

Low Hanging Fruit

Literary & Visual Arts

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Literary & Visual Arts Magazine

The Editors

Editor-in-Chief: Calvin M. Madsen

Kalvin M. Madsen is a fiction writer and musician from Malibu, California. He is a alumnus of University of California Santa Barbara, holding a bachelors in English. Madsen has short fiction published in *The Pomona Valley Review*, *Felix Magazine*, *The Catalyst* (UCSB), and more. He self-published a collection of short stories titled *Hello Receiver*, and a graphic novel titled *Emzara & the New Model*. Madsen is particularly interested in speculative fiction and spooky kafkaesque scenarios.

Executive Editor: Rosella Weigand

Rosella Weigand is an aspiring writer/filmmaker residing with her family and kitty family in Fairmount, Indiana. As the co-founder of Weigand Films, alongside her brother Richard Weigand, she has produced and starred in several online short films & 2 seasons of the comedy/spoof web series *Curve Your Vampirism*. Her writing has been published in many books, including *the tiny book of tiny stories: vol. 3*, *The Patterns Book*, and *The Art of Breaking Up*, released by hitRECORD in partnership with Harper Collins Publishers and hitRECORD's *Campfire Stories*, in partnership with the National Parks Foundation. Her artwork has also been featured on S1 + S2 episodes of both Pivot TV's Emmy-award winning *hitRECORD on TV* and the YouTube Originals series *Create Together*.

Senior Editors:

Valerie Sabrina Carrasco

Valerie Sabrina Carrasco is a Mexican American writer and editor from Los Angeles. Her work shines a light on the unspoken and the unseen. With empathy and courage, she explores themes of mental health and personal growth, crafting stories & poems that encourage readers to reflect, relate, and heal.

Anne-Marie Jones

Anne-Marie “Artemis” Jones is a mixed media artist from Christchurch, New Zealand. Her polymer clay creations have been featured several times in craft magazines, and she held a joint painting exhibition in 2022. She is currently studying towards an art diploma.

Mia Soto | M.S. Blues is one of the most decorated figures in the literary magazine community. At nineteen years old, she currently serves on a few magazine boards and has over 270 publications. She's the Editor-in-Chief of *Cuentos de la Gente* and the Founder & Editor-in-Chief of *The Infinite Blues Review*. In addition to her many literary endeavors, she is a college student and a proud employee in the Mental Health field. She currently resides in the Bay Area, California. Her debut book, *Collected Works: Poetry & Short Stories* can be purchased online through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other booksellers—as well as in store at Caspian Books located in Tracy, California.



Hello!

Welcome to Issue No. 3 of Low Hanging Fruit, your source for literary and visual arts from new and veteran artists. In this Fall 2025 edition, we continue our aim of showcasing contemporary work from creators worldwide.

Our editors have once again delved into the vast array of submissions, seeking out compelling “low hanging fruit”—pieces artists were eager to share. This issue brings together a rich collection of voices and visions, offering narratives, reflections, and artistic expressions from diverse backgrounds.

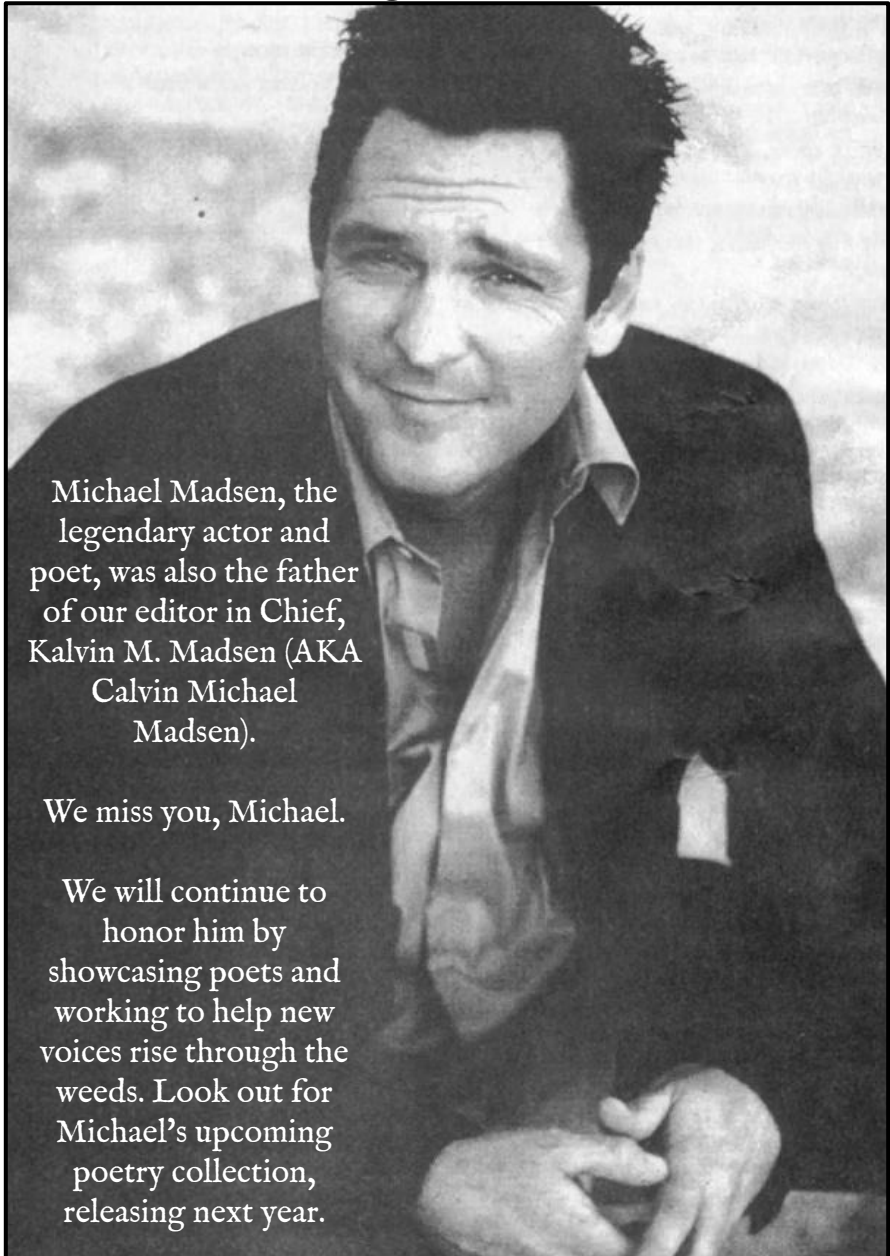
We are pleased to present this new collection for your consideration. We hope you find these pages engaging and discover something that resonates with you. For more information on our curation process or upcoming submission opportunities, please visit our website: fruithanginglow.com.

-Kalvin M. Madsen

Produced during the spring and summer and fall of 2025

1957 - 2025

Remembering Michael Madsen



Michael Madsen, the legendary actor and poet, was also the father of our editor in Chief, Calvin M. Madsen (AKA Calvin Michael Madsen).

We miss you, Michael.

We will continue to honor him by showcasing poets and working to help new voices rise through the weeds. Look out for Michael's upcoming poetry collection, releasing next year.

Content

Prose

- 10 Brittany Studer - *Alive*
- 11 Chitra Gopalakrishnan - *Folklore of Faith*
- 14 Chris Brewster - *Coming To Terms with A Lonely Nature*
- 16 PJ Carmichael - *Memory/Moment*
- 17 Calvin M. Madsen - *Kalamudri's Eye*
- 19 A. R. Tivadar - *Sunday Market*
- 23 Carella Keil - *The King in His Ice Castle*
- 24 Emma Elias - *After 60 years*
- 27 Elisha Osorio - *A Metaphysics Lesson I Ask*
- No One to Take: Grief and Identity*
- 29 A. R. Tivadar - *Quiet Lament*
- 39 Tucker Joneson - *The Mummy's Finger*
- 51 Sophie Van Der Put - *The Freezer*
- 55 Perla Ghabbour - *The Man On The Train*
- 59 Brooke Betten - *An Honest Conversation*
- 63 Carella Keil - *Three Keys One Lock*
- 65 Vojta Pavrovsky - *Saving Amelia*

68 LHF News

71 Visual Art

- 72 Keira Rechsteiner "K + M"
- 74 Irina Tall "GHOST unicorn"
- 76 Irina Tall "Running Dog"
- 78 Irina Tall "Angel"
- 80 Jade Hunt "Bunny Moon"
- 82 Carella Keil "Dorian Gray"
- 84 Carella Keil "Footprints on the Moon"
- 86 Anne-Marie Jones "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall"
- 88 Elias Mossa "Masquerade"
- 90 Elias Mossa "Through The Mirror"
- 92 Vague Animal "The Visitor"

Poetry

- 95 K. West "The Rummage Sale"
- 96 Josje Weusten "Dread"
- 97 Rosella Weigand "Never Refuse Your Muse"
- 98 Katalina Gille "Things that feel like giving up (But Aren't)"
- 99 K. West "Hack"
- 100 Taylor Schmidt three poems
- 103 Chainka "Call me home"
- 105 Mahaila Smith "This Supposed Immortality"
- 106 Brittany Studer "Over The Threshold"
- 107 Rebecca Agauas two poems
- 108 Katalina Gille "What if I'm the Spider?"
- 109 Brittany Studer "Cello"
- 110 Mahaila Smith "After all this loss"
- 111 Chainka - "Trains"
- 112 Valerie Sabrina Carrasco four poems
- 114 Brooke Heldermon "Smoking Silhouettes"
- 115 Adam Peachey two poems
- 116 Rosella Weigand "Her"
- 117 Luke Madsen four poems
- 118 Gabriel Deibel "Lightning Bolts"

119 In-House Interpretations

Seeking Companionship in "Coming to Terms with A Lonely Nature" by Chris Brewster

Seeing Her Again in "After 60 Years" by Emma Elias

Going Beyond the End in "An Honest Conversation" by Brooke Betten

124 Artist Bios

126 Ads and Community Board 100

Prose

Alive

by Brittany Studer

The country road barely gave me room to spread my arms along the slippery shoulder of its snaky back. Summer wind howled by my ears, daring me to race against her wild drift with just two wheels and legs. Beside me, cars shot off like cannonballs—they thundered by much swifter than the bumptious breeze. My heartbeat rattled the hairs on my arms, and pulsed my brush with death throughout my veins. Adrenaline rose up through my tongue, a liquid citrus bite. I rode the razor's edge, balanced between my beginning and my end, and I'd never felt more alive.

Folklore of Faith

by Chitra Gopalakrishnan

I, a liminal being, who needs both land and water, come alive on moonlit nights under glittering stars on the banks of pool waters. And, at other times, within the depth of these waters.

I am most exuberant amidst the hooting of owls, the shrill symphony of cicadas and the patterning of bioluminescent fungi in the hollows of the waters. The magic of reality is not a trick but quite simply beautiful—as beautiful as it is real.

Nighttime, for me, is indeed enchanting. My night vision shows me things others can't see. Colour in the dark, for instance. And my monocular vision shows me things beneath the water. In the dead of night, these visions appear other-worldly, more so as I can see from the front, the sides and partially from the back.

Darkness is magical for another reason. Butterflies, moths, snails, slugs and worms go into torpor, becoming still and unresponsive to stimuli. But I give ear to the slightest of their rustlings and flutters and pursue them in their lairs.

As a master of visual trickery, I blend seamlessly into tree bark and leaf litter. As the heads of my prey nod off gently to sleep, composed and serene, I pull them into the shadows of my wide and sticky mouth, crunch them with my vomerine teeth and breathe in their last breaths with them.

As the night deepens, my soul song comes alive. My skin glistens in its mucous coating, making me the blaze that lights up the night.

I may not win a prize for my looks, the tyranny of cute being forbidding, but I am passably good-looking. My body is vivid green, granulated in every inch, and the webbing between my feet is a spectacular orange-red.

My protuberant eyes may detract, but my magnetism makes up for it. My frog appeal lies in my abilities that go beyond walking, hopping, jumping, and swimming. I glide. I spread limbs with my webbed feet and plummet down from a tree's canopy to glide as smoothly as an eagle.

As the morning breaks, I feel the wizardry of the night dim and the prosaicness of the day settle in along with the sullen, sweltering heat that exposes the cracks in our sandy, clay soil and the listlessness of the vegetation around.

This year, the temperature has crossed thirty-five degrees centigrade in June, unusual for our area that sees only mild heat in summer and though it is past the mid-month, there is no sign of rain.

In my village, with a tongue twister for a name, Surashettikopa, in Kalghatgi, an administrative subdivision in the Dharwad district of Karnataka, the time to plant rice,

maize, cotton, groundnut, pulses, and oilseeds is passing, yet in the absence of rain, there is no water for planting.

I see farmers fret as white clouds flit the sky with indifference.

As the marsh plants around the pond where I live are wilted and weak, I retreat into a leafy shrub to escape drying up.

An eager beginner, I began life as a water-borne egg, hatching as a tadpole, turning into a jelly-like creature with sprouted legs to become a froglet and then losing my tail to become a frog. Every new beginning in my life has come from another beginning's end. It has required great exertion. I wonder what future awaits me.

I soon know.

I see boys in my area on a herping trip. By definition, it means searching for reptiles and amphibians like me. I have escaped til date, hiding in loose soil, hedges, coffee plants, or leaf litter.

Their herping is not a curious or gentle sport as it is meant to be. These wanton boys catch frogs like me and rip us open. Day or night. They do it for fun; we die in earnest. And ingloriously.

Our ability to fly and escape our predators is futile, as these boys have mastered the art of catching and skewering us. They have no regard for the fact that we as a species have roamed the earth for over two hundred million years and survived climate extremities of climate and tectonic shifts.

Will I be lucky today?

I am not. They spot and trap me.

Yet something is different. Instead of tearing me apart from limb to limb, they hold me gently and drop me, even as I cower with fear, into a clean, white, airy cotton bag. I see through the gauze that they have captured an amply proportioned female frog (our women frogs are larger than us males) and are carrying her like me in another cotton bag.

I hear the definite beats of the mridangam in the background and the plaintive melody of the nadaswaram, the drums and wind instrument make for alluring music. I enjoy it even in my captivity.

Then the storm that rages in my mind is back.

We enter a temple festooned with flowers and lush with offerings of food, fruits, coconuts, turmeric, sandalwood, and vermilion.

I feel a tug as a firm hand pulls me out of the bag. I squirm and use my moist, slippery skin to escape. I see the female frog do the same. We fail.

I feel a fabric, gold and prickly in the extreme, being draped around my body. My female companion is similarly draped in red. And then the bare-chested priest, with a bald head and a pigtail, applies vermilion on our foreheads. Not carefully. We both suffer as the powder blurs our eyes.

We hear chants – repetitive and metrical. The priest is loud and is soon joined by the villagers – men, women, and children. The mantras, sung in chorus, last an hour. I am tired, frightened, and hungry. I feel compassion for my co-traveller.

“The marriage is complete,” I hear the priest announce.

I am stupefied. Are we married? Conjoined without any of the mandatory mating rituals that we frogs so love and look forward to. This is preposterous!

I remember this moment that humans regard us frogs as supernatural beings capable of bringing rain, abundance, fertility, and good luck.

“Now it will rain,” the priest exclaims happily, with certitude, as if echoing my thoughts.

They have got us married to invite rains to the village? What absurdity is this?

Both of us are led to the temple pond and released.

Even in our state of daze, we see grey clouds waltz over the blue of the water. Then we feel gentle raindrops fall, a steady drizzle follow, and then our backs feel the intensity of the downpour.

The first rains bring the unmistakable perfume of petrichor – musty and earthy – and drenches the fissured earth and the trees, the plants making the mud tracks run as rivulets.

My skin goose bumps, as the lake becomes a drum for the heavens.

I look at my wife with love, with awe. She returns the look.

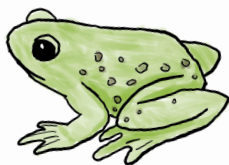
We croak in happiness. Again and again.

Together, we have survived to create an unbelievable miracle.

We now have the respect that we always yearned for from humans. An acknowledgement that we can co-exist and serve one another.

Wild expectations for the future bubble within us.

We rest ourselves on lily pads, our legs splayed in abandon. And then we fly, our legs darting away rapidly.



Coming To Terms with A Lonely Nature

by Chris Brewster

My mother told me it was contagious, her proclivity for loneliness. When I was a boy, I couldn't quite describe that emptiness in the pit of my stomach, that perpetual knot in my throat, that inexorable desire to be a nuisance to those who were sick of my company, that self-hatred knowing that people were, in fact, truly sick of my company. I was eighteen when she told me, shortly after my aunt passed away. She went to New York for a work trip, and I was left alone, left to my own devices. Just a year prior I would have been elated to hear such news. A whole week on my own, a week of TV and junk food and questionable decisions, but when she left early in the morning, without so much as a "Goodbye," I had never felt so alone.

The feeling was there before, but it was different now. It took a more violent, misshapen form, a form that I couldn't pin down in a corner or hide in a closet or bury with false emotions and feigned smiles. It grew to a size that forced itself to rear out of every crevice. The first night my mother left I sobbed harder than when my aunt actually passed away. I suppose it was all catching up to me at that moment, but there was another more sinister realization that I came to that night. It was the realization that I would have to live with that feeling, that sequestration disposition, for the rest of my life.

My mother told me of its contagiousness, like a doctor breaking some terrible, terminal, irreversible illness to a patient. She told me that she'd lived with it her entire life, that when she was nine years old, she felt the weight of it press down on her small, frail little shoulders, and though the weight eased some days, it never fully let up. That heaviness pushing her down was a sharpness in my gut. Its form was different, but the effect was the same. She walked with a buckling of the knees, and I walked with a slouch.

I didn't see that loneliness in my mother until after I graduated from high school. She lost her sister, and I lost the only person in the world who I felt I could be real with, the person I sometimes wished was my mother. Yes, I know it's a horrible thought. Despite such a loss, despite hoping that we would grow together, become closer than we were, the exact opposite happened. Her loneliness tore her away from me, and so did mine. And so we were two people living in our apartment, struggling to say "Hello" or "Goodbye" or "I love you," and when I found her on the floor, on her knees, sobbing the way I did when she left, telling me that she no longer wanted to be alive, I wondered when I too would no longer want to be alive, and if my existence got in the way of her desire to leave it all forever.

I had my dramatic moment of self-loathing shortly after, in college. I didn't fall to the floor and let out pained sobs of contrition or repentance. It was quieter, which I

thought was fitting considering that despite being surrounded by college roommates and people who claimed to care about each other (they didn't), I remained mute on such matters. Quiet but still dramatic. The climax of a movie or the prologue of a thriller; that's how I chose to think about it, and when it was done and I was on my way out, the faces of everyone I ever loved, the faces of everyone I ever hated, the faces of everyone who loved and hated me, they all came flooding back.

It was as if I had amnesia and an unexplainable miracle occurred, granting me my memory, granting me the ability to see those who would show up to my funeral and carry my casket like I did my aunt's. In a way, this pervasive loneliness *was* an illness, though it has a different name.

Pills, therapy, long conversations, apologies, raised voices, hushed whispers — it was non-stop when I came back home from my mutilation. I figured the fast-paced nature of my recovery was on purpose, as to not allow me to try anything again. I guess it worked, though

most people didn't know that despite the loneliness that remained, I had no interest in revisiting something that failed the first time.

So, as I write this, the solitude is still there. I tried to fight it, but in doing so, I ended up hurting myself. There is no battling a state of being that planted its seed years ago. Doing so makes that seed grow into a malevolent, bellicose kind of tree, the kind that uproots unsuspecting plants and wildlife, the kind that stands confidently for generations while others wither away. I had to learn to live with it, to walk that fine line of romanticizing my sorrow and growing with it. When I really think about it, I thought that if I wasn't happy every single day, I was just a profoundly miserable person, that there was no point in living such a life because who would? I thought of the complexities of the human condition in black and white, but I failed to see what was right in front of me the whole time.

My mother, just as sad as me, just as ill, brings me so much joy when I hear her voice on the phone, or see her sharp cheekbones from her profile, or feel the smallness of her frame when I hug her. How could I leave something like that behind? A shared loneliness is still loneliness, but its shape is much more controlled. I can bury it, put it in a closet, pin it in a corner, but there's no need, not anymore, because its existence is inevitable. It has already made a home built on flimsy wood and rusted metal, but coexistence isn't so difficult anymore. And so I wonder, even during my worst days, how sick can I really be if I still have her, the woman who chose to stay alive to see me grow? I think I know the answer.

Memory/Moment

by PJ Carmichael

Are you in or are you out? Free apples in a box on the side of the road. You know what they say. Like sand through the hourglass... The last lightbulb. Bonsai by candlelight. A night out on the town. Over the bridge to Salem. Streetlights and a steady influx of tourists. Giallo films. Below freezing. Fog from last year, Nosferatu in a cold stone church, organ music accompanying the silent film. Pinto and Sprout. Static electricity. Flurries beginning as the sky grows dark, a garland of pinecones, winterberries, and evergreen resting above the glass pane. A little lavender tree in the center of the table. Preparing for a surprise party. Re-counting a recent trip to IKEA. Cleaning off a tall cabinet, leaving the apartment at 5:30. A favorite sweater and the television playing Charmed each time it's turned on. Picking up gently used furniture on the side of the road. Holographic stickers from two friends headed back to Colorado. Hour-long calls with a licensed therapist. Bossa Nova and slight alarm when the pipes downstairs start rattling. Giant waves on the North Shore, storm surge slamming the coast, flood warnings in full effect. What a time to be alive. Endless entertainment and an oven set to 375°, cell phone accidentally left on the hot stove burner, yanked off just as the case begins to melt. Snowbanks shrinking on a warm Wednesday in January, only two days after I shoveled out the parking spot in front. Enjoying the ride, the days passing slowly as the years fly by.

Kalamudri's Eye

by Calvin M. Madsen

From *Hello, Receiver: Five short stories*

Kalamudri was a persuasive man. He taught of truths that lay unseen — his own conjured theories for the settlements that root into the valley. He would say “We are dust; we are also a glowing light.” Another favorite rant he would spill over his listeners was his thoughts on the moon, or as he phrased it, “What you call the moon, I do not. What you call the stars, I call *the glow*.” This meant very little to anyone beyond poetic speaking; in fact, it became his great frustration in life that no one recognized his sphere of total understanding.

But of course, that is not why Kalamudri has become the creeping legend as he is known today. This came after his most magnificent “discovery,” the one which seized his soul and pulled him from any throne of high-moral that he may have inhabited. One evening, Kalamudri's assistant, young Bavlov, reported that Kalamudri grabbed his head in an urgency to stare into Bavlov's eyes. Kalamudri had felt that he had finally found the great answer, the solution to his great question. That night, Kalamudri looked up at the stars and was convinced the formations that he witnessed, the same as he had seen every night, were in fact the small moving particles in a human eyeball. “We are in an eyeball,” he concluded, and in his world it was clear. “The milky way - its center is a pupil.”

