

Issue Seven
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Angel City Review



Foreword

Welcome, and welcome back, dear readers.

Thank you for making time in your day to join us at Angel City Review. I mean that in all sincerity and with every bit of gratitude I am capable of, because quite frankly I find it amazing that any of us has time for anything. We are stretched to the bone by the demands of a system that doesn't have our best interests at heart. We are still, even in this supposedly progressive era, told that our art doesn't matter and that we, by extension, don't matter. We are threatened into competition, told to view each other as rivals and threats rather than friends and allies. Those of us that haven't "made it" yet, whatever that actually means, face constant pressure from within and without, an insidious, treacherous questioning of whether or not what we aim to do is worthy of the effort. Those of us that have "made it" (still not sure what that means) often still have to wring every drop of blood and sweat we can to stay afloat, only to endure a barrage of harassment and temptation to betray ourselves.

You are worth it, readers. Your work is worth it. Every book, every story, every poem, every line, every word. The ones you publish, the ones you throw away, the ones that have been saved in that obscure folder on your hard drive, the ones from that diary you haven't opened in more than a decade.

I know many of us will react to that idea with some trepidation, either because we are trained to disdain positivity, or because positivity is so often now a tool of deception, or because we are sick of hearing empty platitudes. But it is the truth. Everything you have ever written has contributed and is contributing to your development as a writer and as an empathic human being. So long as you are making the attempt to grow, you are growing. Improving. Shaping something beautiful.

You are going to read a great many beautiful pieces of literature as you go through this issue, pieces that were made by humans with the same self-doubts and bombarded by the same nonsense day in and day out as you. And those humans are going to know that you have given some of your invaluable time to helping them grow.

The surest way out of the mess we find ourselves in is solidarity. Those that exploit us, those that seek to dehumanize us, they know that in order to win they must turn us on ourselves – they must blind us to the power of empathy and genuine respect. Even an act as simple as reading, experiencing an artist's work and acknowledging the humanity behind it, is an act of defiance. So read. Defy. Reach out and tell those artists whose work connects with you that such a connection exists. Help each other to see just how many of us there are, that we will never be alone.

Featured Artist

DAN CASSIDY



Well Lit Paint is an exploration of abstraction through a combination of control and happenstance. As a photographer I have been trying to photograph abstraction out in the world. As a painter I have been trying to capture abstraction on the canvas. One day I looked at my paint palette and realized that the abstraction I had been looking for was under my nose all the time. I started taking macro photographs of the paints capturing the miniscule landscapes within. As I have spent more time developing the project, over 1,000 images and still going strong, the work has been less about photographing paint and more about photographs as paintings. Each Well Lit Paint image is approximately one square inch of the canvas. Mixing, photographing, remixing, photographing, editing on Photoshop, I develop the image. Each image is a slice of time and no longer exists on the canvas, which usually looks like a muddy mess by the end of the process. I create chaos and explore the beauty within.

Angel City Review Issue 7 2018

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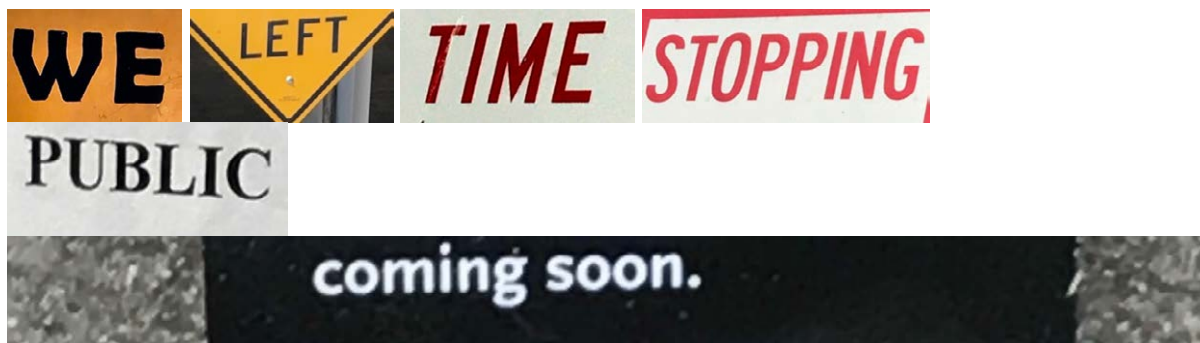
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FIGUEROA

BY BRENT ARMENDINGER



Here FORMER SITE OF HARM
Reside FAR IN DESIGNATED Repair

AMERICAN PROPERTY MASTERS
Buy, Sell & SECURITY SYSTEMS trance
CALIFORNIA CONTRA
the House of FIGUEROA

SURVEILLANCE SHOWERS Any person
AVAILABLE

MIST weighs more than FIRE

TRESPASSERS RECOVER FIRE
THE EPIC last collection

Brent Armendinger was born in Warsaw, NY, and studied at Bard College and the University of Michigan, where he received an Avery Hopwood Award in Poetry. He is the author of *The Ghost in Us Was Multiplying* (Noemi Press, 2015), a finalist for the California Book Award in Poetry, and two chapbooks, *Undetectable* (New Michigan Press, 2009) and *Archipelago* (Noemi Press, 2009). In 2019, The Operating System will publish *Street Gloss*, a book of experimental translations, featuring the work of Alejandro Méndez, Mercedes Roffé, Fabián Casas, Néstor Perlongher, and Diana Bellessi. His poems and translations have appeared in many journals, including *Anomaly*, *Asymptote*, *Aufgabe*, *Bloom*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Ghost Proposal*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *LIT*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Volt*, and *Web Conjunctions*. He is a recipient of residencies and fellowships from the Blue Mountain Center, Headlands Center for the Arts, and Squaw Valley Community of Writers. Brent teaches creative writing at Pitzer College and lives in Los Angeles, where he is an active member of the L.A. Tenants Union.

Crybaby Bridge Songs

BY SETH COPELAND

I resonate with midnight,
the hour of raids

—Sy Hoahwah

I. I RESONATE

Stone silent we've been here_half an hour/By now I can point to
my truck's hulking shadow just up the hill/
In pastures on either roadside
Skeletal mesquite reach up through darkness
like diseased claws. Nestor and I stopped first
at the Mission churchyard_we prayed

at the nameless boy's stone. :there's no bones here: Nestor says
:i don't feel me coming apart :/We slung roostergut
over some stripping elm_parked a safe distance
away_walked to the bridge_waited_wait.
Moon in cloudveil/If some shriek does
careen up at us from that f_cking bridge

_I pray Jesu Mersey I don't shit myself/bless us always/
I look at my phone. 11_45 pm/Not yet/Leaning on a
Weight Limit sign_Nestor's menthol nimbus peppers night/
No locust sing cracked bells for us_this High
Plains summer night humid with death/I look toward the truck/
Bluestreaks shove it to shadow beyond me_____

III. THE HOUR OF RAIDS

Witching hour arrives_a cross old woman/
Nestor stands erect as lust_hair slickt& willow dancing_
high plains Rimbaud/A cicada screech
jags the night_somewhere I can't shake from fear in
our hearts/Up ahead with rumble_a star splits into orbs
 hacks up skunk smoke : a n c i e n t h e l l i n r u t/

Nestor is brave/opens his arms to catch his spent half/
I stand by useless and still/Headlights &we are blue cream
Nestor roars :give me back my lost name_
give it you b:/Horn goes DPHNNNNNNK/
tatters of hag &ectoplasm money shot this macabre_uterio jellyfish
swimming the fevery south sky/

He&I watch_we hoot_we :ohfukfukfukdude:/
the truck cuts the edge of the bridge_cool burns
us in LED flume_&then Nestor is powerful medicine
He silhouettes& we angle to eye contact/
I see a wraith of raw god_then I see its memory/
Lights cut/Locust silence/We only breathe/

Seth Copeland lives, studies, and teaches in the Oklahoma City metro. His work has recently appeared in Mud Season Review, pioneertown, San Pedro River Review, Streetlight Press, and Otoliths, among others. He edits petrichor, and New Plains Review.

Wernicke's Kiss

BY MEGAN OLSEN

Aphasia caused by a lesion in Wernicke's area of the brain, characterized by grammatical but more or less meaningless speech

I from here to straight,
plump, connecting lips
with break, then relate
and elevate toothen to heat. Dip

in unpuddle. But not new,
just back into we-me, meeting
buds touching sun, through
collected bounces in wet sheathing.

If not garbled, then not stop.
You know more that I not
stop it off. But the spot
where I lip-grip seems us hot.

Yes, rise to roof and wet solid peak.
In lashes of fragments bashing unique.

Megan Olsen's stories and poetry have appeared in *Collision Literary Review*, *The Rectangle*, *Sink Hollow*, and *Metaphor*. She received a BA in English at Weber State University and is currently pursuing an MFA at Warren Wilson College. She dedicates all her creative energy (and spare time) to writing and tricking her daughter into eating anything but peanut butter. Megan lives with her munchkin and four cats in Ogden, UT.

A Dream of Time & Silence

BY CHRIS MURAVEZ

-after Elizabeth Bishop

-after Marosa di Giorgio

It is the time of the Great Anxiety.

On the white table a cup filled with lye, a pot of flowers, weed cookies.

You said the story isn't finished.

I said - What story? Nothing is on fire, so why do we feel the flames?

I could pour the lye on my skin, make myself leather.

The air left the room when you walked in, an abysmal feeling like finitude or grass clippings.

You asked about my hangover, if I was feeling ok.

I am not.

I asked you where the letters to your father were.

Buried, you said without emotion.

The sun became an orange cube of light and, during its eclipse,

the one that tore the ozone in half,

visions of slaughter entered the minds of every person staring,

only to be

forgotten.

I've spilt tea on the vinyl sofa. I am awake.

Chris Muravez teaches at Diablo Valley College in the San Francisco Bay Area. He earned his MFA from the University of Notre Dame, and is a veteran of the U.S. Army. His writing can be found in *Deluge*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Flapperhouse*, & *Heavy Feather Review*. His epitaph will read “Here lies Chris. Go away.”



Cardinal

BY TANNER LEE

a bird breaks its beak into beer glass
leaving a small mark

the cardinal, like the inside of your mouth,
is dark and red, trembling at each
shy granting and withdrawal

we lie in a field, two bottles unlocked
sing, darkling,
take over with nothing around

we tread two ripples of
breath and skin

tonight our bodies hum
tonight they sing and throw

Tanner Lee lives in Ogden, Utah. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hobart*, *West Trade Review*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *The Comstock Review*, and *Entropy Mag*. Find him on twitter @hey-tannerlee

White Gloves

BY CATHY BEAUDOIN

To get to her weekly ballroom dance lesson, Jenna walked the five blocks between her downtown Philadelphia apartment and the dance studio. She was adept at tapping her white cane back and forth to avoid curbs and other obstacles. When she came to an intersection she stopped, turned her head, saw nothing but blurry pockets of light, and listened for cars. Hearing none, she crossed. When Jenna came to the only stoop on the fifth block, she maneuvered around it and felt for a metal door handle. Finding it, she fingered the buzzer on the wall. *Zzzzt*. The door clicked, she pulled it open and stepped inside the place she once described to friends as a classier version of an escort service.

Jenna heard a chair rolling around behind the reception desk, “Who’s there?”

“Hi Jenna, it’s Danica.” Jenna smiled. Danica was the gum-snapping receptionist who kept the studio in order. If anyone needed anything, she was the one to go to. Danica wanted to be a dance instructor but couldn’t afford the training. Determined to hold on to the dream, she worked and saved. Jenna respected her for that.

How’d your day go?” Danica asked.

Jenna groaned. “Typical day in the life of a Ph.D. student. Tedious. But I’m here now. Marty around?”

“He’s upstairs. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Jenna folded her cane and laid it on the coffee table. She slid a backpack off her shoulders and cringed as she took a seat on a sticky, fake-leather couch that smelled like sweat and dirty laundry. She grabbed a set of beige-colored satin dance shoes from her pack. Jenna, who wore white socks and sneakers over her nylons, was still getting used to the closed-toe shoes with a kitten heel. But she liked them better than the cheap, black, bulky ones she started with.

After prodding from a friend, she’d cold-called the studio and booked a free, introductory lesson. Her interest was in the International Standard and American Smooth dances, which she preferred over the Latin dances. She was too embarrassed by the thirty pounds of excess fat she carried around her belly and hips to feel like doing the hip gyrating, sexy Latin steps. No four-inch stiletto spikes waiting underneath her bed. She ran her fingers along the soft, felt lining on the soles of her shoes and imagined herself gliding across the dance floor in an elegant gown, her partner in black tails. She took off her socks and sneakers and checked to see if her toenails poked any holes in her nylons on the walk over. None found, she slid the shoes on, stood, and centered the only skirt she owned. Then she sat back down and waited.

