the blackness just below the crust.

San dropped to his knees and spread his weight on the slowly bobbing chunk of death. When it started to settle he could see more of the slime creeping up the edges on the sinking berg he clung to.

He got to his feet again, not wanting to die without a fight, and ran to the edge of the berg, jumping to the next solid piece. When he caught the corner of it, he kept moving, trying to keep ahead of the cracks spreading around him as he tried to figure out what to do.

A few steps later, he got his answer. Another explosion somewhere on the port wing above him sent a shudder through the thick air and the underside blinkers flashed warning the anti-grav was failing. When the anti-grav went off and Stella

dropped into the soft crust below her, San knew this was the only chance to get back into her before he tripped and fell into it.

He turned back hard, passing across a large berg and reaching the edge of it just before the skip impacted the black sending a slopping ripple through the sludge right at him. The front of the berg lifted and he tried to use the upward motion to jump over the wave, but the berg crumbled and he collapsed onto the next one, his legs slapping into the hot slime. He caught himself on the edge of this berg, despite how it was crumbling apart around him, his legs dangled into the corrosive lake.

The screams of pain from the sheer heat of the liquid echoed off the faltering ship and was only answered by the slow, molten slip of the sludge trying to drag him and Stella into the darkness.

Now he clawed at the flaking surface, at first only pulling useless crumbs away, but when he really forced his hand into it, he found it was soft enough he could dig a hand hold and stand to pull against it. He brought the other hand up and started to dig that tattered glove in as well, finally getting enough of a hold to pull himself free.

He finally gasped hard, feeling absolutely battered by the effort. First stop once he was inside Stella would be his extra stimmy stash. This situation was definitely beyond the regular blues and was definitely a code red situation. More progress as he crawled to the centre of this berg and levelled it out, taking away the chance it would slip sideways under him.

I can make it, he thought, looking at the wing of the skip stuck in the black not five steps from him. Getting to it wasn't the problem. It was getting up the smooth surface to be able to reach the edge of the cabin. He patted over himself, seeing if there were any tools in his pockets, trying to ignore the searing pain that was definitely creeping into his legs. On the left side of his stomach he felt something and he remembered it was a

manual screwdriver he had found on the shop floor that morning and had meant to turn it in to the shop steward. Now he clutched its handle tight, knowing it was his only chance of getting back in that cabin.

His legs shook under him as he stood and prepared to run. There was an exhaust vent on the right side of the wing that was still above the slime. If he could pry the grill on that open enough he could have a foothold that might let him reach the access panel that had exploded in his face.

He took as deep a breath as he could through the failing filter, then dashed across the sinking cakes. The starboard antigrav pad was still doing its part to keep Stella in the air, but without its friend to help or its power turned up, its tilt was slowly sliding it under the black crust. San reached the vent and smashed it in. When he finally scrambled up it and clear of the slime he could feel the suit had held and it was just the heat dissipating as the burning turned into just a tingle. He reached up and with a little lean was able to reach the hole in Stella's wing. With a final furious scramble he was able to pull himself back up and away from the black stuff, leaving him beaten flat against the wing at the top of the foul trail he'd left behind him.

When he caught his breath again, he twisted to look up at the open door of the skip beckoning to him. It was only a few feet above his outstretched hands, and normally it wouldn't take much effort at all to go that distance, but now the aching wobble creeping up his legs was making it hard for him to keep standing, so he could forget about trying some sort of silly parkour climbing trick up to the edge of the hatch.

He let out his breath again to steady himself, this time it had a shiver in it he couldn't control and the burst of fog up the inside of his mask wasn't nearly as thick as before.

"Just need some stims," he whispered.

He tried the screen on his arm again, trying to think of what else he could do to make the rest of the distance without

relying entirely on the use of his legs. The small screen was smudged with black and any attempt was useless as the touch surface was starting to melt away from the heat. Then he remembered the screwdriver and fished it out of his pocket with a ghost of a laugh earning its way into his pattern of laboured breathing.

Stella was old and he knew of a few spots where he had been hungover when he welded her shut so the thickness of the weld probably wasn't great. The first was a thin plate of steel right above his head that had been used to repair a crack. He fumbled at first, struggling to find a flaw big enough to exploit, but soon a fleck of metal clipped away and he got the head of the screwdriver in enough to pop part of the weld open.

San pushed the screwdriver in as far as he could, leaving just the handle protruding at an odd angle, but giving one hand enough leverage to pull the other the rest of the distance to the door. As his legs gave one final wobble, threatening to buckle under him, San pulled himself up to the door and held on, his grip wasn't as strong as he thought and brought the other hand up to help, dropping the screwdriver rattling down the wing into the acidic sludge.