That night, Kalamudri took hold of his sleeping neighbor's cat. He took the cat under candle light and looked into its eyes as closely as he possibly could, nearly swapping his own eye liquid with that of the cat. After twenty minutes of silent scanning, all while restraining the poor cat, he slapped his neighbor's coffee table and grunted like a dog. He said, “This is impossible” and left the room fuming while the neighbor searched for their pistol after hearing the slap. Kalamudri was gone by the time the neighbor ventured into the room, so the neighbor gave up and went about looking for the cat, who had run off.

Kalamudri felt the necessity to verify his findings, so that when he explains this new truth to the people, they won't treat him like a traveling bard. First he thought to hold a public display encouraging village people to gather round and stare into the eyeball of his assistant, Bavlov. But this plan was abandoned, because he knew he needed more research and personal experience to support his claim. This became his new campaign.

His first victim was the farm hand known as Wezlo. He was one of the most intelligent residents of his village, which Kalamudri translated into a greater chance of having a universe contained in his eye. It has been told that Kalamudri approached this man in the clothes of a doctor while Wezlo was tending to his field of banana grapes, a fruit that Wezlo genetically designed himself. During their interaction Kalamudri convinced Wezlo of his doctor status and offered a free exam. How could Wezlo refuse?

There was no such thing as a *free* exam in this valley, and in Wezlo's view this was irresistible. Soon they were arranged in Wezlo's living room; Wezlo was on his back, laying on the ground while Kalamudri studied his eyeballs in a crouched position. It wasn't long before Wezlo felt harassed and ordered Kalamudri to leave his home.

While this had been an uncomfortable experience for Wezlo, it only thrilled Kalamudri. Wezlo's eyes were complex; they had stars and black brush strokes that stirred the otherwise blue iris. Kalamudri felt he had found more proof! His thoughts were, "Of course this is what the universe would look like from afar! Like an iris spiraling into a pupil!"

He claimed eight more victims before his vision began to deteriorate in his old age. He could no longer wrestle school teachers to the ground and look into their eyes, nor could he grip the collar of a passerby and beg them for a gaze. On his last attempt, he held a small child to the ground in an empty church. The child's eyes, to Kalamudri, were nothing but the universe through a dirty window.

In his most famous exploit, and in his most desperate hour, he ordered his faithful Bavlov to continue his research and report the findings back to him. That night, Bavlov, while attempting to stare into the eyes of a sheep, was flanked by an enraged ram. Several more rams and sheep joined in and worked together to kill Bavlov, each taking turns marching backward a long enough distance to achieve destructive speed in their charge – then bursting off like a pastoral rocket at Bavlov. He was dead after three hours of this activity. He was nearly a puddle.

A year later, Kalamudri was blind. He wandered the valley, tripping over logs and rocks. He had no idea a war had started during his research into the eye galaxies. In a particularly shaky section of the valley, he was shot in the head by a stray bullet. His last thought was how small he would feel if he could fit into an eyeball. But more importantly, his second to last thought was on his lack of human understanding.



Sunday Market

by A. R. Tivadar

Zamfira carefully shaped her nails. She hated the way square nails felt, but she could bear it until tomorrow. She got her nail polishes from the shoe box she stored them in and got to painting.

“Are you going to make each one different?” Zamfira’s father asked.

“No, they’ll match,” she replied.

They were both in the kitchen that evening. Zamfira did her nails there because the window was open, letting out the steam from the pot and the nasty smell from the polish. Zamfira and her father were having potato soup for dinner. They were in the habit of eating everything they had before going out to get more.

She painted her nails with strawberries, dark red and teal green on a light purple background, with white hand-drawn sparkles. The prettier she made them, the higher she could trade them up. She drew fine details and shadows with handmade tools she crafted out of her old paint-brushes from which she had cut their bristles into sharp points.

Zamfira’s father complimented the final result and served them food. He was getting old, with a greying beard and mis-matching arms. When Zamfira’s older sister, Lăcrimioara, got married, she and her husband found a nice, plain house. The real estate agent asked for an arm and a leg, the standard price. Zamfira’s father haggled for only one arm and his first name.

The agent narrowed his eyes. “An arm, your first name, and your last name.”

“Deal,” Zamfira’s father said. His right arm disappeared from his sleeve.

Lăcrimioara and her man insisted he not do it, but Zamfira’s father claimed the house was his wedding gift to them. He was going to do the same for Zamfira in the future. Once both his children were secure, it wouldn’t matter if he didn’t have anything anymore.

Although having one arm instead of two did make it more troublesome to do anything. Eventually he found a cheap arm to replace it. It was burnt by the sun, missed 3 fingers and was marked with badly-made tattoos but otherwise functioned perfectly.

Tomorrow was Sunday, and the Market was going to be set up again, as early as 6 am. Zamfira and her father were going to go at 8. Any hour close to noon made it too hot to walk around the endless stalls.

Zamfira went to bed after dinner. It was full of things, as was her father’s room and the rest of their home. In her bedroom were located books, hundreds on shelves and in stacks on top of the furniture, on the nightstands, around the bed. They were old books, retired prints, collections and serialisations, some older than her dad, with ripped paper covers and authors nobody knows anymore. She got them for cheap, but their total worth combined ought to be in the thousands. It was good to have them as backup in case bad times came.

Many sellers followed this trick: make everything cheap, so people buy a lot to take advantage of the sale, and before they know it, the bill is kilometrical.

The next morning, they put on plain, ugly clothes. If people thought they were rich, they asked for higher prices. They packed some of Zamfira's old canvases and 50 lei in 10 lei banknotes in an old wallet. The traffic was already hellish; people were parking on the grass outside the market and on the sidewalk. Somebody managed to get their car on top of another car.

Zamfira carried the purse with the wallet, holding it with both hands, and Zamfira's father carried her paintings in a cloth bag. Zamfira loved drawing, and people loved art, but few were willing to pay for it. She got used to painting generic things that she wouldn't miss or mind giving to someone else.

They met such a person quite quickly. He wanted Zamfira's painting of the city at night, the street lights and car lights mimicking the stars. Zamfira's father was very capable at haggling. He got the man to give them 2 kilos of flour. For another drawing 2 bottles of oil, for another a large jug of water, for another sugar, for another fruit. "Deal!" They would say and shake her father's hand.

Zamfira frowned as she watched her signature disappear, and somebody else's clunky one appeared in its place. Her father carried the bag, now with food, on his shoulder and they continued perusing the market.

Anything could be traded for anything. Most people of Zamfira and her father's income usually asked for food. An antique vase for 10 kilos of plums. 2 chapbooks for a chicken breast and ground beef. A kiss with tongue for booze. More for more booze, enough to treat a wedding party. 10 brand new, popular books for a fully stocked pantry. New, hyped-up books with fancy covers were expensive as all hell. 50, 80, 100 damned lei...

Some vendors were completely shameless in their greed, knowing people could and would pay with whatever they got. A full set of teeth for a new car. A pair of eyes, or more, for an uptown house. One's skin for a healthy heart or lungs or bones. Oh, people traded anything for health. Some vendors' wares were themselves. Many people in the market went with missing parts or multiple parts, hoarded for that very reason. They stuck out ridiculously from their backs and necks and the tops of their heads. Zamfira's father forbade her from selling her body, the outside or inside of it, for as long as he was still around.

They reached Zamfira's favourite corner of the market, where an old lady was gradually selling her huge book collection. She sat on a lawn chair by a little van, surrounded by her wares. 1 book for 5 lei, 3 books for 10. Some people still sold for money. Zamfira searched the cardboard boxes full of old tomes, fiction, poetry, history, looking for whatever looked interesting. Zamfira's father wondered if Zamfira would grow up to be like that old lady. May God let her get to such an old age, mostly intact.

Next to the old woman were stalls of old trinkets, old tools and screws and mechanical parts, wooden furniture, china and cutlery sets, oil lamps, cuckoo clocks, old radios and pick-ups and record players, stacks upon stacks of vinyls. Around the middle of that section of the Market, somebody was blasting music on a speaker while also offering CDs. That Sunday he was feeling the 70's groove.

In another area of the Market were clothes, rows and rows of tables with mountains of shirts, dresses, pants and jackets, that people could climb, dig, and search through. Vendors over there watched like hawks and answered whenever someone shouted for the price. Other tables had more neatly arranged displays of shoes and outfits on coathangers.

Zamfira needed a stylish trench coat for autumn and winter. She was becoming a young lady. They spotted a dark blue one, in the vintage cut Zamfira adored. They made their way to it with calm and even apathetic expressions. If vendors saw you liked something, they asked for higher prices. Oh, Zamfira saw hundreds of things she really liked every time they went to the Market.

Porcelain and ceramic figurines, toys, stained-glass lamps, glass bowls in the shapes of flowers, framed embroidery, and other people's paintings. When her father asked for their prices and he found them ludicrous, he'd make them leave, Zamfira reluctantly following behind. She could collect the old lady's cheap books because they were cheap.

"It's high quality wool!" The lady praised her own wares as Zamfira inspected it. "It would fit you perfectly, Miss!"

"It's pretty thick," Zamfira said.

"Yes, it would be more suitable for cold weather," she said. "But it's not bulky at all. It would fall perfectly on your waist and hips! It reaches just to your knees, so your slender legs will still be visible."

Zamfira glared the woman's way. She herself was being inspected. If it were a man, it'd be even more creepy. And as if this coat was worth an entire leg!

"There's a loose thread over here," Zamfira's father butted in, pointing at a button, where the thread holding it was sticking out. "We'd rather buy things we wouldn't have to fix but whatever. What do you want for it?"

The woman glared at him, then put back on a cordial smile. "What are you offering?"

"Would you give it for this set of nail polish?" Zamfira asked, presenting her hands.

"Your nails?" The woman asked.

"Just the nail polish," Zamfira dryly repeated.

"Are they gel nails?" She asked, taking a closer look.

"No, no, it's regular polish."

“They look so good, though! Alright, deal!”

The strawberries disappeared off Zamfira’s nails and appeared on the woman’s second set of hands. She vainly admired them, then folded Zamfira’s new coat and put it in a plastic bag. “Enjoy wearing it!”

They were walking away from the woman’s stall when Zamfira’s father looked up. He made wide eyes. It was still bright outside, but black storm clouds were approaching from the horizon.

“We should get back to the car,” he said.

They made their way out the market along with other shoppers, the vendors around them hurriedly putting their things away. In the grass field turned parking lot the rain started. First as a drizzle, fine cold needles falling on them, then a proper torrent, like a shower head on full blast. Zamfira and her father ran to the car, holding bags above their heads.

“Where is it?!” Zamfira cried out.

“Further back! By that truck!”

“Gaaah!”

The next ordeal was getting out of the parking lot, then out of the traffic jam, everybody leaving all at once. Zamfira’s father turned on the AC to warm and dry them up. They’d be stuck there for a while.

“At least we managed to get some things!” he said, looking at the backseat with all the food and the trench coat.

“Yeah!” Zamfira said, wiping the raindrops off the stack of books in her lap.

The King in His Ice Castle

by Carella Keil

His eyes are as beautiful as two diamonds a poor boy mined for his grandmother, but his face is a mountain cliff of tear-scarred trenches.

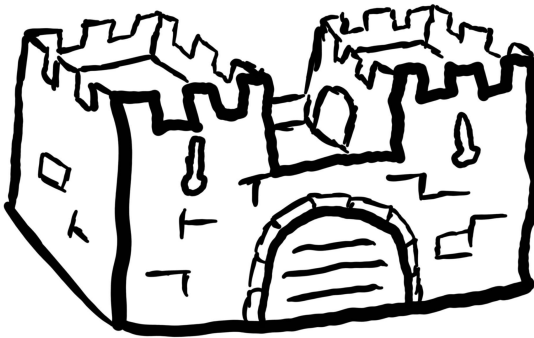
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“Do I look old?” he asks, patting the moisturizer into his skin.

“No.” She kisses him on the cheek, beads of water from her shower clinging to tendrils of her hair. She shakes them off. The way she shook him off her this morning, and the morning before, like a dream she is too tired to have. And just like that, he realizes he is alone in his castle.

The White Pawn adored how unattainable he was; the Black Bishop is entirely different, gliding seamlessly through his nights, until he doesn’t realize all the days that have been cut to shreds.

A memory. Your eyes watching hers in the mirror.



After 60 years

by Emma Elias



Sixty years.

It had been sixty years since Aida had breathed such unpolluted air into frail and disease ridden lungs; sixty years since she had smelt the blend of fresh pine and olive groves; sixty years since she had stepped foot in the village of her birth.

The gravel rolled beneath her boots. She had been much more nimble, much more lithe the last time she had walked this path, or rather, the last time she had run this path, clutching her younger brother's shaking hand and following their father through the night – red and yellow flashes intermittently lighting the distant horizon.

“Tayta?” her grandson gripped her elbow. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, tenderly patting his hand.

Her feet could not run up the path to her old childhood home the way they had once run from it; she shuffled her way to the place where her mother would lay herbs to dry in the sunlight on the front porch, where her father would tell stories by the fire at night, where they celebrated her cousins baptism and her auntie's wedding, and where they had been sitting when they learned that the armies had crossed the border.

Her grandson guided her further and further, til eventually, she could see it clearly – the stone house at the end of the lane with its citrus trees and clay roof that was now caved in.

For sixty years it had stood untouched by human hands, left purely to the whims and whiles of the Mediterranean wild - with weeds spurting from the cracks and grass that reached to one's waist.

Aida chuckled as she thought of how mortified her mother would be at the state of her garden and home. She could almost hear her calling for her children to hurry and clean their mess for there were guests coming.

Almost.

For it had been sixty years since she had heard her mother call her name, sixty years since she had run through the house dusting the ornaments and cursing her youngest child for trekking mud all over her floors.

Sixty years since Aida had left because of the war, and she didn't have that many more to spare.

Her children did not believe her at first, when she told them she wanted to go home, to see it one last time.

“Ma, you are not well. It will exhaust you.”

“I will be exhausted anyway,” she shrugged.

“Ma, you are not well. What if you don’t make it back?”

“I’m going to die anyway,” she waved.

Her mind had been made, and all knew that Aida would not be swayed.

Her grandson James had been the one to volunteer to take the journey with her, along with his wife and children of his own.

With her rattling bones, eighty odd years and disease ridden lungs, she went. On two planes and across time zones she went; across 11170 kilometres and 20 hours she went.

To the place that had once been home she went.

Once.

For sixty years she had thought of this place – of how it all had been.

Everything had changed – the village, the people, her life. When Aida got there, she saw that this home she had left behind was now no home at all, reduced to rubble and roots.

This, Aida could accept, for she had come in search of more than the pile of stones she had once lived in; there was something in that pile of stones that for sixty years she had wished she had thought to take with her – the photo of her family.

Photos were no trifling commodity when Aida was young; there were no cameras in the village and so Aida, her parents, and her little brother had dressed themselves in their finest of fineries and taken a coach to the city.

Her father was so proud of the image that he had paid extra to have it framed.

Aida remembered the people of the village stopping by all that week to see it displayed on their mantle piece. She remembered how amazed and mesmerised they had all been, that such a likeness was possible.

She thought of that photo often, trying to recall all its details in her mind’s eye, trying to remember the way her mother had looked.

She had lived in her new country for three full years when she realised she could no longer picture her mother’s face. She would squeeze her eyes shut, remember her laugh and her scolding and her warmth, but her face... it was gone.

The picture had not made it out the door with them when they packed their essential belongings and left that night, and her mother had not made it out the village.

That she would never forget that dreadful night, that she hadn’t retrieved the photo from the mantle, and that she could not remember her mother’s face – these had been the things that had haunted her these sixty years.

How she hoped the photo was still there.

James led her to the door that had long since fallen from its hinges.

The small houses floor was rubble and dirt and weeds, yet still, out of habit, Aida wiped her feet on the threshold before she stepped in.

The house was smaller than she remembered, or maybe she was bigger, or perhaps still she had simply gotten used to bigger things.

The dinner table around which many a family dinner was had had collapsed; any glassware of finery shattered on the floor – and yet it was all there.

Dragging her weary feet across the rocky ground, she shuffled towards the stone fireplace.

The mantle had fallen and chunks of the fireplace with it. Aida searched the floor, pushing rocks aside with her feet, and scanned every surface and crevice of her once home until she saw it – the smallest glint of bronze poking from beneath the stones.

With great effort, she bent down.

“Tayta, let me,” James lurched forward.

But Aida had already lowered herself onto the floor. She pushed aside the debris and reached for the frame, which her father had once been so proud of.

She shook away the shattered glass and blew the dust from its surface.

She saw her father, standing upright with his pushy eyebrows and moustached lip set in a stern glare. She saw her younger brother, just a child at the time the photo was taken, staring perplexedly at the man behind the camera who was doing all sorts of tricks to hold the children’s attention. Then of course there was herself, with a large bow in her hair and cheeky smirk across her little lips.

Aida felt her heart leap. There she was – her own dear mother.

Her hair was pinned up in a way that still allowed her heavy waves to fall beside her plump face and upon her shoulders, her were lips pressed neatly in a line.

She was not smiling, as this was not the custom in photos, but she her hand wrapped softly around her daughter’s waist, holding her close by her side.

It had been sixty years since Aida had seen those eyes, and although the photo did not show it, she now recalled that they were hazel.

In her old age, Aida found she cried a lot more than she did in her youth and cry she did. Not a heavy, heaving, uncontrollable sort of cry but a soft misting that began in her heart and worked its way up her throat and settled in the back of her eyes, slowly seeping through and down her face.

Her hands and breath alike shook as she traced the figures in her family’s picture with her aged and wrinkled fingers.

Aida let the tears run.

After sixty years, she finally had it back – her family’s photo and the memory of her mother’s face.

A Metaphysics Lesson I Ask No One to Take: Grief and Identity

by Elisha Osorio

It's been three years, and the sweater you gave me on that rainy day in August still sits atop my dresser. Though it remains untouched, collecting dust, I urge you not to make the grave mistake of deeming it unacknowledged. While my hands rarely make contact with its charmingly woven threads—unless by accident—my eyes pluck at it incessantly, obsessively, searching, as if to find traces of you in its making.

It's been three years, and the sweater has become a threadbare symbol of your absence.

Funnily enough, I didn't think of it until a certain day. I don't talk to anybody about it, nor do they care to ask, but when the world is silent—and the breeze in the trees resembles your laughter—I find my way back to the memory. It was the day I attended a physics lecture that, for a painfully slow two hours, droned on about the definition of a wave and a particle.

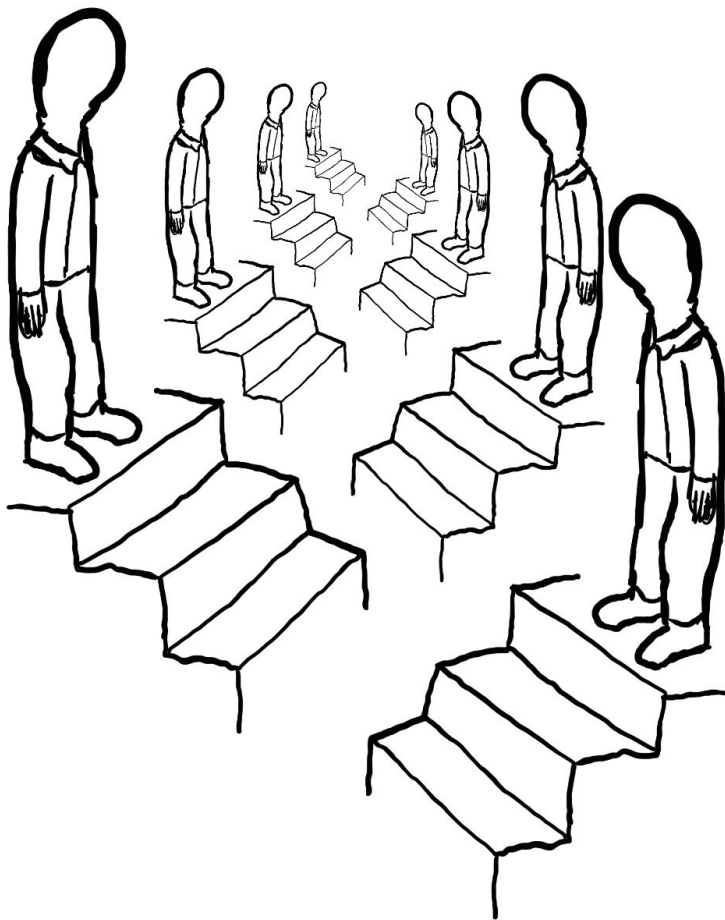
The professor described a wave as a disturbance—almost a nuisance—that moves through space, capable of transferring energy but unable to transfer matter. A particle, in contrast, is a smaller being of matter—defined, its body measurable in its formation. I don't think I retained much from that day, except for one painstaking realization I carried home with me. And as I began to walk home, I saw the lampposts flicker in the same quiet intervals you used to blink before you fell asleep. I quickly saw that we couldn't escape who we were back then, because everything—no matter how fragmented—is inexplicably linked.

While it's no secret how terrible I am at mathematics, I won't hide the fact that I tried to give my realization a physical form. I shaped the thoughts, molding them into words on paper, but the curves of their letters jutted out and drew blood. Maybe I only wanted a physical form so that, if the thought ever dawned on me, it would be easier to destroy, to carve into it, to dismantle it piece by piece. Because, as they say, it's easier to erase something physical, to destroy it, to make it vanish. But the brain never forgets, no matter how much you wish it would.

I got home around 10 p.m. that night, and as I sat down by the neglected windowsill, I came to terms with it. The realization, slow and hesitant, became impossible to ignore: the grief I had once convinced myself was gone still lingered, unmoving like an object in a state of inertia, resistant to any external force. It existed in the way particles exist—definitive and still—yet, at times, it manifested like a wave, moving through me in

oscillating patterns, impossible to contain or control. Time had not dissipated it, nor could I measure it in any meaningful way, much like the wave-particle duality that defines quantum states—both here and not here, at once present and elusive. It was proof that time doesn't heal all wounds. Grief, in its own way, simply is. It lingers, shifting, always present in some form, and it's something you can't easily change or explain.

With this realization, my eyes skim over to the sweater. I knew grief only as a feeling until now.



Quiet Lament

by A. R. Tivadar

On a night all black, dotted with orange street lamps and red cigarettes, the theater was full to the brim. In the back, where none of the sumptuous lights reached, there were many trash cans and wooden crates. One would not think, or not dare, to climb them up to the small square window.