Her mind reverted to doctoral research mode. In the early stages of developing her dissertation topic, she kept thinking about one of life’s most basic questions: Why are some people likely to engage in morally questionable activities while others are not? Jenna was particularly interested in why some accountants willingly misstated their company’s earnings while others didn’t. Everyone thinks it’s about getting a bigger bonus. But she suspected there was more to it. After all, people resisted all kinds of temptations. Though deep in thought, Jenna heard someone coming down the steps.

“Hey Marty, is that you?” They exchanged niceties but Jenna quickly dispensed with the small talk. “You ready for my lesson?”

“Yeah, come on girlfriend.” She wasn’t his girlfriend but liked it when he called her that. Marty led her to the corner of the dance floor where the sound system was set up. She strained to see his blurry body. He was three to four inches taller than she was, had wide shoulders, and was slim. She didn’t attract guys like him, and in any other setting she doubted he’d acknowledge her.

He suggested they warm up with a Waltz.

“Sure. How about Three Times a Lady.” Jenna enjoyed ballroom dance music, including the old-time jazz standards and big band orchestra compositions. It buffered the stress of navigating her way through the doctoral program. Desperate to carve out a life outside the university, dancing with Marty filled a void. Once the music started, they walked to the opposite end of the room, out of the way of anyone else coming in for a lesson. Though the studio was small and offered little privacy, the dance floor could easily accommodate four couples. Like the beginning of any other lesson, the two stood facing each other. She relished the familiar smell of coffee on his breath, and was relieved she squirted some perfume on herself before she left for the lesson.

“How was your day?” he asked.

The question felt like a warm hug. “Same old, same old.”

Since she lost her vision a couple of years earlier, Jenna got good at directing her eyes to the spot where sound came out of a person’s mouth. Anyone watching would swear she was fondly looking into Marty’s eyes. She moved in closer, and though it crossed her mind, she did not touch him there. He moved in closer. Her left hand rested on his right shoulder blade. She felt the crispness of his starched broadcloth shirt, and sensed there was no undershirt beneath it. Her left arm, and elsewhere, tingled. She hadn’t felt stirred like this in a long time. Indicating she was ready to dance, Jenna raised her right hand up and away from her body. Marty responded, putting one set of fingers on her waist. With the opposite hand, he took hers in his. His fingers were warm, and the palm sweaty. They stood together for another couple of seconds, feeling for the beat of the music. ONE, two, three, ONE, two, three.

“Ready?” and without waiting Marty took his first step. She followed, left foot forward, right foot forward, then right foot to the right. Clunky, Jenna thought unaware her shoulders bowed forward and her jaw still clenched the day’s stress. He whispered, “Head back. Shoulders back.”

She dropped her shoulders away from her ears, arched her back, and lifted her chin towards the ceiling.

“That’s better.”

She smiled at his approval. Her right foot moved back, left foot followed making the requisite shift to the left. Her right foot slid over, and for a moment her two feet found themselves together again. Better, she thought. ONCE, twice, three times a lady...she wanted to touch his chin with her fingertips, to kiss him, to let herself be with someone again.

Good god woman, she scolded herself. This is a dance lesson. You’re paying for this. You’re nothing but an unattractive fat woman to him. She took a breath, and attended to her foot placement.

“Reading any good books these days?” she asked during a pause to regroup. He touched her chin with his fingers. She didn’t see it coming and instinctively jerked her head away.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.” He persisted, applying just enough pressure to put her head in the proper position. “There we go. Hum, books. Well I just finished *The Thin Red Line* by James Jones.”

“What was that about?”

“Mostly about how men deal with the reality of war.”

It wasn't just about touch. Jenna enjoyed talking to Marty. He was a smart one, college educated, dance instructor, owner of several commercial properties in the area, and a local boy. He also talked a bit too much about his mother, and had no interest in Jenna outside of the dance studio. She knew this, and thought about the possibilities anyway. Zzzzt. The door clicked, then opened.

"Hi Bobby," Danica called out.

"Who's Bobby?" Jenna asked, "A new customer?"

"Bobby? No, he's been around for a while." ONE, two, three, ONE, two, three.

"Huh, wonder why I've never heard of him." Her posture started to fall apart.

"You came in later than usual today. He only comes for the 8:00 PM time slot because he works over an hour away." The song ended.

"What's he do?"

"Chemical engineer. In Jersey. What do you say, back to your lesson?" He showed her how to hold her right leg in the proper position, and spun her around one full rotation.

"Whoa. That makes me dizzy." Marty placed his hands on her shoulders.

"It's okay, you just need to get used to the motion." He gave her a half a minute to get her equilibrium back and spun her again. After working on the new move, her foot work, and maintaining her posture, Jenna asked, "Can we work on our showcase routine?"

"Sure, let me introduce you to Bobby first." He called across the dance floor, "Hey Bobby, I want you to meet Jenna. Jenna meet Bobby."

A soft, male voice greeted her. "Hi Jenna, nice to meet you."

Sucking her stomach in, Jenna thought about the snacks she ate while sitting at her desk all afternoon. Ashamed of herself, she choked out, "Yeah, same here."

She followed Marty to the stereo system.

"Giving the guy the brush off already?"

"Look at me. I know what I look like. Ass as wide as a tractor-trailer is long, belly so big you can't even see my waistline. He's just being nice."

"I wish you'd give yourself more credit." She turned away from him.

Marty called over to Bobby's instructor, "Okay if we change to the Viennese Waltz?"

"Sure. We just need to switch to Foxtrot in about ten minutes."

The music started, and Marty and Jenna proceeded to position themselves at opposite ends of the dance floor. She looked, but couldn't see him. He was supposed to meet her halfway. She listened to the music and, on the appropriate beat, danced forward. Be there for me, she thought. And right on cue, he was there, took her in his hold, and guided her around the outer edges of the dance floor. Jenna felt Marty showing her off.

"You trying to impress Booby, or something?"

"It's the guy's job to make the girl shine." As they danced past Bobby and his instructor, Jenna overheard their conversation.

"Wow, she's pretty good."

"Yeah, but they've been practicing that routine for weeks. They're gonna perform it at the showcase next month."

"What do you know about her?"

"Well, she's a doctoral student, and has been taking dance lessons for the past six or eight months. I don't think she has a partner, at least I've never seen her with anyone."

“Interesting.”

“She’s a sharp one. Doesn’t take any B.S. from anyone. And...she’s blind.”

“Blind? Blind?” After a pause he bemoaned, “Why can’t I ever meet a woman who’s just... well...normal?”

Normal, Jenna repeated under her breath. Who do you ever meet that’s normal? She wished he’d never come in. As the end of the lesson neared, Marty yelled over to Bobby, “Hey Bobby, why don’t you dance the Foxtrot with Jenna? She’s more than capable.”

“No, no that’s okay,” Jenna blurted out. “Oh, I mean, I didn’t mean to insult you. It’s not that.” Her face flushed with embarrassment.

“Come here Bobby, this’ll be good for both of you. You need to practice with someone besides your instructor.”

“But she can’t...I mean...how will she know...oh geez, I guess.”

“Don’t worry, if you lead, she’ll follow.” Marty’s encouragement settled them both. Bobby stepped up to Jenna. She thought he smelled like soap. Then Bobby took her hand in his. She felt cloth, and jerked her hand away from his, “What’s that?”

“What do you mean, it’s a glove.”

“Sorry, it just surprised me.” Then Jenna laughed out loud. “A glove, you’re really wearing a glove?”

“Well, actually, a pair of gloves. Eddington’s Waiter’s Butler gloves if you want to be precise.” He took a deep breath, “A hundred percent cotton. Hard to find these days. I, uh,” he hesitated as if searching for a way out, and then continued, “don’t like to sweat on people.”

Oh, no, Jenna thought. A germaphobe. Was he obsessive compulsive about touching anything with germs? Did he have to constantly wash his hands? How does he manage to have sex with anyone?

“I kind of don’t like to touch people,” he said in his soft way. “I sweat more than normal, and it kind of bugs me.” After another pause he filled the silent space, “I kind of always thought my sweat repulsed others, you know, made them wash after coming in to contact with me.”

“Okay,” she said, resisting the urge to point out he’s hardly normal. “A guy with gloves it is.”

The two stood facing each other. Jenna sensed he was slightly shorter than her, and a good twenty pounds lighter. She felt her girth, and the wall it created between her and the rest of the world. She was embarrassed to step forward. I’d crush this guy in bed, she thought. He took the initiative, and grabbed her right hand with his. He let his left hand hover around her hip. She figured he was the one repulsed by her. Still, she was committed. She felt for his shoulder blade, lightly rested her hand on it, and squared her body into a boxy dance position. Bobby took his first step and Jenna heard him whisper the beat, “Slow. Slow. Quick. Quick. Slow. Slow. Quick. Quick.”

She felt the stiffness with which he held himself, and her.

“I hope I’m not sweating on you.”

“No, not at all.” Then she realized the area around his shoulder blade was damp. It didn’t bother her. She thought everyone worked up a sweat when they danced. His lead became more controlled, and she concentrated on following his movement. He was much more delicate with her compared to Marty. Two and a half minutes passed, and the song ended.

“Well done you two,” Marty clapped. “Well done.”

“Thank you for the dance,” Jenna said as they stepped back from each other. When Marty started to guide Jenna off the dance floor, Bobby called out to her, “Hey Jenna, I hope we get to dance

again next week. I always wash the gloves.”

Jenna flushed again. “I have to see what Marty’s schedule’s like. If I’m here, I’ll take you up on it,” and then, to create some distance, added “Bobby White Gloves.”

Marty guided Jenna to the reception area. “What do you mean, I have to see what Marty’s schedule is? The dude is totally interested in you, and you’re giving him the brush off?”

“He’s just being nice.”

“No. Bobby doesn’t dance with anyone except his instructor. And believe me, other women have asked him.” Jenna ignored him and turned toward Danica, who was tapping away on her computer keyboard.

“6:30 PM next week, like usual?”

“Nope, Marty has a new client, and she booked the 6:30 PM slot for the next month. I have the 8:00 PM open. You wanna do that again?”

“I guess. Thanks.”

At the beginning of her next lesson, Jenna listened for Bobby. He never showed up. “Hey Danica, no Bobby tonight?”

“No, he canceled earlier in the week.”

Jenna’s disappointment surprised her. Like a teenager, her head filled with self-doubt. Maybe he’s trying to avoid me. Jenna couldn’t imagine ever going out with him anyway. She calculated in years how long it had been since anyone asked her out. Yikes, she caught herself. A dance is not a date.

“Hello,” Marty interjected. “Did you hear me? Are you ready to get back to your lesson?”

“Yes, I’m ready.” She stood in front of Marty, and decided to go all in. “You’d never go out with a fat chick like me, would you?”

“What? A guy with a high hairline, and big floppy ears? That’s what you want?”

“You know I like you.” Her courage came from the fact that she knew he’d never bite. Her friends had warned her. He was only being nice because it was his job. She wasn’t naïve to the optics. She spent a lot of money to dance with Marty. But she also knew how much she needed the lessons, the conversation, the touching. It was worth it, even if Marty had his flaws.

“I know I have no chance. I heard you only like the young, pretty ones anyway.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” There was a slight crack in his voice and she sensed she hit a nerve.

“Yeah, right.” Once, over cocktails with some of the other women who take lessons at the studio, she heard them talking about his infidelity. They said he’d had an affair with a young, married client. Apparently, it was a real scandal. Jenna struggled with the idea that Marty was a cheater. She wanted to ignore what was likely his truth.

“Let’s just practice your routine.” He cued up the appropriate Viennese Waltz, and the two proceeded to their starting positions. Jenna took a deep breath in, danced to the middle of the room, and once contact was made, began to glide across the room. Chin up, shoulders back, the two connected at the hip. One, TWO, three. One, TWO, three. Unlike the regular waltz, the emphasis here was on the second beat, making the mood more romantic. It made Jenna feel more like a woman than she had in a long time. She knew she was willing to ignore his character flaw, and a wave of guilt

overwhelmed her. This is how people's ethics get compromised, she thought. Emotions turn once black and white values to a malleable gray.

He called out, "Ready for the turn." She turned and danced with her back to him. She reminded herself she was a fat, blind woman, and needed to come to terms with the fact that Marty wasn't interested in that package. When her lesson was over, she took the 8:00 PM time slot for the following week.

Jenna was in a playful mood at her next lesson. When she and Marty stood facing each other for their first dance, Jenna moved in close. Instead of leaning back and away in the proper dance posture, she stood with her thigh positioned between Marty's legs. She wiggled her knee, the one underneath his crotch.

He knew the game well. "Don't you dare," he asserted.