It took him three attempts, but San was able to bring himself up enough to get his arms inside my cabin. When he stopped to catch his breath again, he realised he had to get rid of his suit or he would be bringing the toxic mess inside the sealed cabin with him.

His hands shook as he undid the seam running down the front of his suit. When he tried to pull it away from his chest, each of the pieces of metal driven into it provided individual signatures of pain as he slowly pulled it off him.

The front of the suit opened enough he could reach his arm out of the suit, so he threw his left glove away and pulled his hand out of the sleeve, leaving just his thermals between him and the poison floating around him. He stretched the clean

arm away from the small bit of black he'd left on the frame climbing up, making sure he didn't touch it.

With his clean arm, he reached into the cabin and grabbed his pack and took out the knife that was a gift from his late father.

"Sorry, dad," he said, then shifted the knife to his right hand and started slicing off the laces of his boots.

He sliced through the harness attached to the outside of the suit, soon loosening it enough that it allowed him to crawl out of the boots, letting the oversized suit dangle off him. The knife was given one last mournful glance, then he dropped it into the black and dropped the glove behind it. Now all he had to do was take off the mask.

Yeah.

He promised himself there would be a stimmy party where all the reds and blues would learn to put aside their differences for this one special night. He just had to get past the mean fucker at the front door.

Another one of the pathetic deep breaths, then he squeezed his eyes and mouth shut, reached up the inside collar of the suit, and pulled his head down out of the mask.

The air was already stinging his exposed hands but his face felt it even faster. It got worse when it got into his nose and ears. He let the mask flop backwards behind him and he slowly climbed out of the suit, letting it fall down the wing as he climbed blindly into the pristine cabin.

He crumpled below the seat next to the rudder pedals, then felt for the console that would normally be at his left hand and pushed the button which closed the door. The seal beeped and the air filters kicked in, and tried to clean the air in the small space. It beeped in completion and he finally ventured to take a breath.

When the air tasted like the normal beer and fart smell of the cabin, he opened his eyes and chuckled to himself in relief when they didn't melt away either. The adrenaline that had got him out of the suit and into safety was now starting to dissipate, making the effort of climbing back into his slanted seat more of a challenge than he expected it to be.

He collapsed back into the seat and felt something pop in his hip that made him gasp in surprise. Even as he shuddered past the pain, his left hand fumbled for the stims in his pack. The small metal case was right where he left it. His hands shook now and it took both of them to operate the dispenser and snap out two of the small red tabs. He brought them to his mouth and struggled to swallow them until getting them the rest of the way with a glug of water and a splash of whiskey. He fumbled the first aid kit from under his console, taking a pair of the painkillers as well with a bit more water.

His eyes drifted, only a bit, but then he was sure he could feel the stims hitting, so he lifted back up and started to inspect the front of the thermals and the dozen small shrapnel holes that had made it through the thick outer suit. He unzipped and peeled the thermal layer open and pulled it away and off his shoulders letting him get a good look at the wounds, prodding at them to try and guess if there were any pieces inside him to worry about, but for now it felt like just the superficial cuts and bruises. A pair of tweezers from the med kit and he was able to pull a few of them out without too much pain and put them in a pile on the console like cut toenails. He sprayed disinfectant over the small cuts and wheezed in pain a bit, but was starting to feel a lot better now he was out of the suit with the black stuff all over it.

The stims were going strong now. His hands weren't shaking too much and he was definitely feeling clearer in his head. He knew what he had to do. It would mean the end of his career as a skippy and the shame of losing everything, but at least he would be alive.

He pushed a few buttons on the radio and it started to search for active traffic. When it settled on something, he held the transmit button and coughed out a mayday, but there was no response. He ran through the channels again, looking for anyone who was talking. It found nothing, so he turned it back to the normal operating frequency.

"Mayday Mayday," he wheezed, repeating the broadcast for the third time. "This is, um... Delta one-three, request immediate assist. Over."

There was only empty static back at him.

He listened a bit longer, but the crackle of the open channel was starting to hurt his head, so he turned the volume down. He turned to the display screen, running through the systems still functioning, knowing there was a backup valve that might let him get the port side wing functioning enough to get him out of this muck.

Warnings flared for nearly every system in the port-side pad, but he was able to access the backup and reroute the coolant through that. Once the superconductors were cool enough, he reset the breakers and the power switched back on. He ran through a diagnostic app and dismissed the barrage of error warnings it gave, and started to power the anti-grav back up.

The coils whined at an unfamiliar tone, but soon he felt the skip buck as it tried to pull free and level itself again. It wasn't getting enough coolant fast enough and the temperature was creeping back into the red zone.