Through the narrow and dusty corridor, full of broken props, Tarassaco made her way to the platform above the stage. If she sat crouched in the far right corner, hidden by the darkness, she could listen to the opera. That night was Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

She could only see a sliver of the stage, close to the edge of the heavy red curtains. She got, however, a perfect view of the backstage, with people running left and right, frantically changing clothes and dashing back for their scenes. It was like watching an anthill. She could hear Figaro's aria perfectly, the sound echoing all around and reverberating in her chest.

"Ah, bravo Figaro! Bravo, bravissimo!"

She knew it by heart, like most of Rossini's songs. He was the theater's favourite composer too. They also performed a lot of Verdi, Monteverdi, and Mozart. Her memory was pretty great; she knew almost all of them by sound.

The orchestra flourished and lights dimmed as stagehands changed the scenery from Bartolo's front door to Bartolo's elegant home. She watched the doors, wallpaper and furniture, be carried out and set up within seconds. Not even an army had this much discipline. Miss Becky Waldorf, stage name Beatrice Aldoro, played Rosina and wore a powder green dress. It looked very pretty with her ginger hair.

As Tarassaco heard the audience's applause at Rosina's arrival, she continued to watch the backstage — Luigi Speranza fixing his Bartolo wig and Eric Laferge's assistant dusting Basilio's lapels.

In the far left corner, opposite of Tarassaco, she could see the ghost looking up at her. She found him quickly. He was dressed in a long black robe, cuffed at his neck, covering his entire body, making him appear like a dark pillar. His face was covered by a volto mask, pure white, and his white hair spilled over his shoulders in perfect curls. No matter how much was going on around him, nobody paid him any attention or seemed able to see him. Nobody but Tarassaco.

She was not sure if he really was a ghost, or if he was even real. There had been period of time where she felt she was going insane, so a hallucination wouldn't be all that surprising. He might as well have been a mannequin somebody dressed up and tilted the mask to look upwards. But Tarassaco felt his eyes on her. The only one who knew she was in the theater.

Rosina sang her cavatina, and Tarassaco moved her lips along, looking down at the ghost.

*“Una voce poco fa
Qui nel cor mi risuonò
Il mio cor ferito è già
E Lindor fu che il piagò”*

He never came any closer, always staying put in the same place, the same way she did. She would glance away for a moment, or even a second, then he'd be gone. She liked to think he was the ghost of a famous actor, or a producer, or a secret lovechild between two actors, but she never found out and never really tried to seek the information. It would mean divulging she was inside the theater.

Halfway through the second act, she became bored and was ready to leave. She already knew it by heart and could predict Berta's next lines, including Miss Greta Palazzo's intonation. Every role she played she did it the exact same way every time; she was like an automaton.

Tarassaco timed her leave with the storm-like interlude, so loud and life-like. She loved it when the orchestra was wild and loud, but it was time to go, before Paolo and Manuele walked behind the theater to smoke. She glanced one more time at the backstage and the ghost was predictably gone. She half-expected, or half-hoped, he would appear before her in the dark corridor.

She crawled outside like a cat and made no little ruckus when she let herself drop down. While dusting herself and grumbling, she heard the heavy backdoor open. Before the always disgruntled men could see her, she dashed away.

The streets at night were blue-grey. In the neighbourhoods not visited by the fancy folk, the only light came from weak candles in windows and the ever-busy tavern. Tarassaco ran like the street rat she was, merrily jumping over puddles and fallen drunks, greeting people left and right. Some had very delayed reactions, looking confused then laughing back at her. At night she dressed like a boy in tattered trousers, a vest and a cap, betrayed only by her sparrow-like voice.

Her home was nestled between narrow and unfriendly streets, full of grime and crumbling stone, the view out their one window being another wall.

“I'm back!” she announced before stepping through the door. The house was a small room with another small room on top, the staircase being more of a ladder than a staircase. Downstairs was a table and a bunch of small chairs, unsafely close to a small stove, and upstairs was the bed, with Rocinante in it.

Tarassaco made her way up blindly, and she was met upstairs with the orange glow of a candle. The rest of the room looked almost green. Rocinante smiled, the hollows of her cheeks made even deeper by the harsh shadows.

“Did you have fun?” she asked.

“I did!” Tarassaco sat on the edge of the bed, taking off the cap and freeing her dark curls.

“Were there a lot of people tonight?”

“Full house!”

“Who played Rosina?”

“Becky!”

“Of course she did...” she wheezed, which was how she could laugh.

Tarassaco nodded and glanced away from her face to her skinny arms and frail hands. The ring with a black stone on her middle finger stood wide around it, the band too big now.

“Hey... Oi...”

“Yes?” Tarassaco looked up.

“Did you see the ghost again?”

“I didn’t,” Tarassaco smiled.

“Good...”

Tarassaco got up and changed into her house clothes. Rocinante did not like hearing about ghosts or the supernatural. It got worse since she fell ill, and Tarassaco took to avoiding anything that might upset her. She stopped praying too for Rocinante’s health, because it only annoyed her. “It clearly isn’t working,” she’d snap at Tarassaco.

“Can you fix my pillow?” Rocinante asked.

“Of course!” Tarassaco walked up to her and fluffed it.

“Lock the door and the window too. It’s getting cold.”

“On it.”

“Did you talk with Abate about the coffin?”

“I did this morning. He said it will be done by Tuesday.”

“It’s just a wooden box... no point on spending too much money. We’ll both rot.”

Tarassaco didn’t say anything. She hated it when Rocinante spoke like that.

“Good night!” Tarassaco laid down on her mat at the foot at Rocinante’s bed.

“Good night...”

Until she fell asleep, she could hear Rocinante’s wheezing breath, like her airways and nostrils had turned into catacombs.

It was Rocinante who showed Tarassaco how to sneak into the theater and listen to the shows “for free.” She knew everyone there and all their dirty laundry.

“I wanted to be a singer too, growing up...,” she reminisced one time while Tarassaco was washing her with a cloth. Tarassaco never said it out loud, but it seemed like no matter how much she washed her or changed the sheets, Rocinante still smelled bad.

“Really?” Tarassaco wringed the cloth.

“Yeah! I was part of the choir at the convent. I can still hit those high notes!”

“Hehe!”

“I knew how to play the violin too when I was small. My parents took me to lessons. The teacher said I had ‘remarkable talent,’ I’ll never forget it. I was already imagining myself up on stage. But then they couldn’t afford the lessons anymore. So I stopped going.”

The next morning, in the early hours, the world was light grey. Tarassaco woke up first but stayed in bed until she heard Rocinante wake up. She washed her, changed her clothes, gave her water, and went outside to get food.

“Good morning, Mr Abate!”

“Good morning!”

“Good morning, Mrs Ajello!”

“Oh, good morning, dearie!”

“Morning, Miss Ricci!”

“Mornin,’ kid!”

People of the slums, wearing mismatching rags, with missing teeth and sometimes missing fingers, were much nicer than the typical crowd who attended the theater. Even if Tarassaco somehow scrounged up the money to buy a ticket, they would not let her enter on the grounds; she looked too poor. It would have been an eyesore to their esteemed guests. Tarassaco getting to listen to the opera against their wishes was her and Rocinante’s sweet rebellion.

“Good morning, Mrs Conti!” she told the baker.

“Good morning, Tarassaco!” she smiled warmly. “How are ya doing?”

“Good,” she said.

“Glad to hear,” she smiled kindly.

Everybody knew Rocinante was slowly dying, wasting away in a closet-sized room. Mrs Conti thought it would be cruel to constantly remind Tarassaco about it, ask questions, and pry for details the poor girl would rather not think about.

She packed Tarassaco a loaf with the least charring on the bottom. As she made her way back home, she saw Luigi Speranza being lifted by two young men out of a tavern. It was hard work as he was quite fat and still drunk. She could remember one night watching him get into a brawl and biting his opponent’s arm, his teeth tearing through the coat.

She returned home and informed Rocinante, who had a good laugh about it. She hated a lot of people but Luigi Speranza the most. Him and Eric tied a close second.

“Oh, I forgot to ask last night...” Rocinante caught her breath. “How did Becky look?”

“Uh... fine?”

“No, I mean did her dress look tight on her?”

“Well, you couldn’t really tell.”

“When she sat down or got up,... backstage, did it look like she had trouble doing

so?”

“A little, now that you mention it.”

“Heh...”

Rocinante ate the plain broth Tarassaco cooked up, the bread dipped and softened in it, then went back to bed.

“Do you want anything else?” Tarassaco asked.

“Can you sing for me?” she blinked slowly.

“Which one?”

“Any...”

Tarassaco straightened her back, took a deep breath, and quietly sang an aria from the *Barber of Seville*, fresh in her mind. She was a soprano di coloratura, Rocinante said, with a voice warm and light like springtime. She had no education other than what Rocinante taught her, the lessons consisting of singing together around the house, fooling around in “fancy” dresses out of layered blankets. She ran out of breath easily, didn’t care much for perfect pronunciation, or the originally intended voice type.

Rocinante claimed to not believe in anything and to hate everyone at the local theater, yet always asked about it and asked for Tarassaco to sing for her when she couldn’t do it herself anymore. Her favourites were by Rossini and a couple by Lortzing. The more silly and melodramatic the story, the better. When Tarassaco sang, Rocinante seemed to be sleeping with her eyes open, daydreaming away to her voice or perhaps reminiscing.

“Sing something from *Undine* now. Bertalda, please,” she said.

Tarassaco sucked in a deep breath again and began. *Undine the opera* was based on a book, apparently. She wished she could read it. Maybe she could find an old copy in a dumpster and ask Mrs Ajello to read it to her.

She slowly stopped when she saw Rocinante’s eyes were closed. She gingerly stepped closer, straining her ears to listen. She saw Rocinante’s chest moving and sighed in relief, then walked downstairs to eat too.

The house and the alleys outside were quiet at that hour of the day. Tarassaco ate in silence at the old wooden table, chewing the soggy bread and feeling herself overcome with sorrow. She wished she could go to the theater during the day too, listen to the orchestra booming in her ears, covering everything else. In the complete darkness, with nothing but the colorful stage to look at, where music and farse and fun took place. Watching it from the front must be even more enjoyable. She would have liked to sit in one of the velvet red balconies together with the ghost. A mysterious gentleman and his young ward.

She’d wear a green dress like Becky, looking even prettier in it with her raven-black hair.

She first saw the ghost a few days after Rocinante got sick. The very first day she went to the theater after Rocinante got sick in fact now that she thought about it.

“Rocinante?” She asked when she returned home.

“Yes, sweetheart?” Rocinante said from where she laid in bed, growing pale but still having meat on her bones.

“I think I saw a ghost in the theater.”

Rocinante furrowed her brows. “Huh?”

“There was a weird guy backstage, just kind of standing there.”

“So...?”

“He was tall and creepy and just... standing there. And nobody saw him at all! They walked right passed him, and —”

“— Tarassaco, ghosts aren’t real,” Rocinante groaned.

“I know, but it was so weird, and then he just disappeared and —”

“— Maybe it was just some guy! Big deal!”

“Yeah, but maybe it was some sort of spectre, like in —”

“— Stop talking stupid. Those things don’t exist. Now come help me change.”

“S-s-sorry...”

It wasn’t the first time Rocinante snapped at her nor the last, and Tarassaco knew she could be annoying sometimes. Rocinante was dying, no point in picking fights.

When she wasn’t looking after Rocinante, she was going around the city, chatting with people, playing with other kids, begging for change or even pickpocketing. She couldn’t be too far away for long, so she often found herself sitting alone downstairs, staring at the table or the walls, waiting for it to be night already so she could go to the theater.

It was a horrible feeling, waiting for somebody to die. She almost wished Rocinante would stop suffering already. Every time she walked away from her, Tarassaco wondered if she would croak right at that moment, that she would miss it and Rocinante would die all alone.

“I’m going to the theater,” she said as the sun started going down, after she was done feeding and wiping her down.

“Have fun...” Rocinante closed her eyes. “What will it be?”

“I heard Bellini.”

“Ooh, that’s unusual...”

Tarassaco swiftly made her way across the gutters, infiltrating the theater as the chorus was saying “*Voga, voga*.” Tonight’s performance was *La straniera*. Rocinante said of the theater’s manager, when not throwing every curse word imaginable at him, that he disliked most of Bellini’s work, because of *her*, she claimed. Tarassaco, young as she was, didn’t understand Rocinante’s satisfaction at that statement. Rocinante decided it was better she didn’t know about that entire madness.

Luigi and Eric were in the lead roles, as usual. Becky was nowhere to be seen. Alaide was to be played by Greta, whose stiff acting did not suit the despairing heroine at all.

Tarassaco looked around the backstage, but could not see her ghost anywhere. The opera advanced; Arturo was throwing himself in the lake after Valdeburgo and still nowhere. She was starting to feel cold with worry. His absence now concerned her more than his presence. She tried to focus on the opera, but the questions would not leave her head. They tumbled down like a bottle of a flight of stairs, breaking worse each step, reaching topics she had not thought about and did not want to think about. She thought of Rocinante's hatred of ghosts, of death and afterlife, of Rocinante being all alone with no one to hear her call for help, her voice so weak now.

While Alaide was being questioned in the courthouse, Tarassaco ran outside. She sprinted through the streets, feeling her chest turn to ice as her own thoughts made her panic.

She burst through the door of her house and ran up the stairs, no longer caring about making noise.

"Rocinante?!" she called out.

Rocinante, lying in bed and drenched in sweat, lifted her eyelids with great difficulty. "Tarassaco...? What's wrong?"

She panted, heart beating out of her chest, and found herself unable to explain why. "I... I had a bad feeling..."

"I do feel pretty bad..." Rocinante admitted, trying to smile.

Tarassaco did her best to wash her and fix her bed, but Rocinante had no strength to even lift her head. Tarassaco's dread would not leave, stinging her eyes and making them watery.

"Is there anything you want?" she asked.

"To live...!" Rocinante laughed quietly and full of resignation. She sighed, and it looked like her entire torso deflated. "I'm sorry, Tarassaco... I'm leaving you all alone..."

"I'll move in with Mrs Ajello" she said, trying to keep her own voice calm but failing. "She said she will take me in."

"That's good... She's a nice lady... Much nicer than me, at least..."

Tarassaco didn't answer.

"When my mother died, she said she saw figures... lurking around her room..." Rocinante said, somberly. Tarassaco froze, as Rocinante never spoke of her family before. "She would scream in the middle of the night, then look at me all confused, like she didn't... just scream bloody murder... like she forgot... She was going crazy... With pain, with old age, with everything... In a way I was glad when she passed..."

"I'm sorry..."

"I was so scared of ending up like her... A husk with no... sense... not knowing what's real or not... I told myself that... I'll kill myself... before I turn fifty..." she laughed. "I wasn't quick enough..."

“...”

“Tara...ssaco...?”

“I’m here!”

“Did you see the ghost...? In the theater...?”

“I didn’t,” she quickly said.

“I never saw any, ever... anywhere... I thought... I thought it meant, maybe... it wasn’t my time then... Looks like I was wrong.”

“... I’m sorry...”

“Tarassaco, listen up... Don’t go to the theater anymore... And stay away from those people in general. You can sing all you want...” She took a deep, strained breath “... around here just fine... learn some folk songs... sing at weddings! Why not!... Find a good boy who’s whipped over you and marry him... Make sure he likes you too much to be a dickhead...”

“Rocinante...”

“You’ll be fine... I promise you will be... When my mother died, I thought the world ended. It felt like the world ended several times in my life, but it never did... No matter how much I was hurting, I was still here... You will still be here after I’m gone, and I hope... it will be a long time before you join me...”

She couldn’t keep her eyes open anymore but could hear Tarassaco sobbing, trying to keep it down. A skeleton-like hand searched for hers and grasped it as much as she could.

Tarassaco went to bed and somehow fell asleep. She couldn’t remember dreaming anything. She woke up very early, when it was still dark, and it was perfectly silent.

“Rocinante...?” she called out, opening reddened eyes. No answer.

“Rocinante?” Tarassaco stood up. Through the dark, she saw her lying perfectly still, her face like a statue.

Everybody in the slums helped with the funeral, attending it and giving her condolences, food, and a bit of money. Tarassaco said “Thank you” dozens of times, not even listening to what everyone was saying. The house and the streets looked even bleaker than before. She noticed every bloated fly and stain on the dirty ground. She wanted to run away and listen to music until her eardrums burst but felt too weak to stand up, let alone move.

She moved the spoon around in the bowl of soup Mrs Ajello had made her. She tried to eat, but her throat refused to allow anything to go down. She hadn’t felt hungry since she died anyway.

Her attention was caught by Mrs Ajello arguing with Mr Abate.

“We should at least try to ask for help...”

“What good would that do? He kicked her out in the first place!”

"Yes, I know, but she's just a child..."

"Would you leave a child near someone like him? Or, God forbid, Luigi?"

"It feels so wrong..."

"Tch. Of course it does..."

Tarassaco silently walked up to them and surprised them, making Mrs Ajello jump quite hard.

"How are you, darling?" she tried to recuperate. "Did you eat?"

"A little bit," she said.

"Good! You can go rest with my cat. He loves petting, you know!"

"What did Luigi do?" Tarassaco suddenly asked.

"Oh, it's none of our business," Mrs Ajello said.

"What didn't he do?" Mr Abate spat. "Why you think all shows are cancelled?"

"Hush!" Mrs Ajello said through her teeth, her eyebrows arching quite high.

"The shows are cancelled?" Tarassaco asked.

"Yes," she sighed and said, "No shows at all this week."

"Oh... it's been a week?"

"Yes, honey," Mrs Ajello pet her hair. "There has been a scandal with Mr Luigi and that one actress, uh, Vicky?"

"Becky?"

"Yes, Becky! Excuse me! There was a scandal between the two of them, and then it came out that the manager was trying to cover it up."

"Birds of feather, am I right?" Mr Abate asked.

Mrs Ajello glared at him again.

After another dinner she could barely swallow, Mrs Ajello tucked Tarassaco into bed and kissed her forehead. Her house was equally small, but she had set up a makeshift bed on a couch. Tarassaco laid in bed in the dark for a few hours, until all she could hear in her new house was snoring, then snuck out.

She climbed up and blindly made her way inside the theater. As her eyes adjusted, she could make out the stairs leading down from the platform, the curtains, the doors to changing rooms. Tarassaco stood crouched in her usual spot for a long time, then made her way down.

For the first time, she walked onto the stage, entering from the right and walking straight to the center. The chairs and balconies, all red, looked pitch black; it was as if she was staring out to a dark sea. The silence was deafening, every creak sounding far too loud.

A pain she could not pinpoint filled her chest, as it has been for the past few days. No, not filled. She felt a hollow in her chest, pulling her down to the ground. Days seemed they would not end, yet in the blink of an eye, a whole week passed. Only seconds ago Rocinante was alive, waiting for her.

Tarassaco turned around and saw the ghost. He sauntered up to her, taking steps under his robe but making no sound at all. She could see the tips of black shoes. He stopped an arm's-length in front of her. Her head reached about the height of his chest. His mask had the most neutral, serene, unreadable expression, finely sculpted lips, a long nose, and arched brows. Beyond the eyeholes was darkness, but she felt his eyes on hers.

Tarassaco looked at him for a long moment, head tilted up while he looked at her with his head tilted down, her eyebrows furrowed and lips frowning. She stood as still as him, then bridged the gap between them. Her eyes pointed down at the floor as she did, too tired to keep her eyes open any longer, and wrapped her arms around his middle.

His body was stiff like Rocinante's, and the fabric of his robe was rough like an old raggedy carpet. But Tarassaco hugged him tightly, pressing her forehead and leaking eyes against him.

She felt arms wrap around her as well, one hand across her shoulders and the other petting her hair.

"I'm sorry..." he said.

After sitting like that for a long moment, Tarassaco pulled away, sniffing. The ghost wiped her cheek with his thumbs. He was cold, and she flinched away. Without saying anything to him, she walked out of the theater, back the way she came, and returned to Mrs Ajello, and went back to bed.

The Mummy's Finger

by Tucker Joneson

Cobwebs clung to Daryl's hair as he shifted boxes in the dingy basement. The dim light bulb flickered, barely illuminating the cold space. Some of the flimsy cardboard boxes were filled with photo albums and family memories, while others contained bizarre relics and oddities – bugs displayed in glass frames and jars with dead plants. After piling several boxes at the bottom of the stairs, he turned his attention to an old rickety cabinet against the back wall of the basement. It looked older than his grandparents, which meant it was heavy, and that meant it would be a nightmare to push up the stairs.

Cracking his back with a stretch, he stepped over and took hold of the large, creaking cabinet, sliding it away from the wall. The boards of the dresser were all loose, just waiting to fall apart after years of collecting dust in the dank room. As he pushed the cabinet towards the stairs, he looked back over his shoulder and noticed something strange. A fresh wooden board appeared to be drilled into the brick wall.

“Holy smokes!” he whispered, pulling back at the loose corner of the wooden board. A small room was hidden behind it. Spotting something large lurking in the shadows, Daryl retrieved his phone, flipping on the flashlight. The bright beam revealed a large wooden crate sitting at the center of the dark, and otherwise empty, room. Years of dust had coated the secret shipping container.

Without hesitation, the man ran upstairs in search of his crowbar. A cautious voice in his head whispered of the worries he had, but he ignored it. He had to know what was in this crate.

Why would the owner board up this little room? All just for a single box?

“What’s that, honey?” his wife asked from the top of the stairs, grocery bags still hung from her slender fingers. Jamie Frazer’s short, curly hair twirled around her curious hazel eyes. Descending the steps, she inspected the large crate her husband was dragging along the floor.

“Not sure yet! I just found it!” he answered, excited by the discovery. “It was sitting in this secret room, hidden behind that old cabinet.”

Her eyes followed his finger that pointed to the slim opening in the wall.

“Oh, wow! How weird!”

“Yeah, I’m thinking whatever is inside this crate must be valuable.” Daryl licked his lip as he pressed the crowbar under the lid.

“Let’s hope so,” she bit at her nail, watching the crowbar busting the lid loose. With one final push, the crate burst open. The couple peered inside, shocked to discover such a small, strange thing sitting alone in the center of the massive box.

“What the hell is that?” Jamie asked.

“It’s...a finger,” he muttered, unable to take his eyes off of it. “It looks so old...” As he reached forward to pick it up, a chill ran up his spine. Daryl pulled his hand back. He could have sworn he almost heard a voice whisper in his ear.

“Grab me some medical gloves or something,” he said, turning back to his wife. “I’m no historian, but I know we shouldn’t touch this with our bare hands.”

“We shouldn’t touch it at all!” she interjected.