"Hah, you know I could if I wanted to."

"Not funny," he said as he laughed with her. Zzzzt. The door opened.

Marty yelled across the room, "Hey Bobby, just in time. You gonna dance with my girl again tonight?"

"Yes sir. Brought in a set of brand new, crisp, white gloves just like I said I would." Both Bobby and Jenna did some warm up dances with their instructors. Then Bobby took charge. "Jenna, you ready to dance with me?"

"Yes, she is," Marty answered.

"Sure, pawn me off." The words cushioned her feelings of rejection. Hearing Bobby walk towards her, she guiltily took inventory of the junk she'd eaten in the last three days alone. Chocolate covered pretzels, potato chips, cupcakes, burgers, and fries. As she turned toward Bobby's voice, she vowed to get a grip on her eating habits.

Bobby walked up to Jenna, and with his hand took her fingers into the palm of the glove. He moved in towards her and put his right hand firmly on her back. Fresh, Jenna thought, the glove feels fresh.

"I'm glad you're here," he whispered as Marty cued up a Foxtrot for them. Slow. Slow. Quick. Quick. The two processed the beat of the music.

"Ready?" Bobby asked, his voice barely loud enough for her to hear.

"Yes." It occurred to Jenna she really might be ready.

Though his hold was still lighter than Marty's, he seemed more confident leading Jenna around the dance floor. He learned quickly she was attentive enough to follow him. She relaxed, and held her posture firm. He rose on his toes, and squared off his own dance position. Ninety seconds later, it was over.

"Another dance? Maybe a Waltz?"

"I don't know."

"I'm just asking for a dance. But I do find you interesting. Different from other women. In a good way."

Sweat stains started to form under Jenna's armpits. She noticed an uptick in her heartbeat. Marty cued up a Waltz. ONE, two, three, ONE, two, three. Bobby stepped forward and she let him

take her away. When the lesson was over, Jenna unexpectedly agreed to head upstairs with Bobby for the weekly social dance held by the studio.

Jenna asked Marty, "You heading upstairs?"

"I'll probably make my way up there eventually."

Bobby grabbed Jenna's elbow, then her backpack, and the two walked up the front stairs to the private club with a full bar. He laid her pack in a corner. Jenna had been to a couple of dances before, to get extra time with Marty. So she knew the layout of the tight space. When she felt Bobby's hand on her back, she stiffened.

"Hey, you out there?"

"Yes. I'm here. Just hard to hear in this space." She used the back of her hand to wipe some sweat from her forehead.

"You want a drink?"

"Water with lemon would be great." Jenna didn't drink at these events. She knew she'd drink too much, too fast to quell her nerves. One of the dance instructors cued up the first song, a cha cha, and the crowd started to pair off. Forward, forward, forward. Back, back, back. Cha, cha, cha. Cha, cha, cha. Jenna couldn't hide the horror on her face.

"Don't worry. I don't do salsa...unless there's Tequila involved." Bobby put the glass on down on the table. "The water is to your left."

The next song was a Waltz. Having taken his gloves off at the bar, Bobby started snapping them against the palm of his hand. "Time to put these babies back on."

Protected by cotton, he took her hand in his, and led her to the dance floor. Jenna listened for Marty's voice. She thought she heard him talking and laughing with one of the other regulars. Must have come up the back stairs, she thought.

"I'm ready if you're ready," Bobby called out. She smiled and tried to relax. From the start, they fell into the appropriate foot work. Jenna leaned away from Bobby, but did not drop her head back. Bobby talked to her as he danced, and she found herself wanting the conversation.

"I hear you're a graduate student. What're you studying?"

"Accounting. I'm getting my doctorate in Accounting." She sensed a snicker but wasn't offended. It was how most people reacted.

"Accounting? Why accounting?"

"I was an accountant when I could see. Once I realized I was going blind, I decided to teach. But I wanted to get paid well and the only way to do that was to get a doctorate." She decided to leave it at that, in case Bobby was just being polite.

"Tell me more."

"Well, I followed the usual career path. One of the big international accounting firms to start. I was in the tax department, specializing in financial institutions. Then I went to a client to get financial reporting experience. My next job was at a Fortune 500 company. I thought I'd finally made it, high ranking officer in the company, big salary, the works. That's when I realized I was going blind."

"Ouch. That had to be tough to deal with."

"Yeah, it was. What about you?"

"I'm a chemical engineer. I've been working for the same oil company since I got out of college. Right now, I'm head of compliance."

"Ensuring good behavior in an oil company? You must have your hands full." Her posture

started to break down.

“That’s an understatement. Something’s always going on there. Because of the job, I don’t get out much.” Then, after a pause, he added, “My shrink got me dancing because of the whole fear about touching people.”

“Is it working?”

“Hum, good question...”

“I can’t see and you can’t touch – what does that make us?”

“I don’t know, maybe good for each other?”

Jenna felt the confidence she’d had at work come back to her. Could it be? Was he really interested in her? She felt her fat belly stuffed inside her nylons, and knew she wanted to stop building barriers. They continued to waltz around the room.

“Hey Marty,” Jenna yelled across the dance floor, “we gonna dance tonight?”

“Okay, I won’t take that personally.”

“Oh, oh, I really didn’t mean to...”

“Maybe I need more than white gloves.” He paused. “Hey Jenna, I saw you practice your showcase routine with Marty. You guys look great together.”

“Thanks. I love dancing to that song. It makes me feel like I can see again.”

“Ummm. I was wondering, would you consider, I mean, I’d come in every night to practice. I was wondering if you wanted to do that dance with me?”

Jenna dropped her head towards her feet.

“Oh, hey, I’m sorry. I need to mind my own business.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry. I’m flattered. Really. It’s just that, well, I’ve been looking forward to dancing with Marty for months.”

“Foxtrot baby,” Marty yelled over to Bobby. “It’s time for you two to shine.”

Instinctively, Bobby and Jenna came together at the hip, and took off in the same direction as the rest of the crowd.

“I enjoy dancing with you,” Bobby said to her.

“I enjoy dancing with you too.”

When the dance was over, he placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her back to the bar area.

“Jenna, I really want to do that dance with you at the showcase.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Marty interrupted. “How you two kids doin’?”

“I was just telling Jenna how I wanted to do the showcase dance with her.”

“I think that’s a GREAT idea,” Marty said as one of the female customers came to pull him away. “The two of you are going to need to start practicing together next week.”

After a few more dances, Jenna announced it was time for her to head home. “I turn into a pumpkin if I’m out past 10:30 PM.”

“Yeah, I have a long drive. Can I walk you out?”

“Sure.” Once they were out on the sidewalk, they parted ways. Jenna felt a pang of excitement and resisted the urge to stop for a Philly cheesesteak. When she got home, she tried to pluck her eyebrows.

Jenna entered the classic, three-story, red brick building on Main Street, where the showcase event was being held. She recalled the instructions Marty gave her: the ballroom was on the second-floor, the dressing room was on the right side of the dance floor. Tap, slap, tap, slap. Her cane hit each stair as she made her way up the stairwell. At the top of the rise she followed the hallway to the right and heard voices.

“HI Jenna.” It was Danica. “Over this way. I’ll show you to the women’s changing area. You ready to dance with Bobby tonight?”

“I guess.”

“You’ll be fine. You two look great together.” They entered the ladies changing area. It was crowded, loud, and stank from too many perfumes sprayed too liberally. Jenna wanted to gag.

“Who’s got the hair dryer next?” an anxious voice called out.

“Does anyone have any rouge they can lend me?” asked another.

Crap thought Jenna, I didn’t plan on makeup. She did her normal wash and air dry with her hair, but used hairspray to keep it from curling up over her ears. The gown was her one concession. She had it tailored before she met Bobby, and now it was a little loose. Since she started dancing with him six weeks ago, she’d lost six pounds. The gown was maroon, and had hundreds of sequin stones sewn into it. And it had long silk pieces that hung from the arms and will twirl in the air when she spins on the dance floor.

“Jenna, here’s a chair for you. You can put your stuff on it.”

“Thanks Danica, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Jenna groped for the chair. When she found it, she turned and plopped herself down. She placed the gown on the floor and took her backpack off.

“I should be good. Do we just wait here until our name is called?”

“Yeah, I’ll get you lined up when it’s time for you to dance.”

Jenna pulled her shoes out of her bag. She thought about Bobby, wondering what he looked like in black tails. She giggled at the thought of his white shirt. She knew the men bought dance shirts that were like onesies. That’s why the shirts stayed in place when the men danced. Hoping no one was looking, Jenna took her jeans off, pulled her nylons on, and stepped into her gown. She removed her polo shirt and put her arms in the sleeves of her dress. One of the other girls offered to zip her up. When the girl suggested she’d help with make-up, Jenna winced. But she let her apply generous amounts of rouge, blush, and lipstick. In what seemed like mere minutes, Danica was calling out names. Jenna and Bobby were the fourth pair in the first set. Danica grabbed Jenna’s elbow and led her to the waiting area, off to the side of the dance floor, behind a partition. From there Bobby took over and guided her to a spot against the wall. Jenna’s heart sank when she felt his hands covered in cotton. He’d been talking about not wearing the gloves for this dance. He thought he was ready.

Feeling the cloth made her anxious. “You’re going to be there, in the middle of the floor, right? I don’t want to look stupid.”

“Yes, you can trust me. I’ll be there.”

“What if I screw up?”

“I’ll adjust. Don’t worry. No matter what happens, just keep following my lead, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Jenna heard Danica call them to the dance floor. She went to her spot, and looked directly across the floor. She couldn't see him. She felt her heart pounding. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She waited for the music to start. One, TWO, three. One, TWO, three. They agreed to move forward after the fourth bar. On cue, Jenna danced towards the middle of the floor. On the appropriate step, Jenna put her right hand out.

I'm right here," Bobby whispered. "Ready?"

"I'm ready." He took her hand in his. His fingers were warm, and the palm sweaty. She smiled dropped her shoulders away from her ears, pointed her chin towards the ceiling, and followed his lead.

Cathy Beaudoin currently lives in San Luis Obispo, California. Her fiction stories have appeared in Freshwater, Literary Yard, and Scarlet Leaf Review. Her nonfiction work has been published in Five on the Fifth and Kind Magazine. Additional writing about her life as a blind woman can be found at mymindisnotblind.com.



This Time

BY STEVE CHANG



It's a sunny afternoon

Here's an old white-haired drunk on the steps of the local school uniform shop. He's muttering at the ₩1000 bills scattered at his feet.

You pick them up, as if gathering lost scraps of his mind, and push the fold into his shirt pocket.

"Be careful," you say.

You know how things can get

You hope you're looking at a singular occurrence, but, no, something tells you this man is an addict. You should know. You walk among them, and the truth is: addiction is life-long.

That's the only kind there is.

Or so they say

Some people are born this way, you hear, destined to play bumper cars with tragedy, to dive headfirst into wrong.

It's supposed to be an illness or something.

You have to know what you are

You hand him his money, feeling like a saint or an angel again. But he tilts his head at you, muttering, like you're an idiot. Then, with a lurch, he flings the money back into the street.

As if feeding the pigeons!

As if you knew

You had been on your way to the outdoor market, feeling like today you deserved to be. You had money in your pocket. You were a titan of goodwill.

You thought you'd try your Korean out on the aunties as you picked through the stalls for platters of shucked 홍합, shiny 사과, and a bag of sour 백김치, through interactions you'd carefully rehearsed: things like that, wholly ordinary and wholesome.

Then you see this brother in calamity, throwing a fistful of his wits into the wind, as if to ward off what had happened and what was to come.

"No more pretending for him! He was completely and openly a mess. Meanwhile the rest of us go on trying to fool each other."

This quote comes to mind. It's from the Denis Johnson story "Beverly Home," from the 1992 collection *Jesus's Son*. This story is about an addict in recovery. He works as a hospital orderly, trying to become human, taking care of the so-called deformed and deranged.

You think you know what it means, but you don't.

Who are you to get in the way of this mess?

Years ago, somebody had recommended that book. In those circles, it was another kind of Bible. You read it, as you were open to suggestions. For a while then, to feel like one of them, you would've done anything. And you did.

A fool and a saint

You wonder if you should hand him his life back, while he rocks back and forth on the steps. But what would he do with it anyways? He's muttering and raking his fingers through his hair, trying to tell the world how he's been wronged. Or that he's done something wrong.

It's usually one or the other

You're still deciding when these school kids carrying backpacks appear. They stoop to gather the bills, and, like you, try to hand him his money. They're young and naïve, but what's your excuse?

Immediately, you leave. You don't stay to see how things turn out.