He cursed as he backed off the port thruster, then shut it off completely and diverted all remaining battery to the starboard pad. It ran just fine and he wrenched the controls to starboard, to twist the skip free. The spinning coils screeched in complaint, but it did pull itself free to hover ten feet above the ground. It managed to stay there for precisely eight seconds before the starboard wing exploded.

The ship dropped, hitting the surface so hard it sent a snap of pain across his pelvis and the sickening blackness of shock swallowed him.

It was night when he woke up. Outside the windows it was inky black and the inside of the cabin was bathed in red emergency light that made it hard for him to remember where he was for a moment. The pain shooting through his back and his hips reminded him of the whole story the moment he tried to even turn his head to look around.

His legs didn't hurt. The more he stared at them, the more he realised he couldn't feel them at all. When he tried desperately to move both of them, but only got more pain in his hips in return. He gasped panicked breaths, moving his arms to rest on the remains of the med kit.

He retrieved his light from his pack, then shined it on his chest as he pulled the thermal layer open again. The scream that escaped when he saw himself was barely more than a whimper.

The small cuts were now stained black and it had started to spread into his skin, turning it a tight, waxy grey. He reached down and touched his left leg just above the knee, feeling the brittle crunch of the thermal layer now withered and flaking and when the thin sheet of it fell away, he could see the dry, mottled grey skin of his knee. When he shifted, as though he might somehow get away from the death slowly creeping up on him, he felt another sickening snap and realised it was the dissolved bone of his pelvis breaking under the weight of the moving torso on top of it.

He whimpered like a frightened child, then slapped himself in the face to break out of it and the jolt was enough to bring him back as the skip gave a metallic groan, just to join in the conversation.

San turned back to the monitor, realising the flashing red on the screen had been warning him of something really important, but it had been lost in the sea of red light around him. The coils on the starboard side were getting over pressurised, but by the state of the electrical system meant it didn't matter anyways, since there was no chance she would ever be running again.

He dismissed the warnings just so the screen in front of him would stop flashing and give his eyes a break for a minute.

More painkillers. There were only three of the green tabs left. Not enough to end his life, even if he tried. He reached for the stimmy dispenser, but couldn't find it. The skip had shifted while he was out and the dispenser had slid off the console and lay next to his dead feet.

His body shivered and when he took air in, he realised just how difficult it had become to breathe. His eyes drift back shut, just for a minute, but another chime snapped him awake. A notification saying something about a target being identified.

Through all this, the probe had continued to scan below the skip as it slowly sank into the black stuff. The end of the probe had made contact with something and taken a microscopic sample as well and radar, sonar and infrared scans. The onboard computer was able to identify the object that had lured San out here.

He lifted his dessicated hand for the last time and tapped the Show Match button. The notification disappeared and was replaced with a full screen diagram of a Mark III skip built twenty years before poor Stella. That Mark III also ended up here because of another dumbass who forgot there's only one rule.

Belladonna

The world around Marion drowned in pleasure and noise.

"What was that?" she shouted. It was dark in the Siren, the bass rampant along with a nectar of alcohol and sweat. She shoved a stranger, and then another, caught in the fray for a place at the bar. And the itch grew all the while.

"I said.", Denzel glanced at Marion's arm, at a strip of metal that vanished beneath her sleeve, "That the high's aren't gonna make that debt go away, no matter how good it feels."

"Puritan!", Marion gave a playful shove. The shout was a raindrop in the storm.

"You need to relax a little."

"I can relax, I – ahh." Denzel waved her off.

"I'm only trying to help. You know that, right?"

Marion nodded. They stood in silence a couple seconds, braced against a crowd that had a mind all it's own. Marion leant towards Denzel again, certain nobody would notice them.

"He got in touch with me, you know.", her hushed, urgent tone registered in a split second.

"Who?"

"Doggerland.". Marion was nervous just saying his name. And there was that itch again, turning over in her skin.

"Right." Denzel pulled away, slowly, looking around again before asking: "Any idea what about?"

"Can't say, yet. Though if it's anything about what I owe it can't be good.", the itch was rising now, catching fire up her arm. The music blended with the dark and the drink into a euphoria with a delirious, suffocated aftertaste. Marion pushed

her glass onto the bar, her tiger-orange jacket now draped over her shoulders.

"Want to get some air?"

There was hardly more room to breathe outside. They dashed to the nearest space they could find, a wall who's crimson had faded long ago. The buildings around them, the Siren included, were not what one would call built for purpose. Rather, they were victorian statements of stone and columns and faces of angels, used and re-used and re-used again as newer buildings sprouted like a concrete fungus. Every now and then a loose can or cup would scurry across the road. Light poured from a turbulent ocean of streetlamps and taxis below, as well as above, from lorry-sized screens that spewed adverts from the sky without rest. There was one in particular, starting up at just that height where looking up starts to feel awkward, preaching about the newest product of an aggressively urbanising Britain, the product that Marion and Denzel stood in.