“It’s okay, baby. This guy left all kinds of weird stuff down here. Dead bugs in jars, stuffed birds, old documents, and notebooks filled with scribbles,” Daryl explained, pointing back at the stack of boxes resting at the bottom of the stairs. “He must have been some kind of scientist or history expert. Who knows, this house could have been owned by Indiana Jones?”

“Doesn’t make it any less gross,” she sighed.

“We need some extra cash, honey. We’ve put everything we have into this house. This could be a major win!” He smiled, rubbing her arm. He could see in her eyes that she was thinking it over but still remained hesitant.

“You love all those graphic serial killer documentaries, but you can’t handle a little mummy finger?” Daryl chuckled.

With a smirk, she gently smacked the back of her husband’s head. “I’ll go look for some gloves.”

“Hey, Greg! Gotta ask you something, you got a minute?” Daryl called out, stepping out the front of his house. The middle-aged, balding neighbor smiled under his bushy mustache as he walked back from checking his mailbox.

“Sure thing, what’s up?” Greg answered, stepping over to Daryl’s driveway. He glanced down, noticing a dirty rag in Daryl’s hand. “What’s that you’re holding?”

Daryl unraveled the finger from the old cloth. The odd smell continued to radiate from the dried flesh.

“Jeez! What is that, Daryl?” Greg gasped.

“Some kind of mummified finger. It was in an old wooden crate hidden in our basement.”

“Seriously?”

“Can’t make this stuff up!” Daryl shook his head with a grin, “...Along with lots of other odd things the past owner left behind.”

Greg cautiously reached forward to pick up the dusty, white finger and took a closer look at it. Just as he clasped it between his fingers, Daryl pulled back.

“Hey, careful,” Daryl warned. “Might not want the oils in our hands to damage it or anything, ya know?”

“Oh yeah, of course! Sorry!” Greg pulled his hand back, rubbing it nervously.

As they looked it over, a middle-school boy rode his skateboard down the sidewalk. Skidding to a stop, his scruffy blonde hair bounced under his helmet as he stepped over to the two men.

“Woah, what is that?”

“Hey, Scottie. Well, I’m not exactly sure yet. Some kind of mummy finger, I believe,” Daryl said, holding it closer to the kid. “The old owner was some kind of scientist. He had all kinds of strange things he left in the basement.”

The boy’s eyes grew wide in wonder. “Sick!”

“Did you guys know him well?” Daryl asked them. “You know what he was into? What he was studying before he passed?”

“No, not really,” Greg sighed. “He never really came out much. Stayed to himself. Focused on his studies, I guess.”

“Yeah. I think I only ever saw him like twice. Kind of creeped me out,” Scottie added, kicking up his skateboard.

“Hmm...” Daryl nodded, “I’ll need to find some kind of expert to show this to. See if it’s worth anything.”

“I got a buddy that works at the Natural History Museum downtown,” Greg tapped Daryl’s arm. “I don’t know if this is really his area of expertise, but he may be able to help.”

“How much do you think it’s worth? Gotta be a fortune!” Scottie grinned, stepping closer to the finger.

“I hope so,” Daryl answered, glancing up at the setting sun. “...Getting kind of late now. Is your friend going to be at the museum tomorrow?”

“Yeah, should be. He’s always working,” Greg chuckled, “I know he’ll find this fascinating. But if he can’t exactly help you with the finger, I’m sure he can...*point* you in the direction of others who can....Pun intended,” he jabbed. Daryl nodded and grinned at the bad joke, while Scottie rolled his eyes.

“Hey, honey!” Jamie called, poking her head out from the front door. “Oh, hi guys!” She smiled, stepping out to greet the neighbors. After catching up with Greg and the kid, she turned to her husband.

“I’m sorry, honey, but can you run back to the grocery store? I started to pull everything out to cook dinner and realized I forgot to get garlic.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll head out right now.”

After saying his goodbyes to the neighbors, Daryl ran back down to the basement. As he gently placed it in the crate, he felt something hidden under the stuffing. It felt like paper. Pulling his hand out, he retrieved a small scroll that was buried inside. Faded ancient texts were written along the material. Daryl's eyes glistened in the dark room as he looked over the tattered scroll, wondering what it could possibly mean.

"You still down there, hon?" Jamie called. Daryl jumped, pulling him from his inquisitive trance. He placed the paper back inside the dusty crate and got to his feet. Flicking off the light, he climbed the stairs and made his way to the car.

"I'll be right back!" Daryl waved as he drove off down the road. As soon as he turned the corner out of sight, the skater ran back to the Frazer home and rang the doorbell. Jamie eventually opened the door to find the dancing boy on her welcome mat.

"Hey, Mrs. Frazer, could I use your restroom?" he frantically asked.

"Um, sure, Scottie," Jamie answered curiously. "Isn't your house just down the street, though?"

"Can't make it!" he cut her off.

"Okay, down the hall, to the right," she directed him. As the twelve-year-old waddled across the house, Jamie headed back towards the kitchen. Scottie stopped before the bathroom door and slowly turned back down the hall. Peeking around the corner, he watched as she lowered the heat on the stovetop and stirred the steaming pot.

Okay, gotta be quick. Where is that thing? Scottie wondered, searching the home.

Nearing the end of the hallway, a voice softly whispered in the boy's ear. He wanted to jump but didn't. Something about it was so soothing that he barely budged. Looking around, his eyes rested on the basement door at the end of the hall. It was wide open with flickering lights illuminating the stairs. His feet felt weightless as they carried him down the hall. The whispers grew louder, bouncing around in his skull. Down below, the finger was waiting for him.

Gently picking the finger up, he felt the whispers fade away, and the world came back into focus. Unsure of how long he had been wandering, he turned back and ran up the stairs. Sneaking down the hall and turning around the corner, he collided into Jamie.

"Woah, sorry, there you are!" Jamie jumped. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sorry...got lost wandering," Scottie answered nervously, stuffing the finger into his back pocket.

"Okay. Did you need anything else, Scottie..." She began but was cut off.

"No, no. I'm good. Thank you, Mrs. Frazer!" he smiled as he hastily made his way out the front door.

"Weird kid," Jamie shrugged.

“Hell yeah!” he whispered to himself with a grin. “Got it!”

Scottie ran over to his skateboard and jumped on. The wheels rattled down the driveway before he jumped off the lip and off into the street. With rich orange and blue clouds overhead, he watched as the sun was nearly set. Unable to wipe that smile off his face, he dreamed of everything he could have with the money that the finger would bring him. A new gaming setup, all the most valuable skateboards he could ask for, and chicks, of course. Debating what to tell his parents, he figured the best story he could come up with was that he found it in a crate on the side of the road.

Doesn't matter. Once they see how much it's worth...they won't mind a lil' old finders keepers!

Scottie's mind went blank. The last thing he felt was the sudden impact of cold steel on his left knee. The boy had cut across the alleyway without looking and did not expect a large truck to be driving his way. Without any time to stop, the truck ran the boy over. Coming to a skidding halt, the driver leapt out of his car—but it was too late. The middle-school skater was gone. His left arm had snapped backwards. Torn and bloody, it rested over his back pocket where he stashed the treasured mummy's finger.

Driving home in his ten-year-old blue Chevy, Daryl noticed that the “check engine” light flickered on once again. Ignoring it, he turned down his street, where he was greeted by several police cars. Daryl's heart sank, worried something happened to his wife. An officer waved his light, directing him where to drive. Passing by the police tape and the officer, he rolled down his passenger side window and leaned over.

“What happened, officer?” Daryl asked as his heart raced.

“Accident. Someone was run over...,” he started.

“Oh God! I live down the road! My wife—is she okay?”

“Yes, sir. I'm sure she's alright,” the officer sighed. “This was a child.”

“Jesus! Scottie...!? How bad is he?”

“I'm sorry sir, but we need you to clear the road,” the officer backed up, waving his hand. Daryl ignored the gesture.

“Did he make it to the hospital?”

“No, sir. He was killed on impact. There was nothing anyone could have done.”

Daryl rolled back into his seat. He couldn't take his eyes off the blood that dripped from the grill of the truck, still sitting in the alleyway.

“Sir, I'm really sorry, but we need you to keep driving.” The words came through his ears, muffled and distant. Daryl's throat went dry, and his mind drifted off. Finally, he let go of the brakes and continued driving home. Pulling into the driveway, his wife opened the front door and stepped outside.

“Hey honey! Whoa, what’s going on?”

“You didn’t hear?”

“No, I was just getting everything ready until you came back with the...what happened?”

Daryl hugged his wife tightly. At a loss for words, he finally whispered, “Scottie was killed.”

“What?! Scottie, down the road?” She pulled back, with eyes wide like the moon.

“Hit by a truck in the alleyway on his skateboard.”

“Oh my God,” she spoke softly, overwhelmed, “What about his parents?! Do they know?”

“I’m sure the police...talked to them. I just told you what I know.” Looking down into her eyes, he held his wife’s hands tighter.

She pulled her husband closer, resting her head on his chest. “He was just over here...and now he’s gone, just like that.”

After loading the dishwasher, Daryl took the trash bag out of the bin and walked to the front door. Stepping down his driveway and onto the curb, he looked down the road at the alleyway where the accident occurred. The police cars were gone and so was the truck. Nothing left now but the memory of the loss. Daryl tossed the bag into the trash bin and turned to head back inside.

“I’m going to bed, sweetie,” Jamie said softly as she passed him by. She was unbuttoning her pants when she turned the corner into the bedroom. Daryl flicked off the living room light switch and stepped after her. Something stopped him. A funny feeling on the back of his neck. He looked back down the hall and spotted the basement door was wide open. The lights were off as the stairs descended into darkness.

“You coming, baby?”

Daryl’s tense body jolted before letting out a breath and a chuckle. He answered, “Be right there, honey.”

Turning his attention back to the basement, he reached for the light switch. The stairs were lit dimly, with one bulb dead and the other on the way as he descended into the basement.

I just changed those lightbulbs last week...

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, his eyes landed on the large crate ahead. It was still left open, but inside—something was different.

“What the he—”

The light shut off, and Daryl was engulfed by the darkness. His heart raced as he backed up towards the stairs. Feeling out for a wall, he stumbled, landing harshly on the

bottom steps. His back cracked as he struggled to his feet. Believing himself to be going mad, he heard whispers coming from the shadows. Voices in his head, speaking a language he had not known. One he had never heard before. Unable to think or speak, all he could do was run. Daryl found his footing and sprinted up the stairs. The voices grew louder and closer behind him. It felt as though someone was leaning just over his shoulder. He could feel the chill in his ear. With a violent swing, he slammed the door shut behind him. The voices were gone. The house was silent.

“You okay?” Jamie called out.

His heart still racing, he took a breath and shook his head. “...Yeah, I’m fine, baby! Just...stumbled in the dark.” He closed his eyes and took a deeper breath. He told himself he was just seeing things. It had been a hard day and his mind was over-stimulated. Whatever was down there would be gone in the morning. He needed to sleep. Daryl looked down at the shut door behind him for another moment, before turning and heading to bed.

What laid in the large crate was not a finger. It was something more—a hand.

The next morning, Daryl walked Jamie out to her car. With a kiss, she was on her way. Stepping back inside, Daryl slowly turned and walked down the hallway. The basement door was still shut ahead of him. He had to look. He had to prove it to himself that what he saw was all in his mind.

Cautiously outstretching his hand, he grasped the cool doorknob. Opening to the abyss, Daryl lingered in the doorway. Finally, he flicked the light switch to his side, and the bulbs came to life—just as dim as the night before. He couldn’t put it off any longer; he had to go down there. The boards creaked with every step he took. He waited for the whispers, but the basement remained silent.

Standing over the open crate, he looked down at the mummified hand. Overnight one finger had grown to a palm with a thumb and the remaining fingers—rotten and bandaged in cloth older than dirt.

This can’t be real. It’s not possible!

Daryl pulled the blue vinyl gloves tightly over his hands. The bland, sanitary smell hovered under his nose as they snapped on his wrist. Wrapping the hand in the old cloth, he hustled back up to his car. Switching gears to reverse, he backed out onto the road and took off. Headed for the museum, he went over the story in his head. Eventually, he decided that he would leave out the part where the hand grew overnight. He didn’t need these professionals thinking he was crazy. Eager to finally get some answers, he pressed down further on the gas pedal.

Arriving at the Natural History Museum, Daryl squeezed his car into a small spot on the street. After tossing a few quarters in the meter, he looked around and crossed the

road, too impatient to run down to the crosswalk at the signal. *Whales. Ask for Mr. Whales. Or was it Doctor Whales?*

Entering through the heavy front doors and crossing the large entry room, Daryl went straight for the front desk.

“Hi, I’m here to meet Dr. Whales...”

“Hello,” Whales smiled as he walked over to the counter. The pudgy older man reached out and shook Daryl’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Frazer. Come with me and we can take a look at your item.”

With a gesture, Daryl followed the man down the hall and through two sets of doors. Turning a corner, they entered the research room with a large light above the table where they would inspect all of their artifacts. Daryl was surrounded by boxes and cabinets filled with files and other historical items and documents.

“Feels like Area 51 back here,” Daryl joked. “You guys got the Ark of the Covenant hidden in here?”

“No, sir,” Whales chuckled as he slid on his gloves. “But we do have the fountain of youth stashed in the other room.”

“Well, this may not be as special as that, but hopefully you can help me figure out what this thing is...,” Daryl started as he slowly unwrapped the old, dusty hand. It seemed to smell worse each time he held it. For just being a hand, he almost got the feeling that it was watching him. Something wasn’t right with this thing, and he wanted to be rid of it.

“Wow. How did you say you found this?” Whales asked.

“It was in a crate...Found it in the basement of the house we just moved into.”

“Interesting,” he whispered as he held the finger up closer to his face.

“Yeah, the owner had all kinds of strange things boxed up down there. Boxes of bugs, old scrolls, and photos. Some kind of scientist or archaeologist maybe? I haven’t quite figured him out yet. I just needed answers on this hand more than anything with all the weird things going on...”

“This appears to be part of one of the Tarim Basin mummies,” Whales stated, almost in awe.

“How do you know that?”

“The inscription here on the scroll you brought in. It’s not Egyptian,” Whales turned his attention to Daryl. “What weird things have been going on?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I think the hand has just been giving my wife and I the creeps.”

“Okay, well, the skin looks to be paler. European. And from what I can read, the text appears to be the Tocharian language. Again, I’m no expert. I really could use

other eyes on this—more experienced scholars, but what you have here may be a very rare and valuable discovery, Mr. Frazer.”

Daryl’s eyes lit up, imagining the growing dollar signs.

“It’s regarded as a chapter of forgotten history. These mummies date back to 1800 B.C. Were they simply travelers moving across Asia? No one knows where they came from.”

“What is that...?” Daryl asked, his smile fading.

“Looks like...blood under the fingernails,” he paused before turning to look at Daryl with a concerned look in his eyes. “Fresh blood.”

Daryl’s phone loudly rang, startling the two men. He hastily reached into his pocket and pulled out the phone, reading his wife’s name on the screen. Politely gesturing to the other man, Daryl answered the call.

“Hey, sweetie! How are—” he began, but was cut off by a sobbing voice on the other end of the phone. “What? Slow down. Please, honey, you’re not making sense!”

Whales stood there unsure of what to do.

“Okay, okay. I’ll...I’ll be right there!” He hung up the phone and buried it back in his pocket.

“I’m so sorry, I need to go. Some kind of emergency.”

“No problem at all, Mr. Frazer. Are you going to be alright?”

“Yeah...thanks! I...here, ya know what? Keep the hand for now. Look it over, and let me know if you find out any more. I can come back by tomorrow, if you’re around?”

“Yes, I’ll be here. That sounds good to me. I’ll take precious care of it. Drive safely, sir.”

After racing through traffic, Daryl pulled up to his driveway. Police cars were parked at their neighbor’s home, while an ambulance had just pulled away. Its lights weren’t flashing, and the siren wasn’t on.

Not a good sign.

Jogging up to the front door, Jamie opened it before he could reach the handle. With teary, red eyes, she hugged her husband.

“Oh God, it was so horrible!” she cried. “Greg...He fell off the roof. He was fixing the rain gutter when he tripped and landed on his head. I heard his neck...snap...from across the yard. It was the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m so sorry...” he said, in shock, holding his wife tighter.

“We were having an everyday conversation. I was out watering the grass; he was telling me all about his sister who’s about to have a kid,” Jamie started sobbing. “He would have been an uncle next month.”

"I'm so sorry you had to see and hear that, sweetie," Daryl rubbed her head as she wept against his chest.

"The worst part was when he fell. After the snap...I could hear him muttering something. Almost whispering to me. His eyes were locked on me when I walked over to his body. I...I couldn't understand what he was saying, but it didn't sound like him. It sounded like an entirely different person. I haven't been able to stop shaking since, Daryl. I can barely breathe."

First Scottie. Now Greg. That hand...It had to be behind this.

The next morning, Daryl was awoken by the ringing of his cell phone. Rubbing his eyes and outstretching his arm, he retrieved it from the night stand.

"Hello?" The foggy-brained Daryl answered.

"Hello, Mr. Frazer. ...Sorry, is this a bad time?"

He watched Jamie roll over to his right, but she remained asleep. "No, what's going on? Any news on the mummified fin—hand?"

"Yes. I had a peer who specializes in ancient mummifications investigate the remains. He was very fascinated by the hand, sir. We discussed the history of the region it originated from and the type of people this body part could be a remnant of..."

"What about the writing on the scroll?" Frazer interrupted.

"Well, the inscription is hard to read, but what we can make out so far is that it says something about those unworthy who touch this hand will trade their lives for the power of the worthy," Whales nervously stated. A moment passed as he waited for a response, but Daryl sat in silence on the other end.

"Are you still there, Mr. Frazer?"

"Yes. Yeah, I'm here," he hesitated. Daryl remembered Greg touching the hand when he was showing it off in the driveway. *Can it be real?* Tossing the thought aside, he rose from the bed and quietly walked out of the room.

I touched the hand too...but I was wearing gloves! Does that protect me?! This can't be real! I sound insane!

"You can keep the hand," he finally responded. "Consider it a donation."

"That's why I wanted to call you...We don't have it. I thought, perhaps, you came by earlier and collected it from another employee at the museum."

"You...don't have the hand?"

"No, sir," Whales answered. "...and it sounds like you didn't come to get it?"

"No."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Frazer. I will have security check their footage, and I will personally search every department in our museum for it in case it was displaced."

Frazer remained silent. Stunned. He stood at the bottom of the basement

stairs looking down at the crate before him. Inside was not just a hand. Now it had grown a forearm.

"I will call you back with further updates. Again, I am sorry for the displacement. Hopefully, it is just stowed away somewhere here at the museum. Okay...have a good day. We'll talk soon."

Frazer hung up.

Pale, dry and crusty. The fingers had curled inward, as if preparing to grasp something. It even looked more lively than before – as lively as a severed hand could look.

"Your story ain't making any sense, Mr. Frazer," Detective Borris shook his head.

"I told you everything. I swear to God, I am not making this up!" Daryl pleaded. The sockets around his red eyes were dark. Strands of hair hung over his pale face. He was barely holding it together after everything he had been through the last several weeks.

"So after two of your neighbors died, and this so-called mummy's finger grew into an entire arm, you and your wife fled?"

"Yes. We had to get away. For everyone's safety."

"...And you believe this mummy arm is responsible for the death of your wife, as well?"

"Yes," Daryl answered firmly. "I did not kill my wife!"

"Never said you did," the other detective spoke. "But there is an awfully strange trail of bodies that you've left behind."

"And it's honestly hard for us to believe a magic mummy hand is the culprit," Borris added.

"Not to mention that we can't find this thing anywhere," Detective Rains concluded. "You claim it was in your basement, but the place was empty."

"It's there...I know it's still down there," Daryl muttered, as the sense of hopelessness washed over him. "Mummification was meant to preserve the body for all of time...but this body won't die! It wants to come back, and it won't stop unless we find it and destroy it!"

"You should be a horror writer, saying things like that," the detective laughed.

A young boy ran through the empty structure, excited to explore his new home.

"This place is so cool!" the boy cheered.

The husband held his wife in the doorway as they watched their seven-year-old son sprint down the hall.

"I call this room!"

“Okay, Brendan,” the mother giggled. “Just slow down. Don’t want to hurt yourself!”

Brendan neared the end of the hall, when the basement door creaked open. His curious eyes brought him closer to the dark stairway. Descending down the dimly lit steps, the boy discovered the crate sitting in the corner of the dark basement. As if in a trance, he stepped towards it. The boy was nervous, but he couldn’t turn away. He had to see what was inside. The lid sat loosely over the crate, half open. The boy plugged his nose as the smell of rot radiated from inside. Using all of his muscles, he pushed the dense wooden lid off, revealing something in the dark. Not just an arm now but the upper half of a mummified body. A decrepit, skeletal man. Pale and disfigured, its unhinged jaw rested open, as though it was about to scream. Dried blood ran down its face from the empty sockets dug into his skull. The Mummy’s hand was outstretched towards the young boy, reaching for its next soul to take.



The Freezer

by Sophie Van Der Put

Mr Giovanni lived in Genova, and his freezer was always full.

A tall man but crouched in posture. His eyes were deep-set into his long and wiry skull, hidden behind a bush of peppered eyebrows. At a distance, in a crowd, he was plain and polite, his postman uniform and clean nails exhibited him as a man of routine. However, upon close inspection, one could not ignore the echo of his hollowed cheeks and his lizard-like texture, undoubtedly pasty and cold – always cold. He looked, compared to the warm honey oozing from the crowds among him, placid and unassuming, like a blundering figurine made of wax. While the nauseating yellow sun would be pounding against his back, he would walk from door to door with a small sheen of sweat, smelling of nothing, except for his washing powder. He was not a man of many words, and his curved and crooked stance made it almost impossible to look him in the eyes.

Mr Giovanni lived on the sixth floor of a crumpled apartment in zone three, amongst the slowly rotting wood, the scent of hot garbage purifying the air and the flies buzzing in every corner. His items, scattered and simple, had all been found or bought years ago, and he had not removed or added a thing. In his kitchenette still stood the scratched frying pan, seasoning each meal with aluminium, and the freezer, whose humming haunted him day and night. In his living room, there was a gaping hole in the couch, melted leather and the cushioning frayed at the stitches. He could not quite remember how the charred black gut had found itself on his sofa. It was a constant reminder to him of things he could not quite understand about himself. Nevertheless, he did nothing to replace it, but he opted for sitting on the edge of the seat pressed upright against the armrest. In his bed, the mattress had become a lumped and stained wet sock from years of sweat and the Genovese humidity.