Not for any of these people

This moment seems important to your current mission, yes, but also reminds you of the kind of story you were supposed to share, with Styrofoam cups of decaf and rainbow-sprinkle cookies, in church basements and other borrowed rooms, decorated by bulletin boards and crayon art, the sun always butting in from the highest of corners. In these places, these people discussed rock bottom and the hitting of it, sharing things like, "15 years and it's still a struggle." Or, "I'm just trying to get through the *day*."

You try to pay attention.

Really, you're listening to a fly bumping into the window. It buzzes and thumps lightly, again and again.

Rattling in the blinds

There's a template among this crowd you discover, a tradition of telling a story that's both tragic and redemptive. In the end, it's all crayon art you learn.

Still, when it's your turn to share, you try. You stand up there, lying about your humanity, and all of them know it. You're not very convincing. Or maybe they aren't.

"This will help," they say.

Where does one come by such certainty?

If you find yourself in such a room again, you'll tell them not about grace, nor wisdom, nor serenity, nor prayers, but about a Korean man you saw limping uphill in a Sunday suit, shining, leaning heavily on a cane. His right foot turned out nearly 90 degrees. He shuffled up the street as if heading into the sun at the top of the hill, on his way to glory.

He walked right in the road, as if it'd been paved for him. He never stepped out of it, nor did he bother to look back.

You'll talk about the convoy of cars that had fallen in behind him, how among them were Bongo trucks of dark-necked laborers, steering the path in work gloves, not blinking. They had places to go, but nobody honked. Nobody attempted to pass.

The procession headed uphill, you'll say, so *respectfully*.

Man, *you thought*.

It was all quite stately.

And for what?

You had enjoyed that moment, that pilgrimage to touch the hem of the holy. But what if he had crested that hill? What would he be after he had?

You thought of him as those school kids handed that drunk his money, and, this time, such purity of purpose bums you out.

But what is anyone to do?

You shake your head, as if from a great height.

You know now there is no rock bottom. Some might hit something and say, Ouch, but according to those people in all those church basements, one often looks *back* to say, in retroactive assignation, Ah-ha. That must've been it.

As if the bottom must hold. As if the days weren't trapdoors.

This time

You make it back to your building, but there's no sense of accomplishment, no relief in getting it right. You press the call button for your floor, and as the doors shut like curtains, you wonder for whom you're putting on this show.

The sun is setting beyond the balcony, cosmically distant, as you put away your food. You knot the plastic bags tightly. You tidy the kitchen with great ceremony. You drop the scrap of your chore list into the paper recycling and feel regret chase that butterfly about to alight.

It's gotten darker. You turn on the TV. You watch a pink-haired K-pop idol scaling fish in rubber gloves, trying to prove he's as good as anyone, as normal as his co-stars.

You sit there, stiffly.

It won't be long until you're back at work, you think.

You wonder if you've locked the door.

You check it though you know it locks by itself and stand there a second too long.

Man, you thought

That's all that's left to say.

You're not trying to fool anyone

What are you doing? Where are you headed?

You passing benediction. Will you wonder what you are? Wish them all well?
While you wait for that kicker to arrive in the end: the redemption in the revelation.

There but for the Grace of God

Well. You should have known better.

Steve Chang is from the San Gabriel Valley, California. He holds an MFA from Cornell University and lives in Busan, South Korea, where he plays bass for GENIUS. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Guernica*, *Bull: Men's Fiction*, *Atticus Review*, *Crag*, and *Epiphany*. He tweets at @steveXisXok

Fragments from: Stardust

BY GIDI LOZA

Don't know your name.

The limits and boundaries of one self.

Have been coming here forever.

Do you remember dreaming?

A surfboard. The fog. The ocean. A dog.

Walking.

Immensity having the form of something.

We walk towards the bed that has disappeared into.

Blanche. Noir.

Rain again. Coming in the form of a tall tree and a river.

Waving again. Waving at a stranger from another time.

She speaks to me, in her own language, the language of the dead.

You know when to stop. All the time you know when to stop.

Flying. Just flying. Into the nothingness of glaciers and ice.

Gidi Loza is a poet, small press publisher and translator. She is the author of *Conversations With a/an 3D Model/Point Cloud/Image of a Coral Reef*, *El Bordo* and soon to be published *A Fictionalized Memoir of Kathy Acker*. She is the translator of *Felizmente* by Lyn Hejinian and *Cosas de cada posible relación chocando unas con otras* by Juliana Spahr. She recently edited the anthology *First, Second and Third Year Students' Work/ MFA in Creative Writing/Literature Department/University of California, San Diego/2018*.

The Piss Smell of the Psych

By Ron Riecki

ward. It's being cut-
off, from family and debt,

the way the walls seem
to vise us, the schizophrenic

roommate who tells me
he hears voices and that

they sound like the bones
of ghosts, the crepitus

of phantoms, how even
the dead have back pain.

Ron Riecki wrote *U.P.: a novel* (Great Michigan Read nominated) and edited *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works* (2014 Michigan Notable Book), *Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula* (2016 Independent Publisher Book Award), and *And Here: 100 Years of Upper Peninsula Writing, 1917-2017* (Michigan State University Press, 2017). His poetry has been published in *Spillway*, *Rattle*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Dunes Review*, *The New Verse News*, *River Teeth*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Chiron Review*, *Clockhouse*, *New Madrid*, *The Offing*, *Verse Daily*, *Main Street Rag*, *Stone Canoe*, *the Veterans Writing Project's 0-Dark Thirty*, and many other literary journals.

Everything in the World, Maximized

BY HWANG YU WON

TRANSLATED BY JAKE LEVIN & HEDGIE CHOI

ten thousand guitars in the baggage car, loaded and running— the longest and most heavy heart in the world—

and yet only the tracks know what nobody knows— the inside of that heart— by dividing the trampled length of the body into measurements of trampled time, calculating the speed it takes between the point where a train's desperation begins and the success-ing point in self-justification of its end— always enduring, withstanding the weight of the moving train—

no matter how the train tramples, how the train goes, it chops no fingers, chops no toes— but the guitarist who lost his fingers understands, understands that it's better to O.D. and die than make mangled songs,

and the caterpillar with no toes understands, understands that it has to try and go to the places it wants to go, even if its crawl is a crawl with no toes,

and thus, in other words, a visual maximization of the invisible musical notes—

however, we should admit drugs are also a healing thing—

and arriving at the final-stage when the train crammed with more cures than names of diseases finally gives in, when it derails, only the afflicted know that feeling— a feeling nobody knows—

pills gush into that field full of snow— and after the afflicted wake in the morning from the dream where they walk to the field and take and swallow the pills, they come to understand, understand the cold body of the train—

because understanding that a train that tripped over and turned its body on its back is the same as turning your body in exactly the opposite direction from everyone else in the world that doesn't understand you—

there is no escaping reality— there is only maximization—

tonight their prayers elongate like the train so that the speed of the spin of the rotations of the prayers that round the earth lift the train slightly into the air, bit by bit, until finally, looking at the train that has taken off, a hope—

a hope that the tracks will become comfortable for the first time in their lives— a hope that when held for the first time, because it is held for the first time—

it causes the nosedive of the train—

and like an earthquake shaking its axis, like a man punched in the gut, when the tracks vomit acid, in that acid, the feeling of millions of spilling guitars—

does anyone know it?

after rolling off the bed, does the kid that got spilled out a dream understand?

for no matter how long I write, my words will always fall short of the rail— and now, even though it doesn't make a difference whether I quit or not,

on a silent night, a very very holy night, a night that fell over and spilled out all the carols it

was carrying, after hopping over busted light bulbs, after knocking Santa over in a fucked up way,
I immediately seize the essence of Christmas —

the heart of the engineer that has to fix all the guitars before the earth makes a single rotation,
only the guitarist who spends all night fixing broken riffs knows that heart—

so, I wonder, what is the thing that you carry and spill completely when you trip?

is there a rhythm that is inevitably caught because it overflows?

while riding around the fertile dream on the rhythm inevitably caught because it overflows,

because the place you fall is always at the face of a cliff, a feeling: exhilaration,

and crouching behind it, have you ever endured the rhythm face to face?!

while estimating to what extent the crinkled rhythm can be smoothed out, if done soundly,
estimating what it can cover, the reddest wine is ordered and tonight

the train that is hauling ten thousand boxes of red wine in its gut, who can know for what
reason, for what reason the train can't keep its balance, because

even Joni Mitchell could drink a case of you, darling, and still be on her feet, and maybe

even Amy Winehouse who wore the Winehouse nametag and gushed her name

out wherever, whenever, maybe she also understands—

the extreme side effects that follow the tiny and impactful shock

and the maximization of everything that occurs in a single second—

every time the feeling of one long train gets sucked in, blowing its whistle, slurped between
open legs, the feeling that in the end everything is rounded up in one single go,

for the too-long sentence, now, at last, a comma

Deep in the Heart of the Mountains

BY HWANG YU WON

TRANSLATED BY JAKE LEVIN & HEDGIE CHOI

I forgot my eyes and ears there.
The eyes I left watch the sea and
the ears I left listen to the waves.
Those things are still attached to me, but
I have almost become that cabin standing on the beach.
It's dawn now and
the ocean fog is so thick and widespread,
maybe there is a fire crossing the horizon or something.
Everything the ocean set afloat in the wind by lifting itself into the air
is literally spreading out in front of our eyes.
That day
at Hajodae beach, Yangyang
a 200 year old pine
stuck to a boulder.
Beginning at night, the sound of waves arrived and
were also heard at dawn and
are also heard in the morning.
It's like I always carry around this feeling of having left something behind, but
I am also happy I left it.
Thank God I didn't take my cell phone charger.
With my cell phone dead for days, all that survived was
the sea, you, me... and the sound of waves.
Yes, I once came here with a different woman,
and yes, you once came here with a different man,
but now, we can say we came here together too.
We were a one story house, but then we
renovated into a two story house, albeit briefly,
and like collapsing
we levelled to a single story again, and
those waves that lapped at your butt have ceased, but
memory is also like a butt, and
if memory is a butt that is like anyone's butt, it's got to be soft.
Yes, in the heart of the mountains,
one single memory,
like several memories dumped together,
that fall in, plop, and
fly out again like a flush.

If I slap that memory with my hand, slap slap,
it gets printed red in the shape of hands.
I met the ultimate horizon at the end of the heart of the mountains in Kangwon-do.
The heart of the mountains, what an expression.
The more mountains layer, the more the heart deepens
and grows silence, so
inside the bus crawling through the layers of the heart of the mountains,
whenever you rest your chin on my shoulder,
I feel the weight of shouldering a life.
For just a moment after life leaves you,
the eyes and ears you leave on earth will shake with the weight of life, and
even after your eyes and ears disappear,
the sea will shake with the force of life leftover.
Crawling inside the layers and layers of the heart of the mountains, outside the bus window,
floating high into the sky that overlooks the peaks,
an inevitable yawn loosened from a butt's one raised cheek.
With the absent-minded feeling of petting hair growing around a hole,
a thing begets another thing, and
in any case, what I left behind are things
I couldn't have carried away,
so I am glad I left them.
Even the things I bring with me are things I need to leave, and
even after that, I will go on leaving other things behind, and
if I continue leaving things here and there continuously, eventually
I'll reach a time when I have to leave everything and go.
Don't put so much value on it, on
me, the wind
just departed
after shaking
the tip of a branch
of that empty tree.

The Sleeping Habits of Laughing Buddha (Cloth Sack)

BY HWANG YU WON

TRANSLATED BY JAKE LEVIN & HEDGIE CHOI

I went to the Nakgasa temple in Deungmyeong
and fell asleep touching the belly of Laughing Buddha (Cloth Sack).
Squishy and fat,
a suffocating sleep. . . .
Even while Laughing Buddha (Cloth Sack), hung over me, beating me,
I did not wake from my dream!
Bloated like a balloon
I spent all night inside Laughing Buddha (Cloth Sack)'s gut.
Even when all the lights were put out
there wasn't a single darkness.
Dark nights and the like were stuffed into a cloth sack so
the sack became as big as the world darkness belonged to and,
completely blackened,
his belly bloated
to the extent of the coverage
of the sleeping night that spread in every direction and
the dirtiness of Laughing Buddha (Cloth Sack) became a dirty so dirty
that all the dirties of this world
became citizens of a nation of dirty that belonged only to him.
Saying this saying today
and saying that saying tomorrow,
because of the incongruent nature of inconsistencies,
everything in the world became something that had to be stuffed in his belly.
When he tries to sleep in some other place,
a new place is added to the world inside him, and
now there is nothing that can't fit.
The face made while beating a stomach, bom, bom, beating a drum,
the face made while laughing about this and laughing about that,
the face made while Jesus, my God, my stomach's going to burst!
Yes, that face, it's a face that attracts luck
even when luck finds that face unattractive. Yes, a face
that expresses something that is almost a threat.
Luck, fortune, because it is always reading that face,
becomes small in front of the face, and
because of the bigness and fatness,
no matter where you roll,
as long as you roll together,

you can go around the world with that face
and not get a single scratch.
His stomach has become as big
as the world has become big
so that there is no difference; no difference
between being in the world inside the Laughing Buddha's gut
or outside the Laughing Buddha's gut.
Inside a dream or outside a dream,
inside a stomach or outside an inside-out stomach,
what's the difference?
The last Laughing Buddha I saw
was laughing like a maniac, tearing his entire body to shreds.
With a noise like air escaping a balloon coming from his anus,
laughing Buddha has become almost completely deflated.
I guess that instead of saying he sleeps anywhere,
it'd be more accurate to say
he covers the place he lies at entirely with his body.
Yes, Laughing Buddha becomes a single, charming blanket.