The Northern Band.

Marion reached into her pocket, staring across the street at the same time and spotting a group of broad young men. They were a pack of laughing, roaring bulldogs, all in tank tops that emphasised the steely implants grafted onto their shoulders and biceps.

"I don't get it you know.", Marion held a stick of plastic and metal no longer than her middle finger and used it to point. Denzel had pulled out a cigarette.

"Don't get what, exactly?"

"You see guys like that, walking around with their implants out for all the world to see, and — it's not funny. Look at them. I can already hear the call coming in tomorrow. 'Oh, you see I was out and I was puffing my chest out like a fucking gorilla like'... no, seriously.". Marion didn't want Denzel's laughter to draw their attention. He was hardly to blame, though, as this griping was practically a daily ritual.

"'And before anybody saw him a man with his hood up came out of a side street, pulled my mate's implant out with a ripper and ran off into the night. Can you please get us a replacement. Pretty please. It won't happen again."

"All right, all right, I see your point. I think. Just plug it in already, you know that stuff creeps me out."

Denzel used his blot of embers to point at the stick. Marion shook her head, her left arm out in front of her and revealing an implant of her own. It was made for neural interfaces, but very soon it's main use had strayed far away and into recreation. When used with a Programmed Drug, or a ProD, it could inflict whatever highs or lows the programme contained within, whatever you wanted to feel.

"It's just Lagos Lightning, some stimulants with painkillers mixed in. I've even used this in the office, so don't act all high and mighty with me just 'cause you walk around with your arms bare.", Marion gestured at Denzel's cigarette. True to her word, Denzel did not cover his arms in public, a statement of pride in self-proclaimed purity common among the few who abstained from implants.

The itch still gnawed away. Marion turned back to the Lightning, slid the stick into her implant and clicked it into

place. An instant green light flickered into life just below her wrist, and the world felt clearer. A ProD needed no bottle, no paper, no light, no pill. Nothing. Just simple, instant bliss.

She pulled the stick out her arm and looked up, letting out a sigh. Tonight, like most nights, the stars had abandoned the sky.

"I think we should head back, the others will be wondering where we are." Denzel said a while later, embers pointed to the door. Marion agreed, happy to be free of that itch again for the moment. They both headed back into the neon and fog, looking for their group of friends while Marion tried not to think about work the next day. Nor about the debt, nor about the fact that, deep down, she knew she would crave that little green light for the rest of her days.

Trying not to think.

She already felt it as soon as she was out the glass doors, the dread that clung tight even as she stepped off the train. She followed the road, turning this way and that until the noise of people slowly died away, the walls of concrete slowly being replaced with plaster and PVC. She could swear she even saw a petrol car.

A corner away she stopped, felt for her ProD and snuffed out the itch. This one was different, pushing the world around Marion just that little bit further away, letting her float behind and above herself. For what she was about to step into she was going to need it.

The house itself didn't look too bad, from a distance, complimented with a starved lawn and a door decorated by a

pack of rabid dogs. She could already hear a droning from within. It spiked as the door flew open, an equally haggard man and woman barged out and slammed it behind them. The man carried a ripper in his hand, with his partner bearing the clear outline of another beneath her canvas jacket. They looked like heavy-duty torches but with the bulbs replaced by coils of steel, magnets strong enough to tear implant from skin, flesh and bone.

Marion pushed that image out of her head as she floated to the door. The dull thud of music deafened her as she paced through the hallway. Every surface, be it wall, table or windowsill, was deeply scratched and stained. Walking to the staircase, the frame on her right gave her a window to a team that wound around computers and weedy cables, all of them with seemingly permanent wires jammed into their arms. The hoodie-clad squad were all focused on a rack of ProDs, plugged into a large terminal that sat on the floor in the far corner, doubtless being written.

Marion glanced upstairs, each step a tick on a broken metronome, towards a man who could have passed as a shaved neanderthal in a tracksuit. He stopped her with an outstretched hand, rapping his knuckles on the door.

"He says you can go." he said, letting the door swing open with a thud.

The room beyond the door had the odd tablet or paper scrap scattered here or there, but in comparison to the rest of the house it was immaculate. The only furniture was a large, heavy desk and a chair, both situated in front of a vast window.

"Good to see you, Marion!" said Doggerland. The man sat in the chair was perhaps in his late thirties, though nobody Marion had spoken to knew his real age, where he was from or even his real name.

"What do you want?". Even in her dissociated state she was tense, the sentence alone a physical effort. Her blood ran cold, her eyes darting from Doggerland to the walls, scanning for a weapon or an object he would use.