Mr Giovanni was not a man of passion; he was a man of routine and so his freezer was always full. He often sat on his shaded balcony, dry and desolate, and watched the people in their lives. Perched in his usual attire - slacks and a long sweater - no matter the intense cloak of thick heat over the city, he drank in the empty faces and whatever details he could digest from the distance. All the while, the static crackling of his radio would distract his thoughts enough that he could spend hours there. Mr Giovanni had the radio for many years now, and its distorted voices had become companions to him, their sound being the only thing he heard day in and day out – apart from the freezer, of course.

Mr Giovanni was not a man who strayed too far from home. A few years back he had bought the noise-making box in a café down the street. The café was nothing more than a hole in the wall with tables and chairs, the coffee was bitter and the fridge lukewarm, but it was close by, and so he went there once a week. Quiet mothers in hijabs chatting in

hushed tones at their tables; uniformed school children in their chaotic glory buying sweets; young, tired men waiting for a sign of life on the street; and the occasional old man crawling out of his hole, smelling of moth-balls and cigarettes. He'd bring a newspaper, one he had already read, and pretend not to be watching his neighbours' every movement from the corner table with his sewage-water eyes.

Often, he could listen in on conversations without ever being noticed. For Mr Giovanni, acknowledgement was a hard commodity to come by. He overheard the shopkeeper, a young and desperately bankrupt man, that another body had been found a few streets up, namely zone two.

Upon hearing the news, the shopkeeper huffed noisily, mumbling that the neighbourhood's deaths were bad for business. It was true that a year later the café closed, and the poor shopkeeper was found dead in his apartment in zone five.

Mr Giovanni stood up to pay for his espresso when he caught sight of the brown and fraudulently wooden rectangle spewing sad music into the café. The radio was older than he was, with an ink-black knob and over one hundred stations. It was simplified, placid, and unassuming, and so he wanted it, and he was not a man of desire.

He walked over to the cashier plainly and without blinking or changing his tone, he asked if he could buy it, sliding a twenty euro note across the counter. This was a lot of money then, and the young shopkeeper was desperate and did not care for the relics of his ancestors, and so he accepted the note with a shrug of his shoulders. When Mr Giovanni walked back on the concrete to his little wooden door with the little wooden box in his hands, he felt, for maybe the first time in his life, the feeling of pride.

Everyday Mr Giovanni would watch, like a hawk, the tiny humans in their tiny homes and on their tiny balconies, waiting for something to happen. He would watch their watery shadows move and their small faces contort into laughter in the distance as he listened to their echoes in the night. Lovers turning lights off in their intimacy; a grandmother peeling potatoes; the bickering of a family; mothers looking worn at the kitchen table; and fathers in their absent presence smoking on the balcony; this was his favourite entertainment. Hundreds of them, like plump chickens, stacked atop one another in their crates. He tried to count them, but there were always more. They multiplied like rats, he thought, scurrying around and screeching at one another. He did not know what he was looking for or what he was hoping to see but it had become his one and only hobby.

Some evenings, there were moments he witnessed that he knew he shouldn't have – tears, pain, and rage made impure by his intruding gaze. All the while a foreign tune would labour over the vicious drone of the giant white ice chest that stood in his kitchen. The thrum was always in the back of his head, yet he tried his best not to think of the contents; he couldn't most of the time. As was his routine, when Mr Giovanni would come

home after a long shift, he would hang up his jacket next to the door and find a beverage to passively sip on, before taking position on his watchtower.

But there were days when his jacket lay like a crumpled mess on the floor; when the freezer's constant humming would mince his brain; when his movements were distorted and twitchy; when time itself was nonexistent; when he was nonexistent – a ghost.

These were on peculiar days when Mr Giovanni was a most peculiar man, finding himself in peculiar places at peculiar times. These moments, or episodes, one might call them, would happen occasionally. They were blackened periods in which time, space, and his physicality were formless, and his behaviour was nothing short of erratic. His eyes were bloodshot and darting, his senses pinched him, and the sanguineous craving at the back of his throat was a most peculiar thing.

A sudden blink and he could be somewhere else, existing in another time, and Mr Giovanni sometimes wondered if he lost days to this, possibly even years of his life.

He would wake out of a daze, his white-knuckled hands squeezing the rusted railing as he looked down an eighty-foot drop blandly, or his body, pillared next to the kettle, boiling and steaming angrily, while the whistle pierced through his daydreamed skull. The radio static, the warm wind whispering through his windows, and the monotonous buzzing of the freezer that refused to disappear – these were the only realities he could hold onto.

Sometimes he would wake and be sitting on the bed with nothing but his underwear and shoes on. Another time, he awoke in the shower staring down at the murky water falling from his milky torso, the dark droplets slinking secretly into the drain. He did not know why or how often but he awoke in places he did not know, and yet somehow, he always felt he was meant to be there.

Not last Tuesday night, Mr Giovanni awoke from another peculiar episode. He found himself standing coldly in the corner of an unfamiliar bedroom, one that was not his. His eyes crusted open, his heartbeat jolted, and his palms began to perspire profusely. He swept the room with a gaze once and a second time, noticing the echo of light from the hallway and the blinds clinking darkly by the window. After a moment of empty curiosity, finally, his eyes could make out a familiar shape in the inky shadows of the room. There, beneath the bed sheets, lay a body, placid and unassuming. It did not move, and it did not speak, and he could do nothing but stare coolly at its singular form with a strange kind of acceptance. There he was in a place he was not supposed to be in, with a body he did not recognise, and he could only feel that same sickly curiosity he felt standing on his balcony.

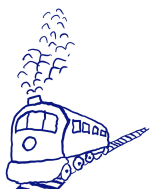
From the darkness of the room, he would slink back through the unlocked door and scurry down the staircase, sighing with a sustained lightness when he was back on the tar road in his night slippers. One might see him across the street at night and think he

looked sickly and decrepit, like a man without a pulse. On his walk home, Mr Giovanni tried to remember the comings and goings of his person but could only form the hazy memory of his shallow routine. His chest would thump, and his breathing would be ragged until he recognised a street, then walking briskly back to his towered nest.

The days after these episodes, he would feel the edges of his memories curl and twist within him, flashes of red would overlap his daily reading of the newspaper, but he was never hungry, a foreign satisfaction overtook him. He would stand at the bus stop and hear the muffled sound of heavy breathing and the wet smack of a chewing mouth, but he could not figure out where it was coming from. He felt himself in a state of repose, the chaos of the world falling to background noise as he inspected the dirt under his usually clean fingernails. Still, in the end, he would come back to his shoebox home, wash his hands with a quiet calculation, and place himself on the balcony, watching and waiting.

These episodes of lost time would melt away with ease, and strangely, Mr Giovanni did not feel any fear for their return, except for the occasional question mark he had. He was a simple man, a man of routine, yet the hidden periods of his life left many things to wonder about. There seemed to be a putrid smell seeping into the linings of his tattered apartment. There were missing items of clothing: a sock, a shirt, his postman uniform he had to replace. Not to mention the burnt hole in his couch and every other aching question. His scrambled frying pan told no tale; his empty rooms left no secrets. It seemed he lay dormant except for the moments in which he disappeared. Where did the time go? Where did he go? What inescapable force was leading him there?

Living as a hollowed man and a livened ghost left many questions for Mr Giovanni, like why was the freezer always full?



The Man on The Train

by Perla Ghabbour

Cairo, Egypt - September 2020

The train doors hiss open, releasing a gust of warm, metallic air. I step inside with Clark, guiding him by the elbow. The car is dim, flickering with the harsh yellow of the overhead lights. It's suffocatingly warm this time of year, even worse inside of a train where the heat clings. The air carries the scent of engine oil, sweat, and something faintly sweet – maybe my vanilla perfume, maybe the roasted sweet potatoes from the street vendor's stall outside.

We take our seats. I give him the window seat—my seat. Maybe the view outside will stir something in him—a fragment of a memory, a flicker of recognition.

The fabric of my dress clings uncomfortably to my thighs, slightly damp with perspiration, the crimson-coloured velvet seat beneath me rough against my skin. This navy-blue dress, once light and breezy in the morning sun, now feels oppressive, like a second layer of skin I can't escape. It wasn't my first choice this morning, but something about it felt... right. Like wearing it might anchor me to the version of myself I was before. When he still knew me.

I glance at Clark settled beside me. He doesn't complain about the heat, doesn't fidget in discomfort, or wipe the sweat from his brow. He is silent and stares out the window, watching the city blur past, completely still, as though he isn't here at all. I wish I could know what he sees.

The train jolts forward, and he inhales sharply, his fingers twitching against his lap. He looks at me then, his brow furrowed, his lips parted like he searches for words that refuse to surface. I wait, watching him, hoping for something, anything—a glance, a word, a sign that he's still himself, that he's still in there somewhere. He exhales slowly; his gaze drifting past me, lost.

Some mornings, he forgets my name.

Some mornings, he forgets me entirely.

"Feels just like it used to, doesn't it?" I offer him a small smile. My voice is careful and light, as if speaking too loudly might shatter the fragile moment between us. He only blinks, turning back to the window.

I adjust my grip on my bag, my fingers tightening around the worn leather strap. Before his diagnosis, he filled the space between us with quiet observations, small remarks about the world outside, details he noticed that I always missed. That was Clark, always observant, always noticing. Now, the silence presses against my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

I reach into my bag, fingers brushing against something soft. A notebook. My old one.

I hadn't meant to bring it, but somehow, it found its way there—just like old memories do when you least expect them. I open it, my gaze falling onto a yellowed page, the ink faded but still legible. I gently trace the words with my thumb.

There he is again. The man on the train.

I close my eyes, and for a moment, I am somewhere else.

Some other September, some other year.

Cairo, Egypt - September 1970

The Cairo streets are alive with the usual morning rush—cars honking in their chaotic symphony, vendors calling out their goods, and the faint hum of city life in every corner. For me, it's the light. The golden glow of the sunrise spilling over everything—the dusty streets, the intricate domes of the churches, the trees leaning against ancient buildings—painting the sky in beautiful orange and pink tones. The air carries freshly brewed coffee, mingling with the salty breath of the Nile River breeze, a comforting warmth settling over the city, as the day begins to heat up.

I step out of my apartment building, the weight of my leather satchel settled in my shoulder as I hurry towards the train station. I was always rushing, always late, always moving too fast to notice the little things. I never stopped to breathe, never slowed down to see the world around me. But that day, everything shifted.

It's a particularly busy morning. The train is packed, but I board at my usual stop, early enough to claim my window seat. It's exactly 7:48 a.m. when he steps on, just as he does every day. Something about him always catches my eye. Crowds blur past me, faces forgotten in an instant, but I always notice him. He became a regular part of my mornings, a quiet constant. And somehow, I found myself looking forward to it.

The man moves with a quiet grace, slipping into the train car as if the morning's rush didn't bother him at all. I watch from my seat, my notebook resting on my lap. Usually, I would have been lost in the jumble of thoughts running through my head; today, however, my attention stays fixed on him.

He glances around briefly, scanning for an empty spot, but there is nowhere to sit. Without hesitation, he grabs the hanging strap above him, finding his balance effortlessly. And that's when I see him clearly. Up close, his features are sharper than I had noticed before—his short dark hair as if he'd just left the barbershop, the faint hint of stubble suggesting he hadn't shaved that morning. He looks like someone always deep in thought, like a man who had a hundred places to be but was never in a hurry.

I flip open my notebook, my pen moving before I even think about it.

There he is again. The man on the train.

Before I can continue, the train stops at the next station , and the person sitting next to me exits the train. I look up and before I have time to process it, the man sits down next to me. I can feel the heat of his presence and for a second, the noise of the train, the chatters of strangers, the heat of the morning, it all blurs. All I can focus on is the space between us.

My fingers nervously flip the page of my notebook, hastily scribbling down a new thought just to avoid him catching sight of my earlier words. My heart beats a little faster as he settles into the seat, a book appearing in his hands as if it had always been there. I glance at him from the corner of my eye. He is reading, the pages of his book flipping gently with his thumb. His brow furrows slightly, his lips moving silently as if he were speaking the words to himself. I find myself captivated by the simplicity of it—the way he loses himself in the pages, oblivious to everything around him. I feel an unexpected sense of calm in the quiet space between us.

Just as I start to lose myself in the stillness, the train stumbles and his elbow bumps mine.

“Sorry about that,” his voice echoes through my head.

I look up, meeting his gaze for the first time. His eyes—deep, dark, impossibly warm—hold mine for a second too long.

“It’s alright,” I manage to say, my voice softer than I expected.

He hesitates before smiling. “You’re a teacher?” he asks, nodding at the notebook in my lap.

I blink, caught off guard. Only then do I realize what I have written—numbers, symbols, equations scattered absentmindedly across the page. I hadn’t noticed myself doing it. It was just instinct, something to ground me; solving for x had always been easier than making sense of the world around me.

“Yes,” I say slowly, still a little thrown. “How did you—?”

“The way you write,” he says simply . “And I think I’ve seen you carrying textbooks before.”

I let out a small laugh. “Good observation.”

“I have a habit of noticing things,” he replies. “I’m Clark, by the way.”

He extends his hand. His grip is soft, brief, but it sends a ripple through me.

“Sally.”

“Sally.” He repeats my name like he’s testing the way it sounds. “You’re new to teaching?”

I nod. “First year. High school math.”

“Math,” a glint of amusement in his eyes, “Me too.”

I straighten slightly. "You're a math teacher?" The words leave me too quickly, maybe with too much excitement.

"Five years now," he nods. "Tutoring on the side, too."

I start to say, "That's—" but I stop, not knowing how to finish the sentence. That's a coincidence? That's fate?

He tilts his head. "That's what?"

"Interesting," I settle on, hoping he can't hear the warmth in my voice.

The train slows as we near my stop. I don't want the moment to end, but I reach for my bag anyway and place my journal inside.

"You get off here?" he asks, though I can tell he already knows.

"Yes."

"Can I walk you to work?" The words tumble out of his mouth quickly, almost like he didn't mean to say them.

I pause for a moment, surprised by the question. There's a softness to his voice, something genuine beneath the casualness. I nod, unable to hide a small smile. "I'd like that," I say.

As we step off the train together, I realize something. For the first time since starting my new job, I'm not rushing through the morning. Just like that, the hustle of the morning transformed into something different. Something slower. I noticed the world around me, and somehow, the world felt like it had slowed down too.

Cairo, Egypt - September 2020

The train rocks gently, pulling me back into the present. Clark's hand, warm and familiar, suddenly covers mine. I look up, startled.

For the first time in weeks, maybe longer, his eyes meet mine with clarity. Recognition flickers in them, a small ember of memory refusing to die out completely. For a brief moment, it's like he's here.

"That's me," he says softly, nodding toward the notebook in my lap. "The man on the train?"

My heart stumbles. "Yes," I whisper. "That's you."

The train slows as it nears the end of the line.

Clark squeezes my hand. I squeeze back, holding on as tightly as I can. Holding on to him, to this.

Because in another moment, he may forget again.

But right now, right here, he remembers.

And for now, that's enough.

An Honest Conversation

by Brooke Betten

"It's a bit bleak," Sam thinks as he enters the doorway of Heaven. It's a space where nothing and everything culminates, yet it looks strangely sterile to him. It's a hospital room. It's a void. At the centre is God in all Their glory—an entity without form or function. "Okay, I'm aware that I should probably be groveling at Your feet now, but it's probably a little too late to repent for the whole atheistic situation."

His mouth is a faucet of water. His mom would have held his mouth under one, would've rubbed it viciously with a bar of soap, if she knew this was how he spoke to God.

"It is."

The voice cuts clear into his mind, yet can't be located or identified. It is masculine, feminine, robust, and gentle. It is a cacophony of every voice he's heard. A warbled dialect.

"I don't have hands," Sam looks to the floor, or the abyss, where his body is supposed to be, only to find a vacancy.

"So how does this work? Do I have to testify against the people I've wronged the most? Do we get to watch a frame-by-frame of my final moments? How about my best memories? First heartbreak? Last one? Lay it on me."

"It's just you and I." God is not tangible. He can't see Them, can't see anything—it's just a rumble in his soul.

"So, theoretically, if I go to Heaven," Sam pauses inquisitively, "Heaven isn't like Earth."

"You're not going to Heaven."

"I guessed that by now, actually—"

"The closest thing is this space."

"So I did make it to Heaven then?"

He observes his surroundings once more. His basketball trophy from elementary school is seated on a nearby shelf. His childhood dog is barking from the yard, requesting to be let in. It smells like the tree he had his first kiss in, tastes like the metallic of it too.

The overstimulation makes his mind reel. "I don't understand how this works."

"You can't comprehend it to its full extent."

Gardenias, that is what they are, blooming in his father's garden under the blistering sun. They would materialize everywhere. In the bathroom, above the kitchen sink, on his nightstand. Sam can smell their pungent fragrance. He can feel them, the paper-like petals, too.

"Got it." He doesn't. "So now what? I just go to Hell?" Sam winces at the implication.

“No.”

“What will happen to me?”

“You will repent.”

“Oh, so, Hell is rehabilitation?”

He drifts away for a moment, caught in the scent of his mother’s perfume. It’s sweet, sickly so. He is nauseated as it hollows him out — the shell of something he loved. He is pulled away by the tide, her hand locked in his at the beach. She tuts under her breath at all of the sand he has managed to gather in his hair. My silly boy, she whispers.

“Can You be honest? Was it because I was gay?” He tears the skin off of his lip, or tries to. “Or is it because I didn’t believe?”

He can hear the crack as his head knocks back harshly into the wall. The sky above him is smoggy. There is a menacing breath taken; the guy’s mouth is an ashtray. A trail of blood-slicked spit seeps between Sam’s lips. He knows it’s the end. Life, as he knew it, had a funny way of circling back on itself. Copper on his tongue—it tastes like a kiss.

“It’s because you were unfaithful.” He doesn’t know if that is a proper answer to the question.

“Right, I was always worried about the whole homosexual thing,” Sam tests the waters again.

The bread crumbles beneath his fingers. It’s stale, sheathed in plastic. The ducks circle below them at the pond. Later, he will find out that bread is terrible for ducks. Some intern, smarted in thickframed glasses, will explain self-righteously about duck digestion. But now, the sun is setting, his dad has a gentle hand over his shoulder, and he is feeding the ducks.

“Life on Earth is a fragment of your eternal existence.”

“Then why does it determine so much of it?”

“It only does for a brief period of time.”

“Dude, this is so confusing.”

“I have no gender.”

Sam finally lets out a sigh. He has forgotten the weight of himself. He is being pulled apart, into the far past and the recent. His non-existent body is being torn and reconstructed repeatedly. He is suddenly ten, surrounded by fallen black locks and his screaming mom, while his dad laughs and pulls the trimmer away. He is fifteen, groaning from growing pains as he adjusts to longer limbs and shorter nights. He is seventeen, with purple bags under brown eyes as the bus rocks back and forth. He is wondering why he is letting the Greyhound take him so far.

“It just seems so unfair,” Sam hates the petulance in his voice, “Do horrible people go to Heaven, just because they believed?”

“No.”

Sam remembers, vaguely, a cross dangling on a worn chain as his vision faded.

“You might have heard my footsteps—” the song crackles over the radio. The sun is rising, and not even the visor above the passenger seat can shield it from his eyes. They’re going fishing, the poles stretch over his seat. They smell like the brackish water they’re crusted with. Sam doesn’t like fishing, but he likes the way the wind feels on his face when Dad rolls down the window. He likes the way it tastes, the hot, damp air. He likes the smile Dad affords when he runs a hand atop Sam’s unruly curls. He likes this song and the way it settles in his chest—echo softly in the distance.

The screen brings the picture into focus. “What is it you want to say, Sammy?” His dad’s voice is husky on the camcorder. They watch the tape on the VCR player. The static of the box TV tickles his skin. Young, pixelated Sam is nothing but a gurgling mess; he has no words to say yet. He rolls onto his back across the carpeted floor. His mother scoops him up into her dark arms, rocking him gently. She starts to sing—something about the sunshine. She smiles at the camera then, the screen casting her in golden hues. Sam pushes his cheek deeply into hers, trying to get some words out.

Sam always thought that it was in your final moments that life comes back to you. He never thought that it was in the confusing in-between, in the liminal space between nothing and everything, that you live once more.

“I have so many questions though.”

Sam wants to know if they are looking for him — if, eventually, they will find him with a John Doe footag in the Monterey County Morgue. He has always wondered: did he become the anonymous face on the back of a milk carton? For years, did his black and white photo sweat on the shelves with all of the other missing children? Had his mom stopped entering the dairy aisle, or maybe did she quit the grocery store all together? Have they always wondered, perhaps, what happened to their boy?

“In due time.”

“Will I ever go back?” The silence sounds like a *yes* to Sam. “Well, if I can, I want to be an animal next time. Maybe a bird? I don’t know, something interesting, nothing domesticated.”

God doesn’t respond to his request.

“I know I didn’t fit the criteria for residency here, which is a little elitist if you ask me—”

He is slipping away, like a tide retreating to sea. It is a kind of dying. It is so terribly strange to know what that feels like.

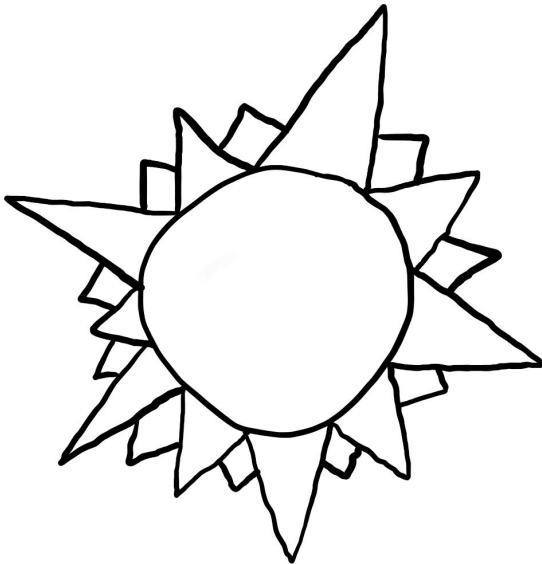
My God, he just wants to go home.

“Can I ask you one last thing? Before you condemn me to eternal damnation or whatever.”

God nods.

“Was I good at least?”

“You were wonderful.”



Three Keys One Lock

by Carella Keil

(Originally published in *The Stripes Literary Magazine Issue 2 Vol. 3*)

I dreamt about you again last night. It's always you. You said you can't dream anymore, so "How could it possibly have been me?" and "Are you sure you aren't confusing me with someone else?" Of course, you didn't look like you. More my memory of you, my feeling of you, although you're more of an abstraction in reality than you are in dream.

....

I'm awake. I think I'm awake.

I could teach you to dream with your eyes open. A part of you must already know this, you keep coming to me in the night.

....