About the author: Hwang Yu-won is the translator and author of many books, including *Everything in the World*, *Maximalized* which won the Kim Soo Young prize. After translating Bob Dylan's *The Lyrics 1961-2012*, he went out to sea for a Korean version of *Moby Dick*. No one has seen or heard from him since.

About the Translators: Jake Levine is from Tucson, Arizona. He got his MFA at Arizona and is currently finishing up a PhD in comparative literature from Seoul National University. He is an assistant professor of creative writing at Keimyung University in Daegu and moonlights at the Korean Literature Translation Institute's translation academy.

Hedgie Choi graduated from Yonsei University in 2018. She was an exchange student at Amsterdam University College in 2016 and will begin her MFA at the University of Texas Michener Center for Writers this fall. She writes poems and short stories. She also translates poems.



I Don't Want a Whole Wheat Bun!

BY LILY SALTER

Everybody who dies is killed by thoughts.—Leonard Orr

Before our shift, Stephanie and I catch up on gossip while rolling silverware and munching on a mistake order of fries. She and I are “Mo’s Hoes,” the self-title serving as both a rhyme and a nod to the soul-sucking side of slinging hash. Located in Burbank, CA, Mo’s provides fodder for the entertainment industry. Plastic I.D. tags—Universal, NBC, Disney—dangle like cowbells from the necks of low-level execs as they graze up and down the salad/burger bar. At lunch we mostly deal with corporate cattle. Nights bring a mix of major and minor industry players, musicians, singers, celebrities from the A-list to the obscure, plus an endless supply of writers, producers, grips and techies. “Film scum,” as my sister calls them.

It was Nina’s commercial film scum husband who got me the job. Mo’s also does catering and craft services for productions, so Bob knew the owner. I wasn’t itching to wait tables, but as a twenty-year vet of the service industry I knew it’d be quick cash. Besides, in L.A. the only real difference between a writer and a waiter is a vowel.

Everyone at Mo’s aspires to be something else—actor, comic, model, singer, dancer, whatever. Before ascension to a higher calling, artistes languish in restaurant purgatory, feeding off manic energy and socking away tips for headshots and demo tapes.

These days I’m too preoccupied to play the wannabe game. I’m not impressed by stars or status.

Outside bruise-colored clouds drift to block the eternal California sun. Petals from Jacaranda trees paint the sidewalks purple. Stephanie’s hot pink hair glows like a neon sign in the window. Spring has sprung. Days are growing longer.

At the burger bar I spy a large man in a tan suit grabbing at a passing busboy. From across the room I hear, “Hey, hey, wait a minute. I told the waiter I don’t want a whole wheat bun.”

Reuben the busboy smiles and nods, slides the meat patty onto a fresh plate and chucks the bun in the trash.

“No, no, no,” says the suit, growing frustrated, “I want a white bun, toasted. Not a whole wheat bun, okay? Is that so hard? I don’t ... want ... a whole wheat bun!”

Stephanie and I start to laugh.

The bar manager Steve walks by. Ignoring the burger-bun tantrum, he barks in our direction, “Don’t forget to clean up that mess when you’re done.”

“He’s an ass,” Stephanie hisses at his hulking back.

Rumor has it he tried to choke two employees, claimed he was only joking. A hot temper is only part of the problem. He also flirts, constantly. When he's busy chatting up some babe at the bar, waiters can forget about getting any drink orders made. He pouts, postures, power trips, and somehow we're all to blame for his foiled dreams of becoming an actor, then police officer, and recently, real estate agent.

"No one will come to his funeral," says Stephanie.

Clearly she's put some thought into how she hopes to be remembered.

"A sold-out party! That's what I want," she says.

I agree that an empty house at final curtain is indeed a depressing thought.

Stephanie's a Mo's Ho with a heart. Her desire to be popular inspires her to act consciously, to be kind. These days, wisdom springs from the most unlikely sources. Aphoristic morsels, Scooby snacks for the soul, keep me alive and listening.

A few days ago Stephanie put in her two-week's notice; she's off to backpack in Europe. I doubt I'll ever see her again. In this business people come and go. You want them to leave, move on to bigger and better things. It gives the rest of us left holding a tray a ray of hope.

I've been here almost two years. For the time being Mo's and other part-time jobs suit me fine. The alternative nine-to-five grind is too safe. It's the panic of living hand-to-mouth that keeps me electric and alive. The mindless work is rest: Coke, light ice to table ten; Chinese Chicken Salad, half lettuce/half cabbage, no noodles, nuts and dressing on the side to table six; small chili, no onions "to go," get Garry Marshall a side of ketchup, quick! Restaurant clamor quiets the noise of Nina.

It was shortly after our rendezvous in Toronto that I learned Nina was officially sick. I was standing in my stamp-sized apartment just off the I-5 in Bellingham, taking a study break, nursing a cup of tea and watching another shade of gray, grey color the day. Nina called from Hawaii, or Singapore, or New York; I can't remember where she said she was. Location hardly mattered. What did was the news she'd been ordered to take a leave of absence from work. With Nina's hands in spastic tremors it was getting dangerous in the Friendly Skies. She'd spilled her last drink, ruined her last Armani suit, scalded her last baby.

Nina explained that the doctors didn't really know what was going on, they had to run more tests. I could tell she was scared. I was too. But I knew Nina wouldn't take sick lying down. Whatever was trying to invade her holy temple, she'd hunt it down and kill it. And me, I'd scraped enough plaque and stain from the content of my brain to realize that a diet of disastrous thoughts only makes things worse. Nina would be fine.

But things went south, fast.

Despite my New Age positivity, Nina didn't slay the dragon. As the months clicked by the mysterious illness continued to attack. Day by day her independence slipped away. No longer

able to drive, or some days even walk, she continued to need assistance. And with Bob filming on location around the globe, Nina's gal pals lined up to help.

Best friends from Canada, Cindy Cecil and Cinderella Sue, have logged more than a dozen trips so far. Both bird-eyed, cuddly blondes with machine-gun laughs, the Cindys are saviors during this time of crisis. Family is in short supply. Dad's deceased. Mum's non compos mentis. And with a full-time job, a nine-year-old daughter, and a son with Asperger syndrome, Pat has her wine glass full. So, as the green-card holding baby sister, unbridled by man, mortgage, or car payment, now it's my time at bat.

To earn a nest egg for the move, I hustled designer steaks at Dirty Dan's Restaurant and worked part-time at the Whatcom Literacy Council. I finished my thesis and pocketed an MA in English from Western Washington University. Thanks to my buddy Jude, who'd pitched our hip-chick sitcom and earned us some development money, I was officially a paid writer. Finally, with worldly possessions whittled down to a packable load, I traded in my '72 Plymouth Valiant for a '76 Mercedes 240D and headed to Tinseltown not in pursuit of fame.

It wasn't such a big deal to relocate. As a full-time resident of the States since '88, I'd been to California countless times. I'd lived in New York, Tennessee, and prior to putting in my two cents in Bellingham, Washington, I did a dime in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. America had become a comfortable second home. And whatever went down in La La Land, I'd be able to handle.

Coached by a schizophrenic mum who hid groceries in the basement and taped the doors shut, and a dad whose love for rum and horses took first place, we Salter girls had a head start in the Tragic Arts.

When I first arrived, Nina was thin and frail; she took long naps and used a cane to walk. She was experimenting with vitamins and acupuncture and mysterious potions. When Bob was away, it was my job to administer the twice-daily injections of hamster hormone or eye of newt. Nothing we tried stemmed the tide and both Nina and the nation were in decline. Their fates combined read like a logline for a film noir script: a War on Terror has been declared, poison letters mailed, and a dark-haired dame is in a heap of trouble. In a matter of months she went from high heels to flat shoes to wood cane to walker. Abandoning her sporty Miata, she traded in one wheelchair after another, until finally settling on a high-performance, battery powered, tilt-and-recline model with a gel cushion seat. For a while she was able to breathe with a bi-level positive airwave pressure (BiPAP) mask. But after every muscle quit and her diaphragm stopped pumping, she was sent to bed without supper and hooked to a life support system—invasive mechanical ventilation with a tracheotomy. The acceleration of Nina's disease was mind-boggling.

Top neurologists at UCLA and USC Medical Centers were pitted against each other in trying to diagnose the problem. One possibility was Chronic Demyelinating Polyneuropathy (CIDP). Characterized by progressive weakness and impaired motor function, CIDP is in the family of neurological disorders that offers a margin of hope. Although treatment options were radical, Nina subjected herself to them all: prednisone, plasmapheresis, intravenous immunoglobulin therapy, and immunosuppressant drugs. With no visible results, once again, Nina was ordered

back to bed while doctors put their thinking caps back on.

Becoming machine-dependent wasn't something Nina had much control over. Suffering from pneumonia, lungs packed with mucus, burning up with fever, her friend Cindy and her sister Sandra had rushed Nina to the hospital. I was at work. Bob was away at his high school reunion in Indiana.

Nina was in an extremely vulnerable and distressed state when they sold her on life support. Invasive tracheotomy was described as a simple procedure. Nurses flipped through some pictures of smiling patients on vent support, held up a few diagrams, showed her some samples of plastic tubing. Heaving in gulps of forced air, Nina tried to absorb the information. She was scared to relinquish the BiPAP mask she'd become dependent on. Only now, the silicon seal of the mask that had been pumping air into her lungs had begun to carve deep welts into her cheeks. A nurse warned that eventually the cartilage around her nose would begin to break down. The coin was tossed. Bob flew back, Cindy and Sandra went home to Canada, and Nina took the ride into surgery.

Breath carries prana, the life force of energy that sustains our existence. The tidal flow of air pressure needed to inflate Nina's lungs is set at 577 on her ventilator. The number rarely changes: Nina's prana is measured. Maybe that's how she stays so calm. My breath comes in short anxious puffs. I have to concentrate to slow my panting. Being alive in the moment is a struggle. Now is nowhere I want to be.

Lately, the mere thought of Nina as a hot-wired cocoon, sipping nectar through a straw, causes my own mind-body to short circuit. As the image of Nina in chains swims through my brain, I feel my pulse race, knees buckle, and the floor give way. I melt in a heap in the "to go" booth. Luckily no one sees me. I pull myself up. Breathe. I can't keep blacking out. Last time I fainted the manager sent me straight home. Liability concerns. But I can't afford to miss another shift.

I concentrate on the new brunch menu prices posted on the back wall, note that Eggs Santa Fe has gone up two bucks. Feeling collected, I run an order of forgotten nachos up to the bar.

"It's about fucking time," snaps Steve.

"Get me another side of salsa for the ladies," he says, sliding the soggy mess toward the heaving cleavage sipping margaritas.

While waiting for José to shoot me some salsa, Kerry, one of the nice bartenders, sneaks up behind me and gives me a hug.

"How's your sister doing?" Without fail, she asks this every shift.

"Still tickin'!" I reply, trying to sound upbeat.

Kerry, usually a bundle of energy, looks tired and pale. Her bulldog Bully dropped dead the other day. His intestines swelled up in the heat and he suffocated. Her son tried to rush the dog to

the vet, but he got lost on the way. Bully was DOA.

After the accident the mood at Mo's was somber. Death became tangible.

I scan my section to make sure the salt and peppers and sugar caddies are full. I'm not thrilled that I have mostly two-tops for tables. I'd hoped to make a C-note tonight. Used to be a hundred bucks a shift was guaranteed, but with 9/11 still fresh on people's mind no one's in the mood for appetizers and dessert. Mourning has become an All-American pastime. And as evidenced by the service industry, the price of war is real.

I tell the hostess to come find me if I get a table. Pointing to my section on the laminated seating chart, I remind her, "No kids, no wankers. Okay?"

"No problem," says Sarah.

For a change Mo's has hired a thinking hostess. It won't be long before she'll be moved onto the floor. All waitstaff must work the front desk before graduating to table service. As a rule, hostesses either move onto the floor or get fired. There's no in between.