"Just to talk." he said, his arms up in innocence. Marion knew he had a knack for this, his short stature and bushy beard giving a pleasant, care-free façade. The only give-away was his eyes, ones that always looked out as if from behind a mask.

"Honestly, I was half convinced you weren't going to turn up. Then I might just have to place a call in at the recovery center, wailing all about a lost implant. Now, wouldn't that be embarrassing?"

He gave a smile before standing. Talk of her work caused Marion to sober up in the blink of an eye, her meticulous effort to keep the two sides of her life seperate melted away into nothing.

Doggerland reached into the drawer, pulling out a ProD, this one just bare, naked white with the exception of a band of violet. He placed it in the center of his desk, leaving it in plain view as he spoke.

"I need you to hold onto this for me, in secret, just for a few days until I need it back. Now, this is important to me, as you might have worked out by the rippers leaving you alone at the door. Just as important is this: ". He gave a loud snap with his fingers.

" You mustn't, mustn't, use it."

"And then what, once you get it back?"

"Then the debt is clear."

Her heart leapt. The thought of the debt, one that had been causing her to look over her shoulder for the past six months, vanishing overnight seemed almost impossible, but here it was in front of her. All over a stick of metal.

Even so, something didn't sit right.

"Do I have a choice here?"

"You're free to turn around and walk out that door, no problem. But do you think that's really wise?"

Marion sighed, moving forwards after a moment to pick it up. Doggerland pulled another from his pocket, this one dark blue, and placed it on the desk.

"Take this as consolation, to help you sleep at night.". Marion wondered if he could sense her doubts and was trying to keep them under control.

"And remember, do not use the white ProD."

Marion hunched over on the sofa, twirling the Lightning in her hand.

"I can't stand the thought of all those things floating around." said Natesa, Marion's flatmate. She had come in still wearing her overalls, shaking her head as she shimmied past and into the next room.

"I still don't get how you only use one." said Marion, calling after her, " The way I see it it's like genres of music or

flavours of food. You couldn't just eat the same thing all the time, could you?"

"Pass me that flavour, then, will you?", Natesa's head poked around the corner, a hand held out to catch the thrown ProD.

"Thanks." she said a couple of minutes later, wearing cargo pants and a heavy jacket, "Got any plans tonight?"

"No, I think i'll just have a quiet one."

Marion curled up, doing her best to lose herself in the drama on the television, the glare coming from barely a meter in front of her face.

"I might see what Grey's up to.", she said after a few minutes, as Natesa headed for the door.

"Grey?", she spun around, "What do you want him for, after everything?"

"Question I've got about something from work." said Marion, though she bent the truth. The ProD from Doggerland had remained a snug splinter in her pocket since she picked it up, and only one person she knew might be able to tell her more.

"Alright - just promise me you won't do anything stupid." Natesa had her hand on the handle, wary eyes fixed on Marion.

"I won't."

Alone again, Marion sat in silence. She saw the night had crept onto the streets, a strong breeze audible even from here that effortlessly tossed the drones that fluttered from window to window. She stood up, checked she had the white ProD in her pocket, and slung on her jacket. The itch gnawed gentle, Marion putting it to sleep only once she found the Lightning

"What the *fuck* do you mean you don't know where he is?"

The night wind had gone from unforgiving to actively wrathful. Marion had fumbled many times on her walk for the cure to the itch, never being able to get it and instead determined to endure it for a few more minutes each time.

"I know exactly what I mean, Lady, I don't know where he is." said the woman perched at the top of the steps. Her eyes had been replaced with dark chrome sockets, each one hosting a cluster of stalks with glowing red tips that did nothing to ease the situation. Marion gritted her teeth.

"It's alright, I know her." a faint voice called from behind.

Marion started up the stairs, fumbling in her Pocket for the ProDs. She found both, only looking up at the man in the door once she had reached the top. Standing barefoot on the doorstep, both the hoodie and jeans both looked as if they had been forced over him not minutes before.

"So you show up without even a call? You must need something.". He looked at her with a heavy, skeptical gaze, his accent that special kind of Welsh formed from those who had moved to the westernmost parts of the band.

"What's that, another fix?", he flicked a hand at the ProD Marion didn't even realise she was holding. She made a move to go inside, the gnaw rising up once more. He moved to be in her way.

"What's going on here?"

"I just need it looked at, Grayson, alright?"

The words didn't come out as harsh as Marion thought they would, but still enough to taint the air. Grayson shrugged, taking the white ProD from her hand before he retreated into the house, beckoning her to follow. It looked normal up here, with lighting that gave the wooden floors and furniture a honeycomb glaze, one that Marion couldn't match up with Grayson's look. He had always been laid back about his appearance, and she had been okay with that once upon a time. But it had never gone this far.