The last time we met was in a matchstick house during the Third Reich. It was inevitable we'd both end up in flames. I was a Jew girl with cumulous eyes and dirt on my cheeks. My fingers had learned to plead with the officers and my tongue to spell out survival. You wore your mask differently. It was too tight around the lips and restricted your eyes. You weren't ready to take it off, but you sensed this identity was not your true face.

You could never love me without breaking your own heart, and so I never quite let you. You wanted to save me, and that act more than the others welded me onto you.

We barely scratch the surface; it's enough to light a spark.

....

"They sent her to the ovens." You looked outside your window and you didn't have time to cry. But that night you dreamt of a boy in Pompeii, covering his eyes. His eyes became sunsets, and I realized you knew.

"Next time, I want to come back as ice," you whispered, and the goddess obeyed.

You're the color of heartbreak when the sun rises. "So let's stay in bed all day," I say. Hips over legs over lust over lips. The goal of the game isn't to win; it's to keep playing.

And you agree, but the doorbell rings, and there she is, dressed only in fantasy. And you'll take her to bed, and still summer will out-sleep us all, dreaming up the firmament and cementing plans we never make.

The ocean is pretty, but the sea leaves scratch marks on the shore, and I'd rather be chasing her tide than the slowly turning, cold shoulder of the moon. From this vantage

point, I can feel nothing but the wind, and I like the way his cold caresses me, in a warning warming sort of way.

Hate is to love without desire, and desire is to pity what can never be. I was searching yesterday for the cabinet where my mother folded up our wings and laughed to find them dangling from the treetops. Like summer kites we used to fly. Mothers don't forget.

You know, burnt cities leave behind years of ash, while melted ones leave nothing. I thought I was wise to choose fire rather than ice, but perhaps you were the one with mercy in your heart. I wanted to go back again, but this time, the doorway had turned to stone.

Saving Amelia

by Vojta Pavrovsky

In the absence of bird sounds or any sound for that matter, a daylight lamp starts beaming. It's screwed to the wall opposite to Amelia's bed, and the expanding brightness beneath her eyelids has just erased any last memories of her dreams. This is not the light at the end of the tunnel; she must have passed by the tunnel some time ago. A nonsense remark that soothes her as she gets used to this new way of life. The white light is 100% *flicker-free*, rather blue, medical, and absolute. Sharp as a shard, too on her raw cornea. She wishes she could cover her eyes, but the tight bunny pajamas won't reach there. All in all, surely a unique take on Saturday morning. All it took was years of unmanaged anxiety, financial dependency, and ultimately a few calls to the bank to clip her wings.

By the time she forces the finishing Amen out, two black-out curtains of hard composite have already retreated to the sides of the room, etching another night of sound sleep onto the granite, vinyl floor. The vinyl is just peel-and-stick though, covering a colorful cartoon carpet underneath, so scratches are no worries. A thin gap of hot air marinating between the curtains and a floor-to ceiling window now seeps into the room, carrying a sharp scent of plastic — sterile, yet toxic. Amelia was told to try not to breathe it in too much. It takes a while for the humming air purifier to remove it, but she waits patiently.

As she props herself up against the head of her bed, her gaze settles on a wooden table too small for an adult body. There's a yellow oblong vase with three tulips. A reward for finishing yesterday's protocol. A sign of good intentions, because *they are* on good terms now.

The tulips are deep crimson. That by itself would have caused a total freak-out in the first two weeks. Back then, everything brought in and out of the room carried meaning, but she knows better now than to overanalyze like this.

Looking at the laminated sheet on her bedside table — that's a morning prayer and a corrective reflection ticked off the list already. She is genuinely happy with how things are going today.

Is this actually starting to pay off?

Amelia was skeptical at first, and the change was in any case a shock to the system on multiple levels. Vibrant dresses and historic centers became tracksuits and suburbs once again. Her childhood bedroom has lost all vibrancy as well, but this too must have been for her own benefit. The room doesn't look like it much, but is supposedly *way* healthier for her.

With a heavy heart, even as she relives a cherished memory from growing up here—having a stable shelter and, somewhat comfortably, close to no autonomy—she comes to think she can't grow to love her parents the same way. But then again, she's not 13 anymore. She's 36 ½, so something's, of course, different.

On top of that, this time, there are no festivities or family parties to attend but home visits; yes, a team of white coats, regular dose reminders, and continuous measurements. At least weekends are reserved for relaxation. In moments like this, memories come easily, pulling her gently back in time.

In a way, she understands her staycation as her parents' last chance to make things how *things* should be—as organized as Rosie's rose garden around the villa beside theirs. Or perhaps as effortless as her first and the last mass of being an altar girl. With that bit, she must have set a very high bar for herself, but she had support then. In the 23 years since that mass, she couldn't ever reach the bottom of her mom's purse for that long unnoticed. The little plastic bottle of beta blockers seemed to have found a new home.

Leaving the nest shortly after churches closed gave her a fresh canvas for her self-image, one to be painted on over bi-weekly facetimes and rare holiday visits. Or so Amelia thought, until she started to slip up, culminating in her 'truly unholy' stint in southern Europe, getting snatched on by that bitch, and ending up back in Kennewick, Washington.

Recapitulating this part of her life takes her back to the Pastor's words about seeds falling on rocky ground. She heard some seeds can be dormant for more than 50 years, and, letting her pragmatic speak, the passage of time would solve some of her problems. Still, she'd rather be a useful crop right then and there.

Ever since her concerns were confined in 322 sq. feet, living up to the expectations seemed possible, though. Fun, even. Just like now, when, without caring to put her slippers on—four sizes too small, anyway—she charges towards an old couch on the other side of the room. There was lying and being listened to once-weekly on that warm leather, but most of it indeed was just lies to fill the time.

Cleaning it from the dry cookie crumbs, a pack of which she smuggled into her room two days before, she secures a handful of incriminating material. "Get in, bastards." And down the drain with them.

Afraid of prompting more binging, she turns her back on the coach and sits on an adjustable stool instead. Together with the white grand piano, all dusty despite the air purifier, these were the only objects she didn't feel like smashing when they first locked her in. Its keyboard faces the large window, but now the frosted glass makes the notes on the sheets above it barely readable. She won't use those anyway and won't care to be guided by the metronome, a farewell tchotchke from her teacher still sitting on a stack of etudes.

These days she plays from the top of her mind, for the pure joy of it, and above all, the intellectual necessity. Luckily, given the overall gravity of the current situation, the formerly attentive, unskilled listeners downstairs won't lose their heads over a mistake or two.

Still barefoot, she skips the scales and preps her hand right at a low D-flat. With a slightly spine chilling smile attesting to the lack of social interaction, she remembers the beautiful melody before producing the first tones.

Chopin's Impromptu No. 3 has its ups and downs, just like her life, but is relatively easier to play. Actually, her fingers are blazing today, which she attributes to both her state of mind but also this faintly familiar sense of dissipation reigniting all over her just now. The sense of dissipated living, to be accurate. "All memories lead to Portofino," her whisper cuts in, giving in to the urge to test the silent thought aloud. She likes the sound of it and tests its reverb again against the crescendo now overtaking both of her hands. Just when she reaches the middle section, *Poco più lento*, her mind starts racing.

Did Chopin believe, or did he just hope for the best?

If there was anyone in that room with her, would they notice her tremble?

Her parents would say it was her nerves. But on the spur of the moment, Amelia decides to prove them wrong. This tremble is from fresh excitement about life. This kind of tremble makes perpetrators weak, the glass behind her ever so fragile, and anything possible.

“Truly Cyborgian Poetry”: Mahaila Smith’s Debut Collection Tackles Techno-Utopias

OTTAWA, ON - What happens when the promise of a technological utopia reveals its hidden risks? This is the question at the heart of *Seed Beetle*, the powerful debut full-length collection from Ottawa-based writer Mahaila Smith (any pronouns), which was released on May 15 from Stelliform Press.

Told as a “novelette in verse,” the book compiles the illustrated poems of its protagonist, Nebula Armis, to build a dystopian narrative. The story is set in a near-future southern Ontario where industrialization has led to desertification and food insecurity. A corporation named Utopic Robotics arrives with a message of hope: a swarm of automated beetles designed to revitalize the ravaged land. But as the community embraces this technological savior, the true costs begin to surface.

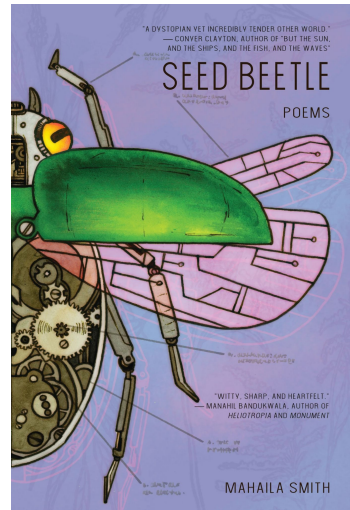
Through sharp, speculative poetry, Smith explores the dangers of relying solely on science to solve complex environmental problems. The publisher notes that the collection uses “femme and queer perspectives” to lay “bare the social implications of a technological savior, and creates a blueprint for co-opting technology in the name of community and connection.”

The collection has already garnered significant praise. Tiffany Morris, author of *Green Fuse Burning*, called it “truly cyborgian poetry.” Conyer Clayton found it “a dystopian yet incredibly tender other world,” and Manahil Bandukwala praised the work as “witty, sharp, and heartfelt.”

Mahaila Smith is a rising voice in speculative literature. Their debut chapbook, *Claw Machine*, was published in 2020, followed by *Water-Kin* in 2024. Alongside their writing, Smith also serves as a co-editor for *The Sprawl Mag*.

Since the book’s launch in May, Smith has been actively promoting the work, including a recent reading at the Factory Reading Series in Ottawa last month.

Seed Beetle is available now from Stelliform Press. To learn more about Mahaila Smith and their work, visit their official website at mahailasmith.ca.



A.R. Tivadar New Website and Comic

ROMANIA - Emerging artist and comic creator A.R. Tivadar, continues to captivate audiences with her thoughtful, emotionally rich work—this time, through the launch of a deeply personal new project: a handcrafted website hosted on Neocities.

The site, artivadar.neocities.org, serves as an evolving digital self-portrait, a carefully assembled archive of art, writing, and introspection. With a retro aesthetic and raw sincerity, the site offers a glimpse into Tivadar's inner world. Though some pages are still a work-in-progress, the project reflects a clear artistic vision and a desire to carve out a space of genuine creative expression. "It is a deeply personal project," Tivadar says, "a place for my art and, really, myself."

Visitors can already explore a range of visual work on the site, including her most recent comic, "Departure," a 32-page narrative following the journey of a character named Garofița as she embarks on a new chapter of her life. The comic blends subtle world-building with emotional vulnerability, hallmarks of Tivadar's storytelling.

Tivadar's connection to Low Hanging Fruit runs deep, with her work appearing multiple times in the magazine. Her appreciation for the platform is mutual: "You guys are one of my favourite lit mags and I am so glad I discovered y'all."

Though Tivadar humbly notes that her mobile design is "god-awful" (best to view on desktop, she advises), there's a charm to the honesty and openness that permeates both her work and web presence. In a digital age of gloss and polish, Tivadar offers something far more valuable: authenticity.

As her website continues to grow and her creative journey unfolds, A.R. Tivadar remains a compelling voice in indie comics and digital art—quietly building a universe one panel, one post, one personal note at a time.



LHF News

Other Headlines

Introducing the Relief Hub: A Gateway to Humanitarian Aid

PASADENA, CA - Low Hanging Fruit Publishing is expanding its mission beyond literature with the launch of the Relief Hub, a dedicated platform connecting people with trusted charities providing aid in conflict zones worldwide.

At Relief Hub, visitors can easily find and support organizations delivering critical assistance, including medical care, refugee aid, and emergency relief. With ongoing global crises, we believe in the power of collective action—whether through donations, awareness, or advocacy.

More information at www.fruithanginglow.com/relief-hub

Kalvin M. Madsen Takes 2nd Place in Line of Advance's 2025 Military Memorial Writing Awards

PASADENA, CA - Calvin M. Madsen, a creative writer and journalist, has won second place in the 2025 Colonel Darron L. Wright Memorial Writing Awards for his prose piece, "Bad Impact." The story, which focuses on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from military drones, was submitted to the "Prose by a Military Family Member" category.

Visual Artist Carella Keil Earns Spotlight in Blue Earth Review

The latest issue of the esteemed literary journal Blue Earth Review (Issue 33) has placed the work of visual artist Carella Keil firmly in the spotlight, selecting her as its sole Featured Visual Artist.

Crow Line Magazine Prepares for Launch, Aiming to Amplify Underrepresented Southern Voices

VALDOSTA, GA - A new literary force is emerging from the American South, poised to bring underrepresented voices from the region to the forefront of the cultural conversation. Crow Line Magazine, an ambitious new quarterly publication, has announced its plans to launch its inaugural issue in the spring of 2026, driven by a mission to celebrate the South as a vital and often overlooked cultural hub.

Visual Art

K + M by Keira Rechsteiner



GHOST unicorn by Irina Tall



Running Dog by Irina Tall



Angel by Irina Tall



Bunny Moon by Jade Hunt



Dorian Gray by Carella Keil

*Originally published in Cosmic Daffodil Issue
VI: Yin & Yang (Cover Art) *Nominated for
2024 Best of the Net



Footprints on the Moon by Carella Keil



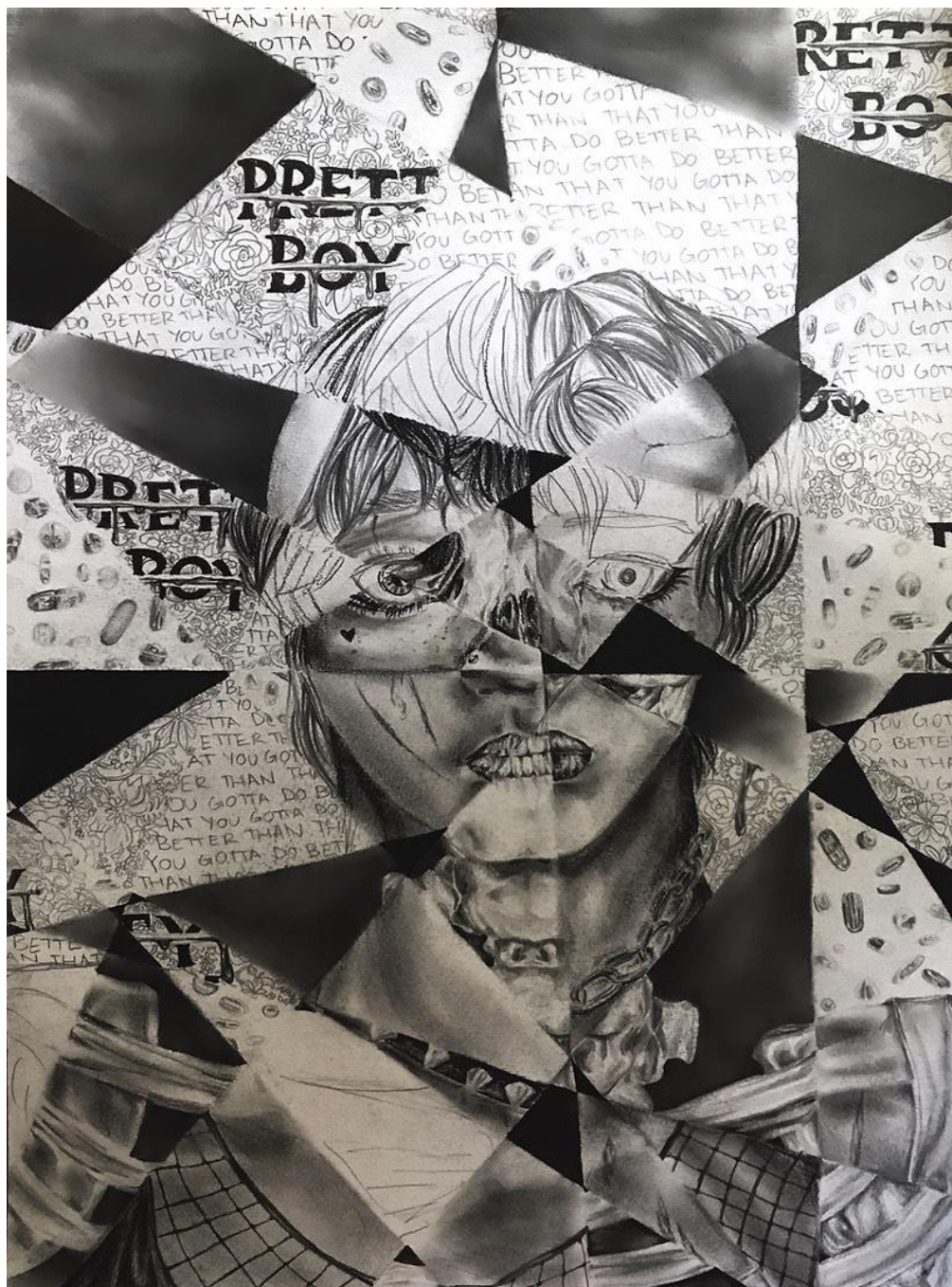
A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall by Anne-Marie Jones



Masquerade by Elias Mossa



Through The Mirror by Elias Mossa



The Visitor by Vague Animal



Poetry

The Rummage Sale

by K. West

We rummage
Stiff air walling us in with the smell
Of decaying clothes
As the local matrons
Flip burgers in the hot asphalt
Of the scorched parking lot
To raise funds for the youth group
Of St. Mary's Catholic Church

As we pick through
Enough T-Shirts, skirts, and pants
To wardrobe the whole Congressional district
In vintage hand-me-downs with small runs

Pyrex, stuffed animals, fading holiday decor
Tchotchkes too

We rummage
To get a bargain, a deal, a find

And what we are looking for,
We can't articulate
And dare I say, we're yearning
For that which we can't discern

Hoping to see it when we find it
As the church bells clamor at noon,
The burgers sizzle in their grease

Under an unrelenting June sun



Dread

by Josje Weusten

I spit in my hands
and watch the spittle thread

spin
around my wrist,
around my lower arm,
upwards to my chin...

I watch the dread
dislocating
my elbow,
my upper arm,
going for my neck,
my breath...

I guess I should be doing something,
but I just watch and watch instead.

Never Refuse Your Muse

by Rosella Weigand

When you paint my emotions on the canvas,
be sure to use every shade
on the color wheel
Those reds and oranges,
blues and greens,
purples and pinks,
and everything else in-between
I want them all

Use long brush strokes
Short ones, too
To show how my mood changes frequently and
unpredictably,
as you know it tends to do
Brighten up the lights
Shade in the darks
Let my personality
speak up
LOUDLY
through your art

Every perfection
Every flaw
Display each one proudly,
please
Don't hide one part of me
Not one bit at all
I want to be seen,
and you're the only one who knows
how to show me

Things That Feel Like Giving Up (But Aren't)

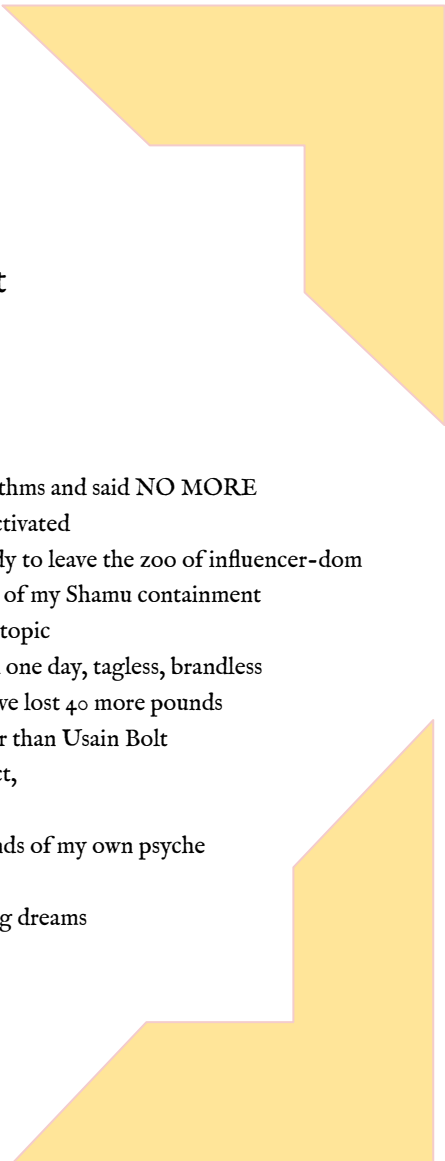
by Katalina Gille

Putting your head down when you feel overwhelmed / Putting your foot down / Or
not / Saying “I love you” after a fight / Or not / Eating ice cream for dinner / Paying
for parking instead of walking the extra block / Quitting that job you hate / Quitting
that job you love for something

better / Dropping out of school (sometimes) / Letting the laundry pile up when
you're sick / Or busy living / Paying extra for guac / Wearing flats / Wearing your hair
in the same braid for three days / Smashing things (in context) / Smashing your
mistakes / Smashing your toxic traits / Smashing your old self / Making a mosaic from
the pieces / Displaying it proudly in your window.

The art of self-kindness is never a waste.





Hack

by K. West

I hacked up
my identity of r-s and o-s, algorithms and said NO MORE
I knew I was serious, when I deactivated
my Amazon influencer page, ready to leave the zoo of influencer-dom
to re-wild myself, get myself out of my Shamu containment
not be on message, on brand, on topic
I will be reintroduced to the wild one day, tagless, brandless
when the SSRI-s wear off, and I've lost 40 more pounds
and my thoughts don't race faster than Usain Bolt
Today I am a conservation project,
an endangered species of one,
saved from the predacious badlands of my own psyche
feeding on dwindling resources
alive among the corpses of rotting dreams

Three Poems

by Taylor Schmidt

A Courtesy

Gratzie,
Thank you for the toothbrush
You gave me at the dentist.
I—
Hollowed out and filled back in.
Composite—
A composition of was-not,
Of will-be,
Of I-like-the-holes-in-my-teeth,
Of I've-carried-you-this-far-but-no-farther,
Of a father standing in line for the lighthouse
With the new baby tucked to his neck
Hushing like the sea
As it meets a cliff-face,
sh-sh-sh-sh-sh

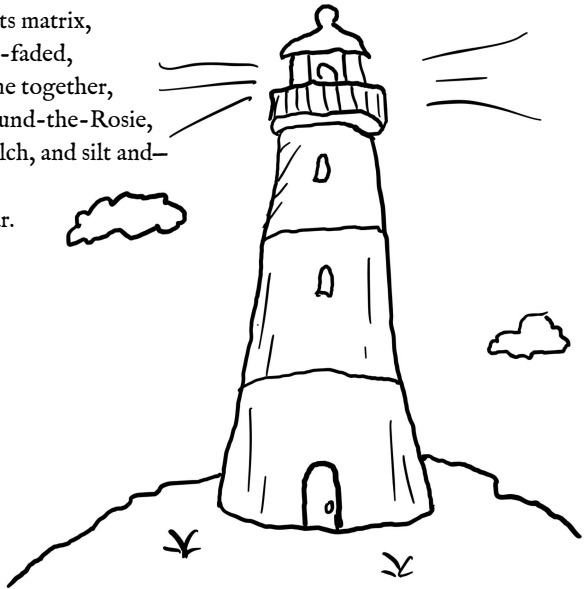
Lightfast

My body is an archive of yearnings
Of desperate would-could-be-mines
Sticking to my bones in toffee-strings.