With my section in order, I hang out by the back bus station and pull a copy of Buddha in the Waiting Room from my apron pocket. Sharing encounters with his terminal patients, Dr. Paul Brenner serves up a fresh perspective on being a witness to the end process: "The gift of these experiences has allowed me ... to seek a balance between hopefulness and helplessness. In accepting your helplessness—your very humanness—you are honoring your ordinariness. Ordinariness unburdens the ego."

The message resonates. I decide from now on somehow I'll try to diminish the importance of what's happening, try to keep perspective. Death is simply part of life, right?

I watch as Sarah seats the actor James Franco into a corner booth. She catches my eye and mouths, "You're up."

As usual Franco is loaded down with books and papers. Just the other night Nina and I had watched him play the lead in *James Dean*. Reportedly a method actor, Franco looks shy and awkward, like he's still enmeshed in the role. Taking his order, I spy among the pile on his table a dog-eared script, an anthology of D.H. Lawrence, and a couple of Pablo Neruda titles. I wonder, which James is reading what? Hollywood breeds such strange creatures, hard to tell who's made of fact and who of fiction.

I know I never imagined my beautiful sister as an extraterrestrial.

Against a backdrop of sunny skies and swaying palms, Nina's dark days drag on. Her tastefully decorated bedroom in her Sherman Oaks ranch-style bungalow has been redressed as a home hospital set. Meanwhile, south on the 101, red carpets roll and throngs of hungry folks gorge on a glittery world of make-believe, clutching grease pens and glossy 8 x10's, flip flops flapping to catch sight of a celebrity in real life. American idols, immortal on the pissed-stained walk of fame, welcome all to Hollywood. Yet I didn't come to be entertained; all this hype is an insult to the

seriousness of life. Single, broke, pushing forty, sister dying—my clichéd plight may irk me as a writer, but my stock character is stuck in this story. Freak accident, natural disaster, or “Drive-by Shooting” might get me cut from the script. Although I have a nagging feeling for those of us who love Nina, there’s no easy exit. We eat shit to please her and do so with pleasure. Nina’s the star of this show.

Bedridden and bound by stubborn flesh and bone, Nina’s bursting to rejoin the chaos, to dive into the human tide swimming beyond her four blue walls. Illness has neither doused her fire, nor dulled her personal power. And as my big sister, without lifting a finger, she knows how to press my buttons.

I recall Dr. Brenner’s thoughts on hurt feelings, how needs/wants/expectations make us human. How we often forget that the extremes of our existence, love/hate, birth/death, are really ordinary things. And for the lucky few who are temporarily cushioned from plain ol’ vanilla crisis, life is doubly simple.

“What’ll it be, Swiss or Cheddar? White or whole-wheat bun?”

Raised in Toronto, Ontario, Lily Salter received an MA in English/Creative Writing from Western Washington University. She's been a stand-up comic, lead singer/songwriter for a Los Angeles folk-a-billy band, and has penned feature articles for national publications. Currently, she teaches English at a community college and is working on her second novel. "I Don't Want a Whole Wheat Bun!" is an excerpt from her recently re-issued memoir, *Death-Defying Nina*. For more information, visit Lilysalter.com

Cryptid

BY AUSTIN BEATON

n. species whose existence is disputed
 Hike dream quiet around adolescence
 in Appalachia, Sierras of Cordoba I wish
 to manicure inner lives of Mothmen,
 drunk Chupacabra hugs warm
 wings long tree palms, half smile zipper teeth
 gating soft middles I want to know exist.
 Obsess president names, arithmetic
 to shed alien skin or maybe achieve
 something rare like vulnerable love
 or a Yeti kiss. Since time tells fibs being linear
 beside the river on a mountain a town
 beds a hundred fathers in boy masks
 before they disrobe: say pull my finger,
 drink morning vodka, dog-ear
 secondary anger till forced retirement
 around a card table, tap trail maps
 and sketches of Sasquatch, traipse the forest
 in love with new wonder like Santa's real again
 while wives miss the children, rub
 the neighbors' triceps in their heads. What if
 by 19 you became a dad
 who always never will be
 your wanted? So we can't and must believe
 what will happen I made a pact to be

then broke it, finding the same brain
 staying brain being inside one head,
 door without knob turned abroad
 thoughts unwelcomed. Barter darkness
 for dreams extraneous: I don't want to imagine
 you dead or purple sound of the accident
 (your friend hands in the hunting rifle
 like a period to a sentence), your mouth
 exploded like infant drools
 blackberry spit. Months after the funeral
 he looked different bussing a table, unshaven.
 I wanted to talk to him even though
 I didn't want to talk to him. I wanted to feel
 his grief guilt

even though I didn't want to wear it,
wool and tight like a Bigfoot suit, arms
heavy and swinging, head turning
to look us back.

Austin Beaton is a poet writer essayist that studied regret at the University of Oregon. His work has appeared in *Boston Accent*, *Porridge Magazine*, *the Bookends Review* and elsewhere. He's editing and publishing *Hindsight 20/Something* this fall—a collection of first-person perspectives by twenty-somethings on transition, failure, and living through the quarter-life crisis. Learn more at austinbeaton.com.

ABRÁZAME, MAR DE JUNCOS

(cinco de copas)¹

BY INMA CHACÓN

Amigo mío
ha caído la hoja dorada
y ya ves
precisamente ahora
que el frío arrecia
DULCE CHACÓN

Abrazáme
mar de juncos
arrancados de raíz

rodéame con la espuma
que arrastra la memoria
y dime cuánto me quisiste

hasta dónde lloraron
tus ojos en los míos,
mar de media luna,
sonrisa interrumpida
antes de que los sueños
terminaran de ser.

Abrázame, mar,
y guarda para siempre
este nombre
que hoy escribo
en tus orillas

1 Pérdida, muerte premature

este nombre de arena
que un día pronuncié
sin saber
que no volverías a escucharme

este nombre de otoños
que no verán caer más hojas
ni arreciar más fríos.

Abrázame, mar

abrázame.

HOLD ME, SEA OF REEDS

(five of spades)²

BY INMA CHACÓN

TRANSLATED BY JUSTIN ALLARD

Friend of mine
the golden leaf has fallen
and already you see
precisely at this moment
that the chill intensifies
DULCE CHACÓN

Hold me
sea of reeds
pulled up by the root

surround me with foam
that carries away memory
and tell me how much you loved me

how much your eyes cried
in mine,
half-moon sea,
interrupted smile
before dreams
cease to be.

Hold me, sea,
and keep forever
this name
that today I write
on your shores

2 Loss, premature death

this name of sand
that one day I said aloud
without knowing
you would not come to hear me

this name of autumns
that will not witness another leaf fall
nor feel another chill intensify.

Hold me, sea

hold me.

LAS RAMAS DEL CEREZO

(CABALLERO DE COPAS)¹

BY INMA CHACÓN

Mientras pueda pensarte
No habrá olvido.
ÁNGEL CAMPOS PÁMPANO

Me duelen las ramas del cerezo
cuando se acerca abril

ese blanco robado a los inviernos
y a las cimas

ese empeño en exhibirse
a pesar de los ojos cerrados
de los nuestros

esa fugacidad
que las conduce
hacia el rojo maduro y exultante

del que las desnudarán
nuestras bocas

esos racimos adheridos
a la última fase de un ritual

que se inicia
tenazmente

cada marzo.

1 Naturaleza en flor, belleza, comienzos

The Branches of the Cherry Tree

*(Knight of cups)*²

BY INMA CHACÓN

TRANSLATED BY JUSTIN ALLARD

As long as I can think of you,
there will be no oblivion.
ÁNGEL CAMPOS PÁMPANO

The branches of the cherry tree pain me
as April approaches

that white stolen from winters
and from mountain peaks

that determination to make a spectacle
despite closed eyes
despite our closed eyes

that fugacity
that drives the branches
toward the ripened and exultant red

which our mouths
will strip from them

those clusters adherent
to the last phase of a ritual

which begins
tenaciously

every March.

2 Nature in bloom, beauty, beginnings

DULCE Y JOSEBA

*(Los amantes)*¹

BY INMA CHACÓN

Atravesé todas tus puertas,
todos tus ríos,
todos tus puentes.

Lo hice acompasando mis pasos
a los tuyos,
sin miedo,
procurando avanzar
cuando avanzabas
y detenerme
cuando necesitabas
llenarte de aire los pulmones.

Y te quise.

Miré por tus ojos
me envolví con tu abrigo
tomé tus medicinas
reí con tu risa
y me desesperé con tu rabia.

Te quise,
sí,
y te querré siempre.

A pesar de las tormentas,
de los vendavales,
de los eclipses

1 Amor, entrega, unión, acoplamiento, compenetración

y de los domingos
que no huelen a verano.

Amor mío,
mi amor,
tu amor,

en mis sueños
y en mis pesadillas

en mis noches de miel
y en mis días sin sol.

DULCE AND JOSEBA

*(The lovers)*²

BY INMA CHACÓN

TRANSLATED BY JUSTIN ALLARD

I crossed all your doors,
all your rivers,
all your bridges.

I did this matching my footsteps
to yours,
without fear,
ensuring to advance
when you advanced
and to detain myself
when you needed
to fill your lungs with air.

And I loved you.

I looked through your eyes
I wrapped myself in your jacket
I took your medicines
I laughed with your laugh
and I lost myself with your rage.

I loved you,
yes,
and you I will always love.

Despite the storms,
the gales,
the eclipses

2 Love, devotion, union, coupling, mutual understanding

and the Sundays
that do not smell like summer.

Love who is mine,
my love,
your love,

in my dreams
and in my nightmares

in my honeyed nights
and in my days without sunlight.

Desaparecidos

(*La justicia, invertida*)¹

BY INMA CHACÓN

Lloran las madres
ante el cadáver ausente
de los hijos
que ya no pueden acunar.

Lloran de noche.
Encadenadas de por vida
a la misma pregunta,
al mismo llanto,

a la espera de un mañana
que se mantiene idéntico a sí mismo,
escaso de certezas.

Aferradas a la última mirada,
a la última palabra,
a la sonrisa de la fotografía más reciente
y a las buenas noches
enmudecidas en sus bocas.

Condenadas al vacío de sus brazos,
a la culpa
en la que se transforma
inevitable
lo que deberían haber hecho
y no hicieron.

Desconcertadas
insomnes
recelosas

¹ Sinrazón, dolor, orfandad

lloran las madres,

instaladas en el recuerdo de los días
en que no tenían que obligarse
a mirar hacia delante.

The Disappeared

*(Justice, Reversed)*²

BY INMA CHACÓN

TRANSLATED BY JUSTIN ALLARD

Mothers cry
before the absent bodies
of their children
that they can no longer cradle.

They cry at night.
Bound forever
to the same question,
to the same sobs,

to waiting for a future
that remains identical to itself,
scarce of certainty.

Clinging to their last glance,
to their last word spoken,
to the smile from their most recent photograph,
and the good nights
fallen silent in their mouths.

Condemned to the emptiness of their arms,
to the blame
which transforms into
inevitable
that which they should have done
and did not do.

2 Injustice, pain, orphanhood

Disconcerted

sleepless

suspicious

mothers cry,

settled in the memory of days

in which they did not have to compel themselves

to always gaze ahead.

Inma Chacón has a doctorate of Information Sciences from la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. She is a professor at la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos. She has been dean of Communication and Humanities for la Universidad Europea and director of doctorate-level Communications, Technological Growth, and Sociocultural Renovation programs. She is the founder and director of the online magazine *Binaria*. She has written both books of poetry and novels and was a finalist for the Premio Planeta in 2011 for her novel *Tiempo de arena*.

Justin Allard is a graduate of Centre College and lives in Louisville, KY. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Perigee*, *Entropy Magazine*, *Lemon Star Magazine*, and *Luna Luna Magazine*.

Look See Wonder

BY LOAN LE

Nina and Margie used to jump on their beds and compete to see who could slap the ceiling the most times. Losing this game, which Nina always did, meant her sister could roll her up in a blanket as tight as possible, then push her off the bed. Once, Nina fell hard, hit her head, and bit through her tongue. Margie cradled Nina in her arms, shushing her cries, smoothing back her hair. When their mother discovered them, she threatened to knock their teeth down their throats.

Margie was seventeen now, too old to jump on her bed, though the creaking of the bedsprings sounded the same. She was with a boy in her room. His name was Juan. She told him to go faster.

Nina stood at the closed door. She wasn't supposed to be here. Their mother was on another date with Frank the car salesman, trying to replace Dad. Nina meant to study for an AP Chemistry at the Cheshire Public Library, the only place that felt familiar in this new town since they moved here two months ago, but a forgotten textbook led her back home.