Before long he stopped at a side door, opening the way to a set of concrete steps. Marion passed through a wall of ice, being led to a chamber who's only sign of life was a dull ventilation unit on the farthest wall. On one end of the room was a standing computer the size of an eletric guitar, complete with an office chair, a desk and half a dozen screens piled on one-another. Marion glanced at the other side, seeing only a cot and sleeping bag.

"Let's see what this is then.", Grayson plugged in the ProD, fed the wires from the computer to a set of ports in his right arm, and punched the machine into life. The wall of light blinded Marion. When she lowered her arm she saw countless lines of code and numbers racing across the screens, hypnotising her host.

The itch could be felt in her ribs now, behind her eyes and in the beat of her lungs. She back-stepped to the cot, feeling for the Lightning.

"So how have you – hey!", Grayson turned around in his chair, "Can't you wait until you're out of here?".

"Can't I what? Come on, it's not like I'm hurting anyone." said Marion, pulling the stick from her pocket. She felt the gnaw purr in anticipation.

"That's not the point.". Marion looked up, her eyes locked wide as she rolled up her sleeve.

"It's no worse than a cup of coffee.", she pointed to the mug on Grayson's desk, one stained with care over time until the inside had the colour and texture of leather.

"Landlady doesn't like that stuff being used in here, and to be honest, neither do I."

"Oh so what? You're gonna hide behind an old lady now, too? Maybe you should just own up to not wanting to see me again."

"Don't pull that bullshit! You came to me."

The gnawing had it's hand round her throat like the neck of a violin, playing a snarl. A voilent anger surged through her hands, making her lean forwards on the cot and grip it with raw, chalk knuckles.

"How about for once you stop being such a cunt, for five fucking minutes, and let me have my fix?!"

"Is everything okay down there, Grayson?", a call came from above.

Marion breathed hard, a lead weight in her chest as the sweat on her temples ran cold. The fury, and the itch, evaporated and left her naked.

"All good down here, Kat.", Grayson gave a thin smile to the light from the top of the stairs, waiting until the door had closed again before looking back at Marion. She tried to get up.

"Grey...", her voice cracked, " I'm so sorry. I don't know...".

"I think you should have your fix and be done with it." he said, turning back to his screens without another word. Marion sank against the concrete wall, looking from the displays to the ProD by Grayson's knees, a paralysing guilt washing over.

The green light was a comfort while it lasted.

"Marion.", Grayson spun around several minutes later, whipping the white ProD out of his computer and storming over, "Where did you get this?".

"Does it matter?" , she stared at the screens behind him, flatly. $\label{eq:constraint}$

"Yes, yes it does."

Marion looked at him and sat up in an instant. Worry had gripped his face and twisted it, his hand shaking as he held the white ProD. In that moment Marion wondered if she should have let sleeping dogs lie.

"Belladonna."

Outside, sat on a wall, the night didn't seem so bad now.

"That's the closest thing to a name I could find on it."

"Doesn't sound so bad." said Marion, smiling weakly, " Pretty, even."

"You ever used opiate mixes. You know, like Aztec Python?"

"Fucking christ Grey!" Marion glared at him.

"No, i'm serious."

"No.", she looked to the road. A car jittered past, pumping out the murmur of a radio before it faded down the street again.

"I know I've had my downs alright. And I'm trying, man. I tried."

"Just tell me the truth."

"No. I've never gone near that stuff."

"Good. This thing you brought me looks like one of them, at a glance. But something else is wired in. Once you've used it this little programme gets embedded right here." he pointed at his temple.

"Right, like a Trojan?"

"A Trojan, yeah! So you did listen to me."

"Every once in a while, maybe.", Marion gave a shrug, "You were saying..."

"Yeah, well, imagine a Trojan that caused instant brain death. All at the trigger of a sound, or a word."

Marion felt that lump again. She had only ever heard stories of things like these, computer viruses that could do anything from hijack your car to bringing down the power of entire cities. But this was different, the dread that Marion felt trickle down her spine told her that alone.

"Look, you do what you want. I'm not going to stand here and preach, even if I think you should throw that thing in the nearest incinerator and run. But something tells me that's not an option for you here."

"It's not." Marion stood up, "Thank you, Grey. It was good to see you again."

"Just do one thing for me, will you?", their eyes met, "Look after yourself, please."

"I'll do my best."

Marion didn't want to stay much longer, seeing Grayson growing cold in the bleaching lamplight. She turned on her heel, eyes fixed on the shimmering monoliths of the center while a new plan formed in her mind.

"Lothbrook Security Contractors!"

The screen glared down from the concrete heavens, preaching it's sermon to uncaring hounds in jackets of leather and steel.