Feral, unfettered, blinders off—
I was born without them
Tried to paste them together,
Clumsy,
Construction-paper-thin,
World narrowed to what
The wolves at the door
Clawed out through eyelash-forests
And snout-bone.

The first drop of rain,
Of clear water,
Of daylight,
Pulled the pulp from its matrix,
Sludgy-green and red-faded,
From scotch-taping me together,
From paper rings-around-the-Rosie,
From ashes, ashes, mulch, and silt and—

I am not made of sugar.
I will not melt.



Boys' Night

Your hair is tucked behind your ears
beneath that ever-present ballcap.
It makes me understand the scandal
of Renaissance women with their hair unbound.

We're staggering down the sidewalk,
Long shadows thrown by dim streetlamps
And the occasional passing car.
Laughing at our shapes

We sit together on the floor,
Rejoicing at gas station mashed potatoes
And plastic cheese,
Talking into that morning hour,
When everything is funny
And our legs are splayed akimbo
Over nearby chairs.

In this, you're mine,
Hazy-eyed and untouchable,
A small army of beer cans
Circling like wagons
Between the mountain ranges
Of our bodies.

The freckles on your skin are treasures, copper mines,
Riches to chase, to die for,
And I want to be a part of you.
That caramel-dotted Appalachia
Is the only wealth I'll ever seek.

Call Me Home

by Chainka

call me home.
it goes +380
there is an automatically generated response on the phone

call me home.
i want to hear my voice from early on,
from the time before i've cried my eyes and learnt how to crawl

jesus, how i want to hear my voice from early on...
through the never-coming-back trains,
backdoor entrance, almost ripped-open veins, war crimes and war saints

call me, i'll be ready
will try to cut the rope, the wire—
until feeling steady

the girl on the phone doesn't know me
and she won't believe
that i know her
to the very deep core
actually, now i think that i don't
like she ever won't
know
what i've been through and why i don't have a place to go
why i'm not at home



she's a girl from the 23rd of february,
too excited to put on a show
she's coming back home
with her bestest friend at that time.

oh, she doesn't know anything
about how it is to not feel fine
oh, she still can cry late at night
she doesn't know how it feels
when you want to,
but you have no tears

she doesn't know how it is
when one of your biggest fears
is not having food to eat tomorrow
oh, she doesn't know anything
about grief and sorrow

she thinks she does,
but to be honest, she's just a fraud.
she lives in the back of my mind—

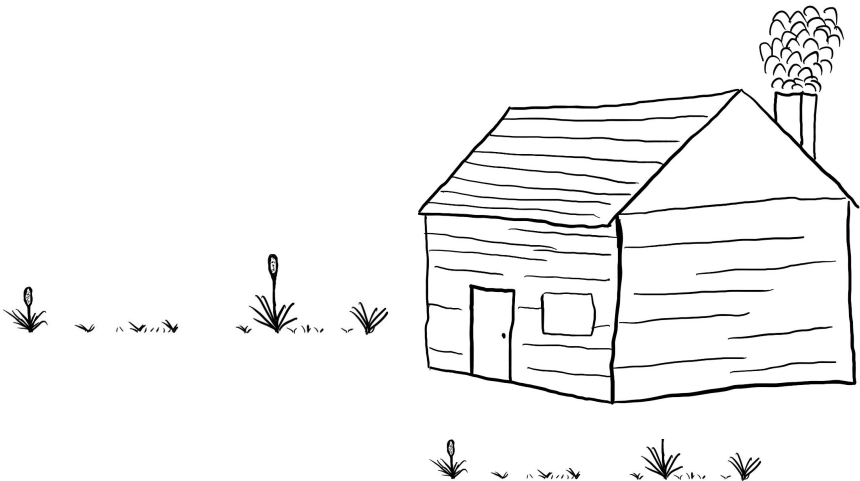
in my least and most favorite thought

god, i wish i could be her.
with a place to go
with my home

but i'm a girl
after the 24th of february
i will never ever again have a home and all
i can do
is
miss her
until i find the courage to bury her in the folded blanket of my bewitched soul

call me home
it goes +380

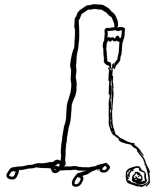
for only a fleeting moment
i want to be her
a girl that i was three years ago



This Supposed Immortality

by Mahaila Smith

Did we think that doing nothing
would make it go away?
The bodies of our neighbours, friends, families,
accumulate in hospitals, unclaimed.
As long as we leave them burning,
we have nothing to fear.
We, who disbelieve in the reach of sickness,
what will we do in the face of a mass infection,
mass extinction?
Who will we comfort, and who will we treat?
Hurting down to the bone.
Losing kin like years sloughed from a tree.
We walk away from screams
dampened inside locked rooms,
believing we will
outlive it all.



Over The Threshold

by Brittany Studer

The grass was tall that afternoon, it touched our outstretched fingers like a friendship held by vulnerable threads.

Cicadas moaned against thick summer air as we glided through the painted meadow, never stopping to sip the sweet smell of color in the flowers, who patiently watched us grow.

Along the yellow straw path we paved,
hearts raced
to the towering timber grove ahead.

The threshold loomed before us, trees swayed to let us in.

We stood there, hand in hand, not daring to cross the thinning line.

With the gold meadow warm against our backs, the cool mauve wood whispered an ambrosial invitation at our lips.

Those primal weak-knee steps felt so much heavier than the effortless floating from earlier.

Our shoes cut through the wet loam, carving our untamed existence as furrows from a plough.

We danced along a row of trees like wildfire, stirring them awake.

Hands still held, I pulled you close behind my back, your breath blazed down my neck.

I leaned in, surveying humid layers of ferns
over fungi

over shiny insects doing their business, and you bent over me as roots pressed into earth.

Bodies fused and moved like rain against leaves, intertwining fingers like vines to steady

as we stood and stooped like weeping willows.

Mosquitos whined in our ears and sampled our skin,
but we could not pull our eyes from the dappled woodland floor,
writhing with life.

Two Poems

by Rebecca Agauas

I'm A Toucher

I'm a toucher.
I walk around this world feeling and touching my way through.
Lace pressed against my skin feels like a hug from my grandmother.
Holding a record and placing the needle down, I can feel the saxophone cry out and
the drums beat faster than my heart.
As I stroke my cat's back, her silky fur runs in-between my fingertips.
I grab your hand and interlock it with mine.
Skin on skin, I can feel your pulse run through my body.
Your love surges through my veins.
I'm a toucher.
I never expected you to touch me.

Home Alone

The day my father died, hawks circled above, looking for lunch.
Butterflies began to fly towards Mexico for the winter.
Petals on the rosebush began to fall to the ground.
Grey clouds scattered across the sky, preparing for a storm to arrive.
The apple tree has produced all its fruit for the season, pies have been made with love
and stomachs have been filled with warmth.
My stray cat rubs up against my leg, as I walk up the stairs, her meows let me know
that I am loved or that she's hungry.
With the turn of a key and a click of a lock, I enter my home alone.
This is where I learn to heal, to be me.
Here, home alone without my dad.

What If I'm The Spider?

by Katalina Gille

You once said,
"You're not
an easy person
to love."
And I thought,
Good.
Then that makes you
the strongest man
that ever lived,
and I need someone
to protect me
from everything
I'm afraid of.
Like spiders,
and small talk with strangers, and losing you.
But then I thought,
What if, to you,
I am the spider?
In that moment,
I decided
to get my act together
and start being easier
to live with,
if not to love.
Turns out,
I'm not very good
at either one.



Cello

by Brittany Studer

O the cello, he sings the perfect sigh,
a tantalizing tone the most composed
swoons and falls deep into the bass clef's line
of fire and swelters there.

Striped with flamed maple, his back ripples,
as a tiger who stealthily weaves through
me a pulsing string of flesh deep down
to my inner ear. My drum beats softly
from his gently rocking hum, as his bow glides

sul tasto

up and down my neck, a tender, tenor timbre.

Vocal cords quiver
vibrato fervor,
a quick turn to light,
feathery strokes,
finger taps

staccato

down my back.



A tension grows as friction catches hard
between pulled hair and skin,
and as his sonorous cavern croons
with hastened breath,

a final cry rings out the highest string, a hair falls
loose; it hangs undone.

Ears ablaze with echoing song, his bow
is drawn across the bridge, his breath
seeps out a quiet sigh that halts the time,
al niente.



After All This Loss

by Mahaila Smith

You did find me, invader, intruder.
You watched me sleep under my hoard
of dried leaves and feathers.
Clutching my collection of water and weapons.
Hi. The fungi hold my mind at the fore of sleep.
They wring me awake and standing.
I hiss, hold tightening on my cutting glass.
Who are you?
I'm here to help.
No.
It doesn't matter. I don't need your permission.
You descend my hill, controlled slide down
buried sandstone and sycamore branches.
Now what?
What are those? You point to the ground.
To my collections of necklaces, gold-leafed teacups
and leather-bound books, stuck in the dirt.
Souvenirs.
What is there to remember?
Enough.



Trains

by Chainka

when i was younger, i watched the trains go from the top of mountains just to pass me by
driving in the night
through the world's sore, always-watching eye
trains, full of devils and angels, safety and dangers, sleeping and talking strangers,
destined to exist forever in the fleeting windows
as i was crossing the roads on the tips of my toes
too young and naive to hear alarm

i held my mother's finger as i later grabbed your arm
the distance, cool resistance, long goodbyes, look in your eyes, — that was always my lucky charm
the bittersweet moment of loving harm

i'd stay on the station
playing my silly little game to get my silly little ovations
watching the trains pass me by,
taking off the rails of the sky
so that we could meet once again,
but in the next life

you slip away from my fingers
when i'm trying to look through
like a sand in the air, like a raindrop of dew
your world is in red and my world is in blue
a., i guess i have known you
in another dimension
where we were two shadows at the training station
intertwined forever — or at least 'till the sound of alarm
kissing my open mouth, feeling it sour, you're my infinite lover,
my lucky charm

i still can feel the warmth of your palm
the bittersweet moment of coming harm

i'm inside the train
isolated from solace and pain
we've been here before and we'll be back again
the future is your unwritten letter
'all that happens, happens for better'
the past is a rabbit's hole
have i told you i loved watching trains when i was small?

i guess my heart long time ago
got woven into your soul

Four Poems

by Valerie Sabrina Carrasco

The Last Goodbye

I dread the funeral march, the mournful, solemn pace
A ritual I've repeated, a sorrowful, familiar space
The walk up the aisle, a journey through the past
Memories flooding my mind, of the time I saw you last
I don't want to say goodbye, to let you slip away
To leave you in this cold, dark place, without a ray-
Of sunshine, of warmth, of love, to light your way
I don't want to say goodbye, not today.

A Heart In Hiding

They say I'm cold, unfeeling, with a heart of stone
But little do they know, the turmoil I've known
Touch is a language I'm still learning to speak
A dialect that feels foreign, yet somehow, I yearn to seek
Physical affection, a craving that's hard to define
But intimacy, for me, is a delicate, fragile line
I'm selective with my hugs, reserved for a chosen few
A guarded heart, a defense mechanism, I've learned to renew
I wish I could embrace my loved ones, without feeling unsure
But it's a gesture that's hard to endure
If I start now, will it feel weird, like a forced, unnatural part?
Or can I relearn, rediscover, and heal this fragmented heart?

Reflection

I'm a reflection of you both, a mirror to your soul
Inherited traits that make me whole
Your anger, your attitude, a fire that burns so bright
A work ethic that drives me day and night
Your looks, a familiar face, a laugh that's truly mine
Blue eyes, curly hair, and a smile that's divine
Yet, in every way I'm different, on a path that's my own
A unique perspective on life, and a heart that's made of stone
I'm a paradox, a contradiction, a mix of old and new
A blend of your experiences, and the lessons I learned without you
So here's to you, dear parents, a tribute to your name
A celebration of our bond, a love that's forever the same
I'm proud to be your child, to carry on your legacy
A mix of your traits and my own identity

A Legacy Reborn

To younger hearts, a message I impart,
A family's tale, of trials and heavy hearts.
Trauma, loss, and love, a complex, woven thread,
Mental illness, a shadow, cast upon our heads.
Not ours to own but ours to bear,
A weight we carry, a burden we share.
Yet, we rise, we strive, we shatter the mold,
Refusing to be defined, by a family's troubled fold.
We're breaking the cycle, shattering the chains,
Refusing to pass on the burdens that we've gained.
To you, dear younger ones, I say to you,
You are the change, the hope, the future anew.
Don't let the struggles define your path ahead,
You are strong, resilient, and capable of rising above the dread.
We'll stand together, united, as one,
And forge a new legacy, where love and hope have won.

Smoking Silhouettes

by Brooke Heldermon

Hugging the walls of her room, the
warm orange light
cascades over the soft tapestry
hanging underneath.

Filling up with smoke,
the room grows hazy.
dancing around my face,
teasing me,
taunting me.

Suffocating me as it wraps around my neck,
the thick, herbal plumes tickle my head.

Escaping from the distant speaker,
the beating of the bass lulls my dry
eyes
closed.

Sitting beside me,
She asks again “Are you okay?”

Shifting to a harsh red,
the light wraps around her face,
masking her from me.

I gurgled out a response,
although not to her liking.

She scoffs in return,
A mark of our unfamiliarity.

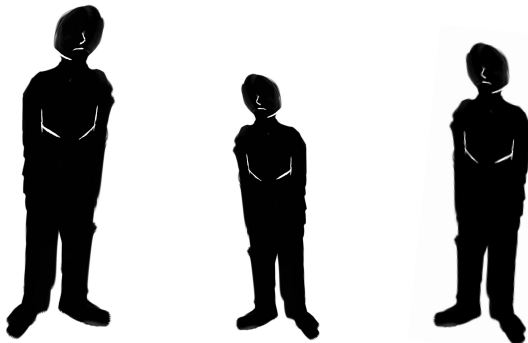
The song I forget is playing ends.
Chewing the air, I take note
of the deafening silence.

Gripping my legs from beneath,
the slick, leather couch;
peeling at the edges
from years of sitting comfortably,
reminds me I am anything but.

Catching my eye,
the amber light shifts to a
golden hue.
Like the gold on the dress I am wearing.

I sink deeper into the black, leather,
implanting myself in those torn edges.

She speaks at me again,
yet no words reach my
ears—
only the staggered tempo of my heartbeat to
keep me company.



Two Poems

by Adam Peachey

THUNDER

Your love is a passing storm
Making my world grey,
Lifting me from my seat,
Enveloping me with your thunder.

Only to leave me soaked;
Sopping with tears,
Drying out
In the sun.

UNTITLED I

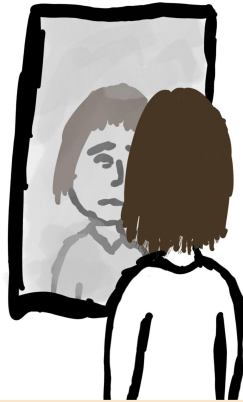
Bury me into your skin.
Breathe life into my lips
And whisper to me thoughts of
tomorrow,
The lies of which you hold so dear.

I will sink into the ocean
Before I feel myself
Sink into you again.

Her

by Rosella Weigand

I'll never be her,
So why even bother
That girl in the mirror
I thought she was taller
I must be imagining things
Or maybe I'm simply remembering
Differently
Didn't she used to smile?
I'm almost certain she did
Maybe that's why she appears like a stranger
She's missing her grin
Yeah, that must be it
I sure wish she'd show it again
Her eyes look so tired and worn
She looks like she's been crying
But that can't be right
She was a ray of sunshine all the time
When did that change?
Something must've happened
Now she's covered in sadness



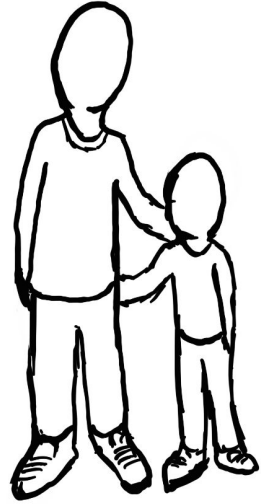
I didn't think she was affected by pain
I swore she was stronger
Or maybe that was only her shield of armor
I must've been confused at first
But I think after taking a closer look,
I believe I finally get it
I now understand her better
She's human -- beautiful flaws and all
So I can't really blame her

Four Poems

by Luke Madsen

At My Side

A friend you can't see but can feel,
A sword when you hold bare hands,
No bear too tall, no Colosseum too wide,
For when I walk, I walk with
The lord at my side



Rainstorm

Like standing in a heavy rainstorm,
Waiting for the rainbow,
But instead it just keeps raining.

Living At My Father's Home

My mother has her studio, brothers have their homes
and apartments, where is my place?
I feel as though I'm trapped on the set of
a horror movie,
a horror movie that is never finished.

Talk Without Action

Writing letters to someone nonexistent,
Burning the "to-do list" of tomorrow.
Saying "I'm gonna," but never
when.

Lightning Bolts

by Gabriel Deibel

Sound! Sound! See-saws of sound
Brass bugles and trumpets that blare all around
The crisp hot yip
Of the lightning bolt, quick!
Stroke and sunder the earth
With white flames of rebirth
Now a torrent of rain
Hear the drums of New Spain
A vortex, a madness
Sheets of flowing membrane
Howl! Howl! Nightmares on the prowl
Shimmer sharp teeth, mashing pigeons and fowl
The ceiling will burst
With a trickle, a curse
Over cat-tails and sea snails
Soaking carpets and hearth
Now a torrent of rain
Jagged rows of blue veins
A vortex, a madness
Sheets of flowing membrane

In-House Interpretations

Seeking Companionship in “Coming to Terms with A Lonely Nature” by Chris Brewster

Written by Rosella Weigand

One is considered the loneliest number for a reason; it stands by itself, often far away, detached from anything or anyone else. While being ‘left alone’ can be a preference, loneliness tends to carry a heavy load of sadness and the feeling of being left out. Forgotten. Unimportant even. Those that feel like they’re in a state of loneliness usually feel like the only ones stuck within its tight grip, but the truth is that there are countless others all feeling the exact same or similar way. In Chris Brewster’s *Coming To Terms with A Lonely Nature*, we get to experience what it means to be ‘lonely’ and how coming together through this shared feeling can have its rewards.

We all feel lonely at different times for various reasons. For our narrator, loneliness was nothing more than a fleeting feeling. But it takes the week of being left home alone at age 18 by his mother after the passing of his aunt for the absence of company to significantly effect him. He mentions that, “The feeling was there before, but it was different now. It took a more violent, misshapen form, a form that I couldn’t pin down in a corner or hide in a closet or bury with false emotions and feigned smiles.” He can’t help but allow this brief abandonment to cause him stress and to worry. He cries his heart out, as he slowly begins to realize that one day he will be someone who won’t have anyone in their life. It makes him anxious and deeply sad just considering such a bleak future.

But he’s not the only person in his life who finds coping with loneliness to be an issue. Not so strangely enough, his own mother knows that same anxiety. When describing her own thoughts on loneliness, he reveals “My mother told me of its contagiousness, like a doctor breaking some terrible, terminal, irreversible illness to a patient. She told me that she’d lived with it her entire life, that when she was nine years old, she felt the weight of it press down on her small, frail little shoulders, and though the weight eased some days, it never fully let up.” So loneliness for his mother has been a constant battle, something she has found herself struggling with time and time again and from such an early age.

Some people get good at hiding their problems and real emotions. Even as someone going through their own personal fight within, he admits that he “...didn’t see that loneliness in my mother until after I graduated from high school. She lost her sister, and I lost the only person in the world who I felt I could be real with, the person I sometimes wished was my mother.” He’s aware that it’s not nice to have such thoughts, but their separate loneliness only pulls them further apart. His mother is a reminder of feeling so alone, one he tries to ignore. So perhaps he longs for connecting with someone who doesn’t mirror his own inner demons.

He and his mother begin to isolate themselves, and he soon discovers just how heavy of a weight his mother still carries. He says, “And so we were two people living in our apartment, struggling to say “Hello” or “Goodbye” or “I love you,” and when I found her on the floor, on her knees, sobbing the way I did when she left, telling me that she no longer wanted to be alive, I wondered when I too would no longer want to be alive, and if my existence got in the way of her desire to leave it all forever.” Now aware of his mother’s depression, he fears he’ll catch her mental illness and blames himself for allowing her misery to continue.

As if it’s unavoidable or a part of his genetic DNA, he does succumb to his depression and attempt to take his life while he’s away in college. And like his mother kept her struggles a secret from him, he doesn’t tell others in his life about his darkness and self-loathing. He almost believes it was inevitable to find himself going down such a dark path for, “There is no battling a state of being that planted its seed years ago. Doing so makes that seed grow into a malevolent, bellicose kind of tree, the kind that uproots unsuspecting plants and wildlife, the kind that stands confidently for generations while others wither away.” He views depression and an early exit from life as his destiny.

Fortunately, good memories save his life. And he decides to seek as much help as he can get to avoid another incident, one he never intends to attempt again anyways. But he begins to focus on what he has rather than dwell on what he doesn’t. And there’s one constant in his life that restores its meaning -- his mother. He realizes that he isn’t truly alone afterall. And he appreciates that she’s sacrificed so much for him. He tells us, “My mother, just as sad as me, just as ill, brings me so much joy when I hear her voice on the phone, or see her sharp cheekbones from her profile, or feel the smallness of her frame when I hug her. How could I leave something like that behind?” So while he may not necessarily have a reason to live for himself, he chooses to keep living for her, the one who gave him life. After everything, he finds his purpose.

Loneliness when carried with others feeling the same weight on their shoulders has a tendency to not feel as heavy. Sometimes all it takes is knowing that others share similar struggles to make one’s own sadness and heartbreak more manageable. What Brewster shares is that loneliness and depression aren’t always going to leave those effected by them, and it’s okay to live with these emotions. And it’s possible to learn from them and deal with having dark days. It’s important to remember that “A shared loneliness is still loneliness, but its shape is much more controlled.” Our loneliness doesn’t have to make us feel that alone. Our shared connections always have a way of bringing us together.