Juan obeyed Margie's command, his voice deeper than the one he used at chorus practice. "*Ven, carina, ven.*"

For weeks, Nina had watched them at rehearsals, or she watched her sister watch Juan whenever he sang his solos, the stretch of his Adam's apple as he tipped back his head, the lazy sway of his body as their director Blake accompanied on the piano. Margie had called him Mario Lopez's younger brother, dimples and all, and giggled about him whenever she talked on the phone with her friends from California. Nina hadn't heard from hers in a while; she liked to think they were busy with their sophomore year.

The voices behind the door grew louder, and the bed quickened its cries. Hit by a shame she didn't know where to place and feeling warm, everywhere, Nina walked away. She wanted to think it was just an unknown seventeen-year-old girl underneath an unknown seventeen-year-old boy, their desperation resounding in the crash of their bodies.

∞ ∞ ∞

Water dripped from the tea kettle's spout and sizzled on the stovetop. Nina tightened the lid on her thermos and side-stepped her mother who reached for a piece of nearly burnt toast from the toaster.

"Eat, *mija*," her mother said, jabbing Nina with her hip.

"I have a banana."

"A banana. Are you anorexic? Hmm?"

"Okay, okay."

"And wear a jacket. It's not spring just yet."

"I have one in my backpack." Nina slathered her banana with Nutella.

Her mother moves on. "I'll leave money for dinner tonight if you need it. I'm working a double shift. One of the nurses called in sick." Normally her mother would have protested getting handed someone else's job, but she was new to the hospital. She didn't want to ruin their fresh start. And so far, Nina could tell her mother was better, at least compared to how it was before.

"I can feel her here," her mother had said angrily, the word *feel* trembling and her Chilean accent coming through. That was the night she told them about the move. She, Nina, and Margie sat at their kitchen round table in a circle that was normally completed by their father. "I know he brought her over."

"Does Dad know we're leaving?" Margie asked, sounding unusually meek.

Their mother scoffed. "I don't care!" was her reply.

"Nina?"

She focused on her mother, dressed in scrubs, standing in front of her.

"Uh, yeah, okay. I'll see you later."

Her mother tapped her own cheek overdone with blush; Nina obeyed the silent demand and relented with a goodbye kiss. Cabinets slammed. Bags zipped up. She was out of the house before her mother could remember to ask how it'd gone at the library last night, before her sister even finished drying her hair.

∞ ∞ ∞

At school throughout the day, Nina imagined select teachers and classmates in the throes of sex. It was something to get her mind off her sister and Juan but not really. Nina figured her literature composition teacher Mr. Callahan wouldn't be as vocal like Juan; her classmates called him Mouse behind his back. Mr. Fitz and Mrs. Fitz were married so they had to have sex. The teacher who probably had the least amount of sex? Ironically the substitute sex ed teacher Miss Burns, who blushed as she lectured. Or maybe she had a condition.

It was second-to-last period. Nina rested her chin in her hand, sitting in the back of her Spanish classroom. From her viewpoint she glimpsed a flash of gray and brown hair that'd just passed by the door and knew it belonged to Blake. Her chorus director was somewhere in his late thirties. He often said his regular barber "refused to dye his hair," a joke that failed like many of his others, though he tried. Nina would rather hear any story to hold off practice. She liked watching his hair glisten under the florescent lights, how he looked down whenever he laughed, how his fingers melded perfectly with the piano keys.

He'd been keeping tabs on her since the day he called her out for refusing to sing. But it wasn't Nina's fault she hated it; she was only there because Margie liked singing and their mother wanted them to do more "stuff" together. Nina had told Blake over and over that he should kick her out, meaning it, wanting it, because joining chorus wasn't her choice anyways. Nothing ever seemed to be these

days. “You’re throwing away your potential!” Keeping telling your jokes, Nina wanted to say.

She traced the carvings on her desk’s surface: initials of the students before her, cusses aimed at the person who’d been on one kid’s mind at the time. She wanted to add her own mark, but the desk had been through enough.

A peal of laughter sounded from the left side of the room. When she moved to Cheshire, Nina had tried joining the girls who sat there, but after asking her where she was from (California), if she lived in Hollywood (No, Fullerton), and if she had met any celebrities (the father from “Full House”?), the girls had exchanged smirks, some rolling their eyes. She wanted to lie, but she was ever good at that. She hoped Elle would say something to acknowledge they had chorus in common.

Elle was a soprano, like Margie, but Nina, who watched everything, never saw her sing. Before and after practice, Elle’s girlfriends gravitated around her, magnifying her allure behind hair-flicking, bubbly bodies. But Nina thought Elle’s half-hooded eyes were the most striking part of her appeal—olive green, the first person she’d ever met with eyes that color. Something lurked underneath them, roiling, as they surveyed the room for better company.

Behind Nina sat a row of boys wearing highly priced clothes designed to look like things from Goodwill or the Main Street consignment store. They traded a lot of penis jokes, sports statistics, and bets on Kate Petronella’s dating status. Kate was incapable of being boyfriend-free for more than a week, the boys said. Two weeks ago it was Tom, and before that, Brandon. Nina’s mother would call someone like her a *puta*, like the woman her father left them for. In the front row, Kate’s new boyfriend let her right leg rest on his thigh and was walking his fingers along her skin. “Stop,” Kate giggled, but not at all with conviction. Nina shivered as she imagined someone touching her that way and shifted in her seat.

Señora Aspuru’s entrance, her caustic stare, and her index finger pointing *here* and *there* separated Kate and her boyfriend. The lesson began, and Nina paid attention to what she could. Though her mother spoke fluent Spanish at home, only Margie could respond effortlessly while it took Nina a minute to string together one sentence.

“Madeline,” Aspuru said, walking down one of the aisles, her sensible heels clicking along the tile floor. “*Como te sientes del fin de semana, hmm?* I think you’d look forward to the weekend, wouldn’t you?”

Madeline, a plain girl who wore T-shirts with weird Chemistry jokes, had been doodling in her notebook, mostly bubble-shaped initials in neon green gel pen. She jumped slightly when she was called. Nina felt bad for her. “*Um, sí, esta*—I mean *estoy excitada por*—”

Aspuru quickly laid a hand on her shoulder. “No, no, no, *chica, no puedes decir eso*. You can never use that word if you mean you’re excited, at least not in that way. It’s, eh, incorrect, you see”—Her hand flourished as if beckoning her next words out of thin air—“It’s a word you might use when you’re with someone you love, at a certain time, and in a certain, eh, state. A feeling.”

Nina felt the short pause that followed her explanation and imagined a row of lightbulbs clicking on at once. The boys snickered, and the girls who never welcomed her tittered. Aspuru’s cheeks turned as red as that dress she wore every week, the one too tight on her curvy figure.

“Ay dios mio, chicos. Shh. Madeline, you should say, ‘Estoy emocionada,’ vale?”

The class eventually settled down, and Aspuru assigned them fill-in-the-blank exercises in their textbooks.

Chemistry was next. The test wasn't that hard. In fact it was easy, so easy that Nina wondered if she was doing equation wrong. In no time, the final bell dismissed them. Nina moved in slow motion, packing up her things, pushing in her chair, biding her time, as she knew Margie was waiting in the car for her.

In the hallway, Nina joined a sea of Vineyard Vine and Lacoste shirts. Elbows and shoulders crashed against her and the smells of Axe, sweat, and sweet Victoria Secret perfume hit her all at once. Loud rap and pop music floated from the earbuds of students rushing to leave school. Teachers fast-walked with their heads down and dodged students ready to complain about a grade or beg for extra credit. Jocks lugged around lacrosse sticks and duffel bags and prepared to smash their bodies together for fun.

Nina thought about the calendar in her bedroom—the only item hanging on her wall since the move—and how she would mark each passing day with a X. But she didn't know why she was counting.

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Outside, Margie waited for Nina in their Dad's old, battered red Nissan. A string of yellow school buses sat still as they loaded human traffic.

Nina slid into the passenger seat. Her feet touched the clean floor, which always surprised her; when Dad drove it, she had to sit knees to chest because paper mail, losing lottery tickets, and fast food wrappers took up the floor space.

Margie's thumbs moved quickly over the keys of her flip phone. She was always texting someone and now Nina knew it was likely Juan. Her sunglasses sat atop her head, held in place by her thick brunette hair. “Thanks for being late,” she said, without looking up. She closed her phone, threw it into the cup holder, then turned the keys in the ignition. Their car coughed awake and soon they were drifting down Cornwall Avenue onto Main Street. They had a half hour before practice for their spring recital started.

“You left early this morning.”

“Yeah, I wanted to get to school early and study for my test.”

“What test?”

“Chemistry.”

“How'd you do?”

Nina shrugged, which Margie couldn't have seen.

“McDonalds or Subway?”

“Doesn't matter.”

They had their unspoken rules inside and outside of school. They'd never agreed to say, “Don't

talk to me,” but that was what happened. Back in California, Nina would walk down the hallway and see Margie coming her way, flanked by her doppelgangers—girls with smooth Brunette curls and pale hazel eyes. Only the slight brush of her shoulder against Nina’s served as an acknowledgement of her existence.

On any other day the silence between them would be normal, comforting almost. But seeing Margie meant hearing her again, and Nina realized just how different her voice sounded in two languages—in Spanish, last night, it was much sweeter, more earnest, but her English was terse. Sometimes Nina couldn’t tell if her sister was praising her or insulting her.

Margie cranked up the radio volume, blasting a new song by JLo and Daddy Yankee. She sang smoothly in Spanish, on pitch as well. No wonder she’d gotten a solo. Blake picked her right away, but none of the girls were mad. They congratulated her with smiles. Margie always had people around her like moths to fire.

The smell of spearmint gum brought Nina out of her thoughts for a moment—Margie’s offering, which she accepted. They hit traffic down Route 10 where parochial schools were just letting out. Margie turned up the music even more to drown out the honking from drivers who thought cars would part for them like the Red Sea. Kids weaved through open spaces between bumpers, on their way to the library, Main Street Café, or their drug dealers.

Nina snuck a look at Margie. She wanted to say that there was something different about her, after knowing what she knew.

“What’s wrong, stupid?”

She looked away. “Hm? Nothing.”

“Nah-uh. First you were staring out the window like an emo. Then, I caught you staring at me. Spill it.”

“I swear, nothing’s wrong.”

Margie popped her gum.

Nina shrugged, then sat up in her seat. She grabbed for an excuse. “I just don’t feel like going to chorus tonight.”

“Why?”

“I have a lot of homework to do.”

“Shut up.” Margie said that a lot to Nina even when she wasn’t saying anything. “I have even more homework than you. Teachers want to torture us one last time before we graduate. So don’t even complain.” She looked at her instead of the road, so Nina was her eyes for now. “You’re thinking about Dad, aren’t you?”

Nina hadn’t thought about him much, and sometimes she wondered if that was normal and other times she just knew his absences outweighed the few times he even tried to get to know her or Margie. So maybe it wasn’t wrong to forget about him, but it was sad to see her mother try to act like she wasn’t lonely. She still cried in the shower on Tuesdays, when she remembered what she discovered that day.

“You miss him. I get it. But we’re better off without that douche.” Her sister’s voice grew louder with each word. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel.

If she said yes, that might appease Margie. “I know.”

They arrived at McDonalds and slipped easily into the drive-thru lane, beating the slew of cars that lined up behind them. They had done this routine enough times for Margie to order for them. A bag of two medium fries, two boxes of four-piece McNuggets, and a McChicken sandwich landed on Nina’s lap. Margie dipped her hand in to grab a few fries.

Margie’s phone vibrated once again, clattering in the cup holder. Nina saw Juan’s name on the screen, and though it wasn’t the right moment to ask her sister anything, she was astonished by how fiercely she wanted the truth from Margie. The words came out before she could stop them. “So do you like anyone? At school, I mean?”

Margie clicked off the radio, would’ve pressed on the brakes if she were more reckless. “Okay, random. What made you ask that?”

“Nothing,” Nina said quickly, feeling her cheeks warm up. “Some girls were just talking about boys and stuff today, and I was . . . just wondering.”

Margie rolled down the window to spit out her gum. She turned the radio back on, but seemed suspicious of it. “No, there’s no one yet. You?” The last question came out begrudgingly.

“No.” Nina sagged back in her seat.

“Okay.”

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Back at school they went their separate ways again, even though they would end up in the same practice room. Nina ducked into the bathroom. It was empty—faucet water drips echoing against the tiled walls, the stench of urine and Lysol clinging in the air, the generator trying to wake itself. Once in third grade, she thought she was alone in the bathroom, until some bullies turned off the lights and started banging their fists against her stall, taunting her. She hid there until a teacher saved her.