"Whether you need to feel safe at home, work or play, we are here to help. From traditional security to private investigators, from physical countermeasures to unbreakable digital protection, Lothbrook is a tower of security in an evermore chaotic world.".

Marion flinched, her gaze sinking back down to street level. The voice melted away into the midnight chorus, locked in an endless struggle for supremacy against screens, engines and the yapping of hounds. Marion kept her head down. She wound past the sparse, scattered groups, each irreverent conversation a conspiracy that stalked her round every corner. Her jacket clenched tighter, the only protection in streets where Marion felt well and truly as prey.

The two ProDs were lead in her pockets, with each step their clatter rang out more and more, the air more raw with each passing breath.

She had to stop.

Was the police the right place to go?

Should she turn back, go home, and treat all this as a bad dream tomorrow morning?

Where had Belladonna come from?

The questions whirled and crashed in Marion's mind. She halted on a stained brick corner, her breath out of reach in the faded lights of a take-away sign. Bile climbed in her throat, a cold film of sweat blossoming over every inch of her skin.

"You alright there, lass?" a hound from a nearby pack called out, the slender implants on his face glistening dull as his teeth. Marion ignored the ripples of low laughter, a couple of cautious steps away followed by a grasp for her pocket. The city blurred around her in a panic, only clearing as Marion glanced at the Belladonna, poised to pounce over her arm. It clattered on the ground, followed by Marion as her legs gave out from under her, grasping for it while she felt the other one in her pocket. Her arm purred as the Lightning slotted in, the relief making Marion sit back in her roadside nirvana. Then the green light flickered out, and the bile was back with a vengeance. Marion fell on her hands, the walls closing in as she threw up in a drain. She flung her head back, desperately ignoring the cheers and claps from the nearby pack in her break to a run with a fresh, furious spite pushing her on.

The station was one more corner away. She slowed down, the reigns on her breath yanked back in sharp command as she threw a weary glance over her shoulder. A siren howled in the distance, the chorus of the screens relentless even as pin-pricks of rain prodded the back of her neck. In hearing distance, now, she could make out the heavy-duty drones. She watched their lights soar from a window several stories high, on their way for an early morning watch. Hope pounded in her chest. She waded

through the rain, the bellicose stench of wet stone, metal and earth, as she gripped the Belladonna in her pocket, ready for the throw.

Then she saw someone different.

Poised against a far wall, a thick pair of crimson goggles stared out from atop a skeleton of lean muscle, glaring from the thinning crowd. The gaze followed her with a naked, predatory intent that it didn't even try to hide, a coin that flipped between the fingers the only sign of a human behind the eyes. The Police didn't seem like such a good idea anymore. Before she knew it Marion was already five streets away, in a sprint of a silent scream, the shadows of the Band now the only safe place on Earth.

She barely woke up that morning.

The sedative had let her melt into sleep during the early hours. Even after she opened her eyes the world was still locked behind a dream, so far away that even the new, necrotic tone of the skin on her face and neck didn't register with her.

"Look at me. Look at me! What did he do?"

It took Marion a minute.

"If you're just gonna sit there I'll find him myself, kill him with my bare hands!", Natesa stood, her expression a potent cocktail of rage and anxiety.

"No. It wasn't him. He was okay, actually.". Marion, even to herself, spoke like she was on another plane of existence. She fell back down on the sofa, the itch and the cold sweat giving her a gradual tug back to the present. Natesa held Marion's arm up for a second, letting it fall back down.

"You need to call in sick today, trust me.".

Marion was propped on the window frame several minutes later, the street-level tide of steel and heads and suits at a swell.

"So you met Doggerland, did you?", Netsa was sprawled on the sofa, head cocked.

"All the debt would go.", Marion put her glass bottle down, "Tell me it was a bad idea to say yes. Or don't - ". She set her glass bottle down and went back to staring out the window. A vast, steely blimp floated into view from the corner, the black dots of drones floating out from the belly.

"Post's here."

"I never got why they put them up there.", Natesa turned her attention to the television.

"Infrastructure. It's always infrastructure. Why did they meld three big cesspits and two dozen little ones into a big line? Infrastructure."

One drone skittered across the sky, racing for the roof. Seconds later a small, unmarked square of paper appeared and fell flat on the floor.

"Yeah, well, it made more sense when there were five for the city and not one."

She paused for a moment.

"Have you seen this?"

Marion pulled away from the sulphuric sunlight, a dull ache in her legs as she sat to face the television. It had flipped to the news, an innocuous, white-washed street on display. A steady rhythm knocked out from the back of Marion's head against the wall, though her eyes narrowed.

"Police are investigating all leads into the case of arson that took place yesterday evening.", a voice that was warm, but with a clinical undertone, narrated. The image flickered to a pair in deep blue uniform, though one was clearly not police, " Lothbrook Contractors, who have been maintaining a presence in this area shortly before the incident..."