Seeing Her Again in “After 60 Years”

by Emma Elias

Written by Rosella Weigand

Our memories can be a tricky thing. It's impossible to recall every little detail from all of our experiences throughout a lifetime. But occasionally, all it takes is one thing to transport us through time, one thing to take us back, one thing to help us recapture what we assumed our minds lost forever. In Emma Elias' *After 60 Years*, it all comes down to one significant keepsake to restore something unique and special to someone, something deemed irreplaceable.

In a heartbeat, many of us would give anything to go back to revisit our past. In this story, the main character Aida plans to do just that by returning to her childhood home, a place she left behind 60 years ago. It's a very a long time to go without experiencing somewhere, and yet, she's able to remember the sights and sounds, especially ones of her mother. Aida reveals that, “...it had been sixty years since she had heard her mother call her name, sixty years since she had run through the house dusting the ornaments and cursing her youngest child for trekking mud all over her floors. Sixty years since Aida had left because of the war, and she didn't have that many more to spare.” From this, we know the reason she and her family left and can infer that it wasn't really their decision to leave; they were forced to abandon everything they came to know and love for their safety.

Aida is much older now, which is mainly why she feels this may be her last chance to go back. She certainly is determined despite her declining health. Describing her journey, Elias details “With her rattling bones, eighty odd years and disease ridden lungs, she went. On two planes and across time zones she went; across 11170 kilometres and 20 hours she went. To the place that had once been home she went....” She isn't going to let anything slow her down and keep her from returning. Even when her family pleads she doesn't make the trip, she presses on.

But there's a reason she's putting herself through such an ordeal; she's hoping to find something of great personal value. For it's not the house itself she longs to see again; it's not even standing. “This, Aida could accept, for she had come in search of more than the pile of stones she had once lived in; there was something in that pile of stones that for sixty years she had wished she had thought to take with her – the photo of her family.” Considering that not many photos were taken of her and her loved ones, retrieving this photo means everything to her. “She thought of that photo often, trying to recall all it's details in her mind's eye, trying to remember the way her mother had looked. She had lived in her new country for three full years when she realised she could no longer picture her mother's face. She would squeeze her eyes shut, remember her laugh and her scolding and her warmth, but her face... it was gone.”

To forget such a face is just one way Aida's aging mind has been so cruel to her. She needs to see her mother again one more time; maybe doing so will give her a sense of closure. Maybe she'll be able to get back what she has lost.

She recovers the family photo, as if it's been waiting for her all these years later. And she finds herself reunited with the imagery of her mother. In the photo, her mother's hair "...was pinned up in a way that still allowed her heavy waves to fall beside her plump face and upon her shoulders, her were lips pressed neatly in a line. She was not smiling, as this was not the custom in photos, but she her hand wrapped softly around her daughter's waist, holding her close by her side." She and her mother must've had a loving relationship. She's needed this moment to remember a time before their world together was destroyed. But while she'd feel so happy to see her mother's face again, it has to be hard knowing that she lost her all those years ago. A year would feel like a lifetime; sixty whole years must feel like an eternity.

There's a reason pictures are worth a thousand words. Capturing moments in real-time can give us frames from our past when our memories fall short. This photo became the only link to helping Aida rediscover something so cherished, but then she begins to remember even more than the picture tells her. "It had been sixty years since Aida had seen those eyes, and although the photo did not show it, she now recalled that they were hazel." It's a tiny detail, but it shows that somewhere in her elderly mind, she's remembering again. And hopefully, she'll never stop.

Going Beyond the End in “An Honest Conversation” by Brooke Betten

Written by Rosella Weigand

What happens when we die is a mystery to all of us who remain alive; there's no absolute certainty. No right or wrong answers. We choose what kind of afterlife, or lack thereof, in which to believe. In *An Honest Conversation* by Brooke Betten, our main character Sam faces his end and has the most meaningful conversation he'll ever experience -- a meeting with God.

When speaking to God, Sam picks up that He sounds “...masculine, feminine, robust, and gentle. It is a cacophony of every voice he's heard. A warbled dialect.” It makes it seem like His voice is meant to be personalized for every individual. One would expect Him to sound as almighty and powerful. We know this discussion will be unlike anything else Sam has ever experienced, and he has so many questions and uncertainties about what's happening to him.

But Sam isn't in Heaven or Hell but rather a waiting room for the afterlife. And while he doesn't know why he's stuck in this place of limbo exactly, aside from his unfaithful, wandering ways, he can't help but feel surrounded by familiar comforts. He notices that “...His basketball trophy from elementary school is seated on a nearby shelf. His childhood dog is barking from the yard, requesting to be let in. It smells like the tree he had his first kiss in, tastes like the metallic of it too.” It's like a gallery of his entire life but told through snippets. His sense memory is on overdrive. Everything is happening all at once -- each fragment turns into another.

To face one's present and past simultaneously must be extraordinarily overwhelming for anyone. Through this chaos, so much is revealed about Sam, as “he is being pulled apart, into the far past and the recent. His non-existent body is being torn and reconstructed repeatedly. He is suddenly ten, surrounded by fallen black locks and his screaming mom, while his dad laughs and pulls the trimmer away. He is fifteen, groaning from growing pains as he adjusts to longer limbs and shorter nights.” These flashes happen frequently, as if they're all rushing by in the blink of an eye, which is how real life tends to pass us. We can never slow down to fully enjoy every moment. We're too preoccupied waiting on the next one and next and so on and so forth.

Sam isn't a bad person. He's made mistakes, but that only makes him more human. Death isn't necessarily something that has been on his mind, but he never expected to relive so much of his life back-to-back. It's through this journey of self-discovery down such a long, winding memory lane that he really appreciates the life he lived. He “...always thought that it was in your final moments that life comes back to you. He never thought that it was in the confusing in-between, in the liminal space

between nothing and everything, that you live once more.” Those little moments deemed insignificant initially now become more meaningful.

It’s only natural to want to impress others, and despite his life having already ended, Sam still hopes to win over God’s approval. God tells him that he was ‘wonderful,’ which must be the best praise one can expect to ever hear. But he doesn’t need it; his moments in his life speak far greater volumes. Betten doesn’t disclose how long Sam is to remain here or what will come after for him. But it’s not important to know. It’s the unknowing that still allows one’s afterlife to keep us guessing and leaves us wanting more even after we’ve reached the end.

Supernatural Hope and Horror in “Folklore of Faith” and “The Mummy’s Finger”

Written by Calvin M. Madsen

The human fascination with the supernatural often reflects our deepest hopes and greatest fears. This duality is explored in two short stories from this issue, Chitra Gopalakrishnan’s “Folklore of Faith” (pg 11) and Tucker Joneson’s “The Mummy’s Finger” (pg 39). Both narratives delve into how ancient beliefs and objects can shape human experience. However, where Gopalakrishnan’s story frames belief as a source of hopeful connection and coexistence, Joneson’s tale presents it as a malevolent force that brings only fear and destruction.

“Folklore of Faith” tells a whimsical story of an ancient ritual from the perspective of a frog. The villagers, desperate for rain in a drought, believe that frogs are “supernatural beings capable of bringing rain, abundance, fertility, and good luck”. They conduct a wedding ceremony for two frogs, draping them in gold and red fabric and applying vermilion to their foreheads. The frogs are bewildered by the “preposterous” conjoining, but the ritual is a genuine expression of a community’s faith in nature’s power. The belief is validated when the sky darkens and “gentle raindrops fall, a steady drizzle follow, and then our backs feel the intensity of the downpour.” The story concludes with a feeling of newfound respect, as the frogs believe they have found an “acknowledgement that we can co-exist and serve one another,” (pg 13). This belief is a hopeful bridge between humanity and the natural world, a source of miracles and mutual respect.

In stark contrast, “The Mummy’s Finger” portrays belief as a harbinger of a deadly curse. The main character, Daryl, discovers a mummified finger hidden in a crate and believes he’s found a valuable historical artifact. His excitement turns to dread when he finds a scroll with a terrifying inscription that warns “those unworthy who touch this hand will trade their lives for the power of the worthy” (pg 48). This isn’t a benign folktale; it’s an active, horrifying curse. The horror escalates as the finger begins to grow, first into a hand and then into an entire arm, all while claiming the lives of those who come into contact with it. A young neighbor is killed after touching the finger, and a friend dies after a conversation about it. The belief here is not a source of hope, but a paralyzing force of fear. Daryl is haunted by the thought that this “body won’t die” and will “come back” (pg 49). He is completely powerless against it, and his discovery brings nothing but destruction and despair.

Ultimately, the two stories show two very different sides of the same coin. “Folklore of Faith” demonstrates a hopeful, life-affirming aspect of the supernatural, where belief is a collaborative act that brings positive results. The ancient ritual brings a much-needed downpour, validating the community’s trust in the world’s unseen forces. “The Mummy’s Finger,” however, reveals the darker side, where an ancient belief is a malevolent trap that consumes those who cross its path. The difference lies in the nature of the belief itself—one a sacred and respectful partnership, the other a lethal curse. Together, they form a complete picture of why humanity is drawn to the supernatural, whether in search of hope or in morbid fascination with fear.

Artists

Adam Peachey is an author from Warner Robins, Georgia, whose writing includes themes of nature, relationships, or religion. He currently attends Valdosta State University.

A. R. Tivadar is a hobby writer from Romania and a graduate of the University of Oradea. She has been published in *Alien Buddha Press*, *Motus Audax Press*, *RJC Journal*, and 17 other publications.

Anne-Marie ‘Artemis’ Jones is a mixed media artist from Christchurch, New Zealand. Her polymer clay creations have been featured several times in craft magazines, and she held a joint painting exhibition with Zenobia Southcombe in 2022 titled “Empty Vessels.” She is currently studying an art diploma.

Brittany Studer is a native of Eugene, Oregon and graduate from the University of Oregon. She has had a love for writing poetry since eighth grade. Her poetry has appeared online in *The Up & Coming Magazine*, *Writing in a Woman’s Voice*, and in miniMag issue 122.

Brooke Betten is a short story writer living in Berlin. Her work mostly reflects the intersections of religious upbringing and familial relationships.

Brooke Heldermon is a recent graduate from DePaul University and has always loved the expansive nature of poetry. Her work dives deep into the human emotion, toeing the line between confrontation and observation.

Carella Keil is a Pushcart Prize Nominated writer, Best of the Net Nominee, and the 2023 Door is a Jar Writing Award Winner in Non-fiction. She is the featured artist for the Fall 2024 Issue of *Blue Earth Review*.

Chainka was born in Ukraine and has been writing since childhood, crafting stories and poems that explore the depths of human emotion. She is known for her ability to delve deeply into themes of sadness, desperation, and resilience.

Chitra Gopalakrishnan is a writer based in New Delhi who uses her ardour for writing to break firewalls between non-fiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript, and tree-ism and capitalism.

Chris Brewster is a journalist at Colorado Blvd. Newspaper and enjoys writing stories about love.

Elisha Osorio is a business student who spends her free time writing and nerding out about reptiles.

Elias Mossa is a California-based illustration student, working to develop an artistic voice that captures the surreal and unusual.

Emma Elias is a young Australian writer of Lebanese descent. She has been writing stories, poems, and scripts for as long as she could hold a pen and has never lost her passion for it. Instagram (@e.t.writer).

Gabriel Deibel is a poet and singer-songwriter living in Los Angeles, CA. You can find his debut album *All Through The Summer* on streaming platforms now.

Irina Tall is an artist, graphic artist, and illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art and also has a Bachelor’s degree in design.

Josje Weusten (PhD) is a novelist, short story writer, and poet, as well as, a senior lecturer in literature, poetry, and creative writing at Maastricht University. For more information about her work, visit josjeweusten.co.uk

Kalvin M. Madsen is the Editor in Chief of this magazine! He’s also a fiction writer and has a book of short stories titled *Hello, Receiver* available on amazon and is currently working on his second collection. kalvinmadsen.wordpress.com

Katalina Gille is a writer who has been telling stories since before she could write and writing since she could spell. Her education is a hodgepodge of attempts to run from her identity as a storyteller.

Keira Rechsteiner is a 17 year old artist based in New York. Through her work she seeks to discover the importance of relationships and connections to human beings.

K. West is a poet, painter, and filmmaker. Her poems have been published by *Death Wish Poetry Magazine*, *Local Gems Press*, *miniMag Weekly*, *The Orpheum Collective* and *The Anti-Misogyny Club*.

Luke Madsen is a poet and fitness advocate living in Southern California. He enjoys cowboy movies and going on hikes with his dog, Daisy.

Mahaila Smith is a researcher, poet, editor, and MA student based on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg in Ottawa, Ontario. They won the 2024 John Newlove Poetry Award. You can find more of their work on their website: mahailasmith.ca.

Artists

Perla Ghabbour is a student and writer based in Toronto, Canada. She studies Life Sciences and Dramatic Arts at Queen's University. *The Man on The Train* marks her debut as a short fiction writer inspired by a lifelong love for storytelling and the true story of how her grandparents met.

PJ Carmichael is a writer, artist, dreamer, and lover living in the seaside town of Beverly, Massachusetts, USA. His writing reflects on his direct, lived experiences and has appeared in the *Boston Hassle*, *Sunstroke Magazine*, *Vagabond City*, and elsewhere.

Rebecca Agauas is a woman who lives in Michigan. She is a person living with chronic illnesses and is an advocate for the chronic illness community. She has self-published 2 books and has been published and received recognition from various literary magazines. Instagram @rebeccaagauas.

Rosella Weigand is the Executive Editor of this magazine! She's also an aspiring writer/filmmaker, Community/Featured Curator/Contributing Artist for hitRECORD, an online global art community. She resides in Fairmount, Indiana.

Follow her on X/Instagram @rosellaweigand

Sophie Van Der Put is a writer and poet from Cape Town, South Africa. Her writing has a gothic influence, and her themes often delve into grief, love, memory, borderline existences, and existentialism. She currently attends Maastricht University in the Netherlands.

Taylor Schmidt is someone who writes multifaceted studies of the Midwest that are strange, unsettling, and more real than true. When not writing, Taylor spends their time amassing the sorts of hobbies grandparents enjoy and drinking copious amounts of tea.

Tucker Joneson is an artist, writer, animator, and creator of the horror anthology, *Thirteen Tales of Terror* and the children's book *The Soldier Bear*.

Valerie Sabrina Carrasco is a Los Angeles-based Mexican American writer and is a senior editor of this magazine. "To anyone who has ever struggled to put their feelings into words, I hope these poems speak to you."

Vague Animal is a visual artist from California, who is also the official visual artist of LHF.

Vojta Pavrovsky is a public health student at Maastricht University and is currently beginning to explore creative writing.

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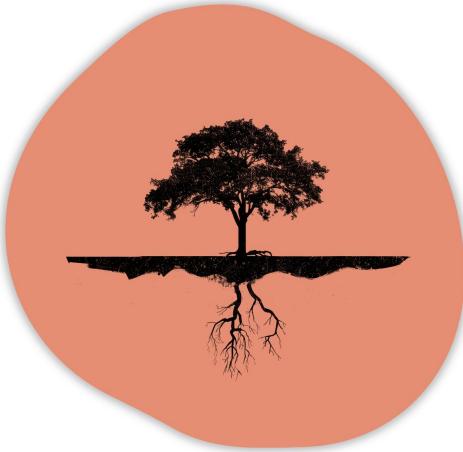
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The African Queen

Whole Bean Coffee

Country of Origin	Roast Date & Batch No.	
Rwanda - Gashura		
Taste Notes	Roast Type	Roaster
Strawberry Jam, Cream, Vanilla	Light / Medium / Natural	

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REBEL WITHOUT A COFFEE

Madsen Roast

Whole Bean Coffee

Country of Origin	Roast Date & Batch No.	
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Taste Notes	Roast Type	Roaster
Cocoa, Brown Sugar, Dried Cranberry	Medium	

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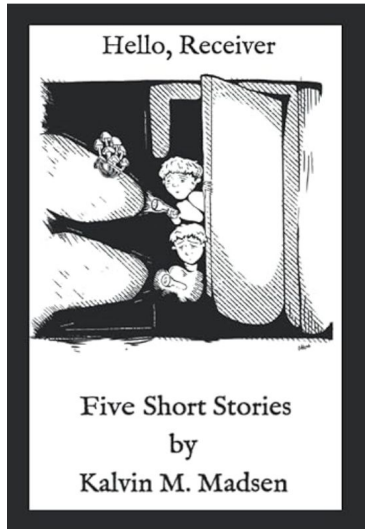


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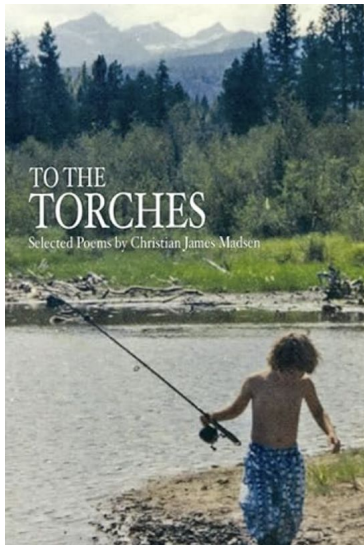
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Hello, Receiver is the first standalone printing of Calvin M. Madsen's writing, featuring five short stories. Read the rise and fall of an underground city called Den Three, or of a mysterious, abandoned ship named Moxie that is taken in by a small coastal town. From a child in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, to a garbage collector in Montana who is cornered into violence, Madsen guides readers through extreme and sometimes absurd examples of the human experience.



To The Torches is a collection of poetry that Christian James Madsen has written over the past 10 years. It is available now on amazon.

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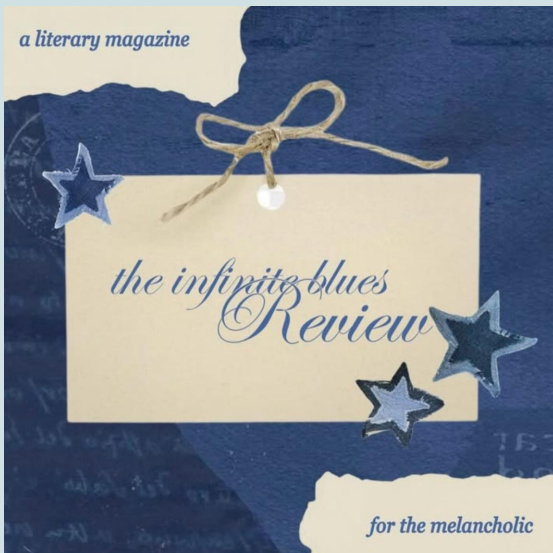
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The Infinite Blues Review
(est. May 2024)



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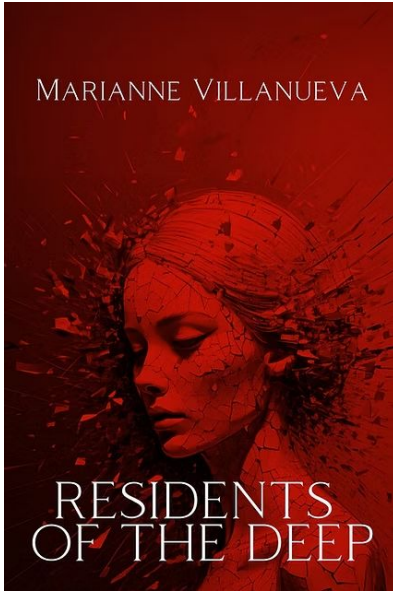
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The Infinite Blues Review would like you to take a moment and consider donating to the Muwekma Ohlone tribe or visiting their website to learn more about the lives of California Indigenous people.

More info:
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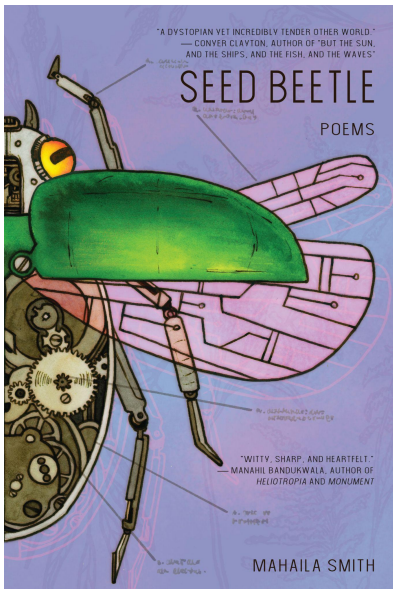


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Marianne Villanueva's “Residents of the Deep” Set to Release August 2025

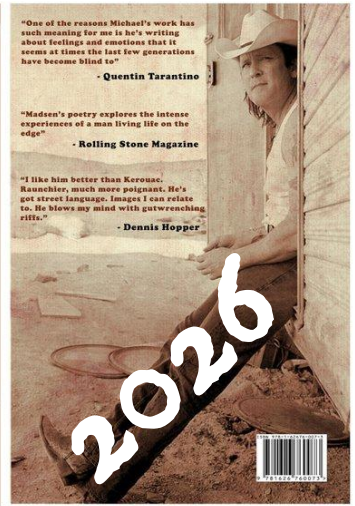
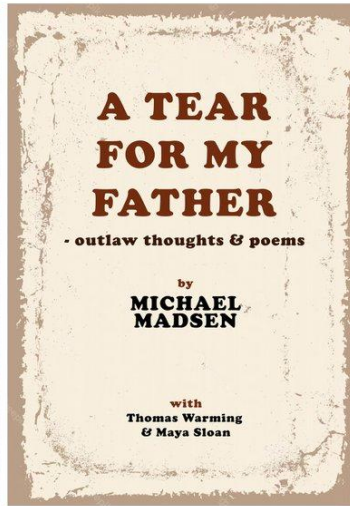
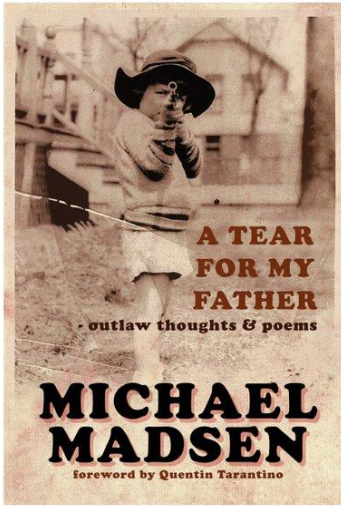
Acclaimed author Marianne Villanueva is set to release her latest collection, *Residents of the Deep: Stories*, this August through Unsolicited Press, based in Portland, Oregon. In this compelling new collection, Villanueva delves into the depths of human resilience through a series of powerful and thought-provoking stories.



Mahaila Smith’s “Seed Beetle” Available Now!

What happens when the promise of a technological utopia reveals its hidden risks? This is the question at the heart of *Seed Beetle*, the powerful debut full-length collection from Ottawa-based writer Mahaila Smith (any pronouns), which was released on May 15 from Stelliform Press.

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Thank you!