Her classmates, being young, hadn’t known how to hide their disdain for kids like her who didn’t say much, but high school students were more polished. They practiced wearing their masks in the hallway, spectators lined up against the lockers, eager for a fist fight to start at one end and a breakup to happen at the other.

She flushed her toilet and was about to unlatch her door when she heard girls laughing, the hallway’s mélange of gossip flooding in for a second. She waited for the sound of someone else, and when all seemed still, she left the stall. But she was not alone just yet.

Elle stood at the sinks, gazing at her reflection in the mirror.

Silence pressured Nina. She needed to do something to break it. But what? She washed her hands stridently under a rivulet of lukewarm water, the only temperature that could be reached. She was about to stop, but Elle stopped then, and Nina didn’t want to think she was copying her.

Elle didn't leave as expected. She rummaged through her bag, sticking her thin arm deep inside to pull out a small Louis Vuitton makeup pouch. She started applying mascara with a skillful hand.

Now Nina dried her own hands. She thought of the lipstick in her own backpack, one that she barely used because the red shade made her look like she was trying too hard. Still, she took it out.

Done with her eyelashes, Elle looked at Nina in the mirror, causing her to jump.

"Hey, you're new, right?"

"Yeah. I'm Nina."

A nod from the other girl, her lips forming the start of a smile. "Elle." She uncapped her lip gloss and brushed the bottom of her lip. "So how do you like Cheshire? Boring, right?"

"It's OK."

"California must have been crazy fun."

Nina tried hiding her surprise that the girl remembered. She nodded eagerly.

"Cheshire sucks. Everything closes at like 10. Restaurants aren't even good." Elle scoffed. "And the boys here are so immature, it's not even funny."

It took Nina a few beats to find a reply. "I haven't really noticed anyone."

"Really? No one?"

"Um, I guess Juan isn't that bad looking. You know, in chorus?"

Elle laughed shortly. "Hmm. A lot of the girls thought the same thing when I was dating him. And he was more than aware of that, believe me. Reason why I dumped him in the first place."

Margie's face popped up in her head, the sight of her wide eyes when Nina asked her about boys. For a moment, she felt something she rarely did because her sister never needed it: pity. Nina made the effort to flip her hair behind her shoulders. "Yeah, well, I have a boyfriend, so it doesn't really matter."

"Oh yeah?" Ellie's pitch went up, like she really wanted to know. She faced Nina instead of speaking to the mirror.

"He's older. It's, like, a secret, because my mom would kill me." Nina's voice sounded as flippant as the other girls in Spanish class, so similar that she felt proud of herself. She could pass as one of them.

"Like how old?"

"Just . . . older. It's pretty new." The color of jaunty red in her image contrasted with her muted gray pleated skirt and black top. Nina's lips looked bruised. Her mirror-self was intertwining her hands, gripping the life out of each other.

"He's not like Dad-age, right?"

"What, no—gross! That'd be like . . . fifty."

"Oh god, I didn't think your dad would be so ancient. My dad's only forty."

Nina's was that age, too. He even looked younger sometimes. She didn't know why she said fifty, but it'd be stupid to take it back.

Elle's lips, slightly pink, gleamed as they curved just so. "Well, good for you," she said, her back

suddenly all Nina could see. “Go easy on the red.”

Hallway noise crept in and retreated like it entered the wrong room. When she was alone again, Nina ripped off a paper towel and rubbed rubbed her lips clean.

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In the practice room, Nina avoided looking at the section where Elle sat. She settled in a seat a few rows behind Margie and Juan. They weren’t holding hands, but they sat angled toward each other: Margie had her legs crossed, her pointed right foot brushing against his right knee. Juan laughed at something she said.

Blake arrived then, comfortably dressed in a plaid long-sleeve and relaxed jeans, carrying coffee from Main Street. He threw his leather tote onto the piano bench, and it landed with a sharp smack. “Hey, kids. How’s everyone?”

Their group of thirty mumbled their reply.

For an hour, they sang. Nina didn’t; she watched Elle do the same while most likely scrolling through her Facebook and hearting each picture on her Instagram. Juan sang. Margie sang. Blake tapped his baton against the stand, *together!* They all sounded the same, boy and girl, and now Nina couldn’t quite tell if anyone was good. Maybe Blake was hearing the same thing; she observed the violent strike of his baton, the downward curl of his lips, the wrinkles on his forehead that deepened as minutes ticked by.

And now he was returning her gaze, looking more severe. Nina slumped down in her chair, but knew there was no point; she had been seen.

At the last dying note of their rehearsal piece, Blake closed both hands to cut off their sound. He sighed, smoothed out his wrinkles. “Okay, we’re done for tonight. Torture’s over.”

Nina tried to blend into the rushing stream of kids exiting. “Nina, can I speak to you for a second?” Blake asked her.

“Sure, I just have to . . .” She looked for Margie who had already left the room. “I gotta tell my sister.” Running out, she caught her sister walking briskly to the exit. Having shorter legs than Margie, Nina had to work twice as hard to keep up with her sister’s pace.

“Margie, can you wait a second? Blake wants to talk to me.”

Her sister showed no mercy, throwing over her shoulder: “I have somewhere to be. Can’t you get a ride home?” The impatience behind her words felt more biting than Nina was used to. They stopped just before the entrance, Margie with a foot toward it. Just outside stood Juan under a flickering light. He gripped a keychain in one hand. A trail of cigarette smoke rose into the night.

“Yeah, um, sure,” Nina said. “I can ask . . . Elle.”

Margie’s expression darkened. “Elle? Why would you get a ride from her?”

“She’s a friend.”

“You’re friends with her?”

“Yeah, she’s my friend,” Nina said, striving to be just as dismissive, yet her tone was not right, because Margie didn’t move away at once. Her lips parted like she had something more to say. But before Nina could read her eyes, she turned to go to Juan.

“Ok. If Mom manages to come home early, tell her I’ll be home by nine. I’m going to study with someone.”

“Fine.”

Back in the practice room, about ten of her classmates loitered, some waiting for the piano to free up and some waiting for their rides. Blake sat at the piano, reading sheet music from the music rack, pressing high notes that sounded mournful. They called to her.

Noticing Nina’s return, he beckoned her over, pulling up an empty stool. “I’m guessing you know why I asked you to stay back. Answer me honestly: are other kids giving you a hard time?”

She suppressed a sigh. He’d asked her that before. “No, why?”

“You like to sit far away from the rest of the chorus. And I notice you’re not talking to anyone. You’re not singing either—now we talked about this, haven’t we?” A pointed look. Why didn’t he talk to Elle then? She was doing the same thing.

“I told you—”

“Yeah, you’ve told me this isn’t your type of ‘thing’”—Blake used air quotes—“but I think you just need to give it a try. Get more involved—there’s no reason not to.”

Nina used her index finger to press down a high A. She could feel Blake’s insistent glare, heard him ask, “Do you want me to talk to anyone? It doesn’t sit well for me knowing that you’re not enjoying chorus. This should be fun for you, but if you can’t take anything away from it, maybe I’ll talk to your parents, and see if we can find something else for you.”

Parents. She had only one now, and she didn’t want to see what her mother would look like on the phone with Blake. Nina shook her head. “It’s just my mom—”

“Oh.”

“And I don’t want to cause her trouble. It’s not that bad, I promise. I don’t—I mean, I’ll try. I’ll try harder.”

Blake’s lips tightened. But he nodded anyways. “Okay. This takes time. I know being new is hard, but you just have to keep your head up.” He paused, adding in a softer voice, “With everything.” He picked up his music and rearranged the pages against the piano lid. “But let me know if any issues come up.”

Nina wasn’t sure what made her look up, but she did, gazing over the lid. Elle was still in the same spot, surrounded by only two of her friends, who seemed uncharacteristically relaxed, conversing with each other, leaving Elle alone at the center. She was focused on Nina and Blake. Her green eyes lazily slid over to Blake. An eyebrow went up.

Nina realized Blake was still talking when he said her name. “I’m going to call on you for a solo one day, and you have to be ready. Okay?”

“Solo?”

Blake gave her an impish grin. “One day, yes.” A hand went to her shoulder. A squeeze. “You’ll be fine, kiddo.”

She gazed up at him, up because he was standing now, head eclipsing the light that shone down. He bent over to get his bag.

“Can I use the piano now?” It was Elle, standing a few feet away. Her two friends left. It was only the three of them.

“Yeah, no problem, kiddo,” Blake said, voice muffled as he was upside down. He sprang back up with a huff. “Just make sure to close the lid when you’re done.”

His attention was already on his phone as he walked away from the girls.

“Blake.”

He glanced up when Nina called out to him in a voice not her own. Feeling Elle’s heavy gaze against her back like a long push, she went to where Blake stood, just under the emergency exit sign. He tilted his head slightly when seeing her; his whole body stiffened as she pressed against him to whisper ‘thanks’ in his ear, to breathe in the toasty smell of a café clinging to him, to place a soft, barely-there kiss near his jaw. She felt his jolt, and stepped away, not meeting his gaze in fear of what she knew she would see. She turned, ears ringing.

Elle sat behind the piano, spotlighted by a singular burning light, looking down at her phone.

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Arriving at school the next day, Nina found a hundred pairs of eyes lining the never-ending stretch of lockers. She had the sensation of knowing she was trapped in a dream, knowing the alarm clock might wake her in a moment, but her classmates’ whispers—“That’s her, the New Girl”—came through too clearly. Her heart seized when she felt a strong grip on her arm forcing her around.

It was Margie with a wild look in her eyes. “Nina, everyone’s talking about you.”

“What?” She jerked her arm free, rubbing at the spot where her sister’s nails had dug in.

“It’s all around the school. You and . . .” Margie trailed off. There was a hardness to her voice that Nina had never heard, even when she was in her worst mood. “Look, is it true? Did Blake really do something to you? Was this what you were trying to tell me in the car yesterday?”

Sound warped and slowed after Blake was mentioned. Nina’s cheeks warmed. “What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Beyond Margie, students closed in on them, unmasked in the early morning to reveal a range of expressions from barely contained glee to discomfort.

“Nina, this is serious!”

“Nothing! Nothing happened to me.”

But her sister did not hear her. She looked beyond Nina.

A heavy hand gripped Nina’s shoulder. The principal asked if she could come with him to his office immediately, though his hold on her made clear that she had no choice. As she moved down the impossibly long hallway, her vision grew blurry from tears, faces lost shapes, colors turned mute. She

was guided now only by Margie's warm hand, which tightly clasped hers. Before rounding the corner, Nina believed she saw the bored glint of Elle's olive green eyes among the crowd. What did she do?

"I'm here, Nina," Margie said. "Everything's going to be fine."

Loan Le is an assistant editor at Atria Books. She's the author of *A PHO LOVE STORY*, a forthcoming YA rom-com from Simon Pulse (Simon & Schuster). Her fiction has appeared in the *Mud Season Review* and Submittable. She also holds an MFA in fiction writing at Fairfield University, her alma mater. Loan runs Young to Publishing's biweekly writers group and can be found blogging on her website www.writerloanle.me and on her Twitter @loanloan tweeting her MTA frustrations and writing woes.



St. Elmo's Light

By JESSE CLEMENS

I find the stuffed animal beneath my bed
like a flare sent up in reverse;
the blood-red gilding the edges
of the under-bed darkness.

Once, blood-brother,
this kind of corona discharge
struck sailors with awe, a wrinkle
in the midst of storms.

But here, it is a normal anchor
that I pull into the light,
revealing a dragging lank, limbs worn and loose,
not like you, who used to sweetly take my hand
and bend back my thumb
to get what you wanted, sometimes.

Frayed terrycloth, a workout
for stimming finger-nerves,

The stark white spheres of eyes
connected by a cracked bar of plastic, crude in

how it tried to hold everything together
and not even hide its futility,

the baggy orange nose, hole
worn through by forefinger,

the missing arm, the socket
seemingly closed over, but for sprigs of white fuzz

Far cry from limbs caught in ropes,
amputated on storm-tossed tables,
belts bitten, eyes raised
to the apparition on the rigging,
the wink of a god who created this lightning rod,
then left,

as you did,
leaving the kinetic imprint
of your flinging, flicking, twisting
until the thing could no
longer live up to your need
for coming apart.

A token,
a less-whole than you,
a seen-through my empty hands
to the dumb mess
of the resting things
I think I can still keep close.

Come find me,
says the rescue flare,
declares the red reminder,
save me from this viewfinder
that can not be looked away from,
the one where you lassoed my future
with felt, with the soft thud
of the light of day,
an omen of home
you
child
no
longer.

Benediction

By JESSE CLEMENS

Something's supposed to happen,
but I don't feel anything
unbroken circle of hands
in a garage with exposed studs
concrete like a mirror
showing