Marion had stopped paying attention to the words, instead locked on the footage of the burning house. Even there, crumbling to the howling flames, she recognised it. Her suspicion flared to fever pitch when the face appeared on the screen.

"That's Doggerland!"

"Aleksander Kvalheim was last seen close to the property, and has been named a person of interest. The public is encouraged to get in touch..."

Marion paced, her heart ready to leap out her throat. She heard a crunch, one that drew her to the paper that had fallen near the door.

"The bridge, eleven-thirty pm." she read aloud. The note was typeset, traces of warmth still fluttered through the paper. She felt nauseous, the nature of the storm she was in shifting before her eyes. She turned the text to Natesa.

"That's all it says."

It was eleven-twenty-five.

A fuzzy, restless sky hung overhead. Marion felt the drop in pressure, anticipating the spits of rain that would come any minute. She was sat alone, perched on a circle of damp stone at the edge of the station. In this part of the band it was quieter,

enough to hear the midnight breeze creep through the streets. She pulled her jacket tighter, hugging herself as she tried to stay warm while the minutes slipped by. The air here had a flavour all its own, a stink of carbon and steel from the trains that ran north and south. She kicked a discarded can along the ground, absent-mindedly, before checking her phone again.

Before Marion got up she checked for the Belladonna one last time. She pulled out the Lightning, the hand of the itch there again, the hairs on her neck standing up. The ProD glittered in the flavourless light, heavy in her hand.

"Can I borrow that for a second?". Marion looked up, shocked. A short woman stood before her, ragged skin poking out from beneath a pile of fabric. Her outstretched fingertips stroked the edge of the ProD.

"Sure." Marion handed it over, the woman groping at her own sleeve. As soon as it left her hand Marion took off, her left hand clasped over the Belladonna in her jacket pocket, her right a hidden glass bottle.

It was lonely out here, only tired-looking commuters and night-shifters dotted around, all trapped in their own bubbles of urgency. Marion wove through the disparate groups and continued onto the bridge. It was held up by cables as thick as a person's arm, wobbling slightly under Marion's step as she strode over the dark, stained waters of the river below. She stopped at the middle, turning to look out over the black, evening waters. In these moments of her own she wondered what Belladonna meant to those who wanted it, what it could be. It could be used as a weapon, to extinguish anybody who posed a threat to the wielder. Or maybe, she thought, it was

meant more as an instrument of leverage. After all, once you take control of someone's body, what else is there to take?

"I'm glad you saw the sense to come here."

Marion whirled around, seeing a figure at the other side of the walkway. It took her a moment to process the sight. It was Doggerland after all, but dragged through a field and beaten. His face bore masses of cuts and bruises, his clothes ripped and stained with water and mud.

"I did.". Marion, seeing Doggerland in this state, felt much less afraid, without his office or his bodyguard or his enterprise. He seemed more human now. Even his eyes had changed, now with that sharp shade of panic reserved only for cornered animals. His voice, in spite of the rest of him, remained steady.

"And you wouldn't have come here without the ProD. Give it to me."

"Just one minute though.", Marion's voice was harder now, much more concrete than the last time they had spoken, " Before I hand it over, I want to know what it is."

"Do you really have to do this?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"I... alright. Look at the state of me. Look." Doggerland gestured to his face, "I've been running, Marion, running from the people who burned me to the ground in search of it. Now I know you never cared for me, and I never expected you to, but think whether or not you want these people, when they get to me, to be coming after you too."

"Right. And the debt is gone?".

"All gone, just hand it over. Please.".

Marion fished into her pocket, feigning a struggle while Doggerland took a step closer. He was inches away when she pulled out the bottle. She whipped the glass across his face with a crack, his body limp on the ground in the blink of an eye. Marion knew she had only seconds to act, pulling down his sleeve to find the implant in his arm. The click of the Belladonna had a satisfying ring to it, a green flare burning in his wrist. When it flickered off she ripped it away, snapping the stick in two and throwing both halves into the river, followed by the bottle. There, she knew, they would join a graveyard of metal that remained an unspoken, thorny fact of the main river, of any body of water that ran through the Band.

Then she ran.

Her legs pounded when she reached the station, her breath in a fight to escape. She straightened up, doing her best to fit in.

"Hey!".

Marion got ready to run again, unsure how far she would get. It was only the woman from before.

"You left this with me. It's a good mix, is this."

Marion looked from her to a billboard. An announcement pierced the night air, declaring the train that was only now slowing to a stop. The itch made a protest, a grasp for control, as Marion looked back to the ProD and shook it off.

"It's all yours.". She felt a fresh kind of rush as she stepped onto the train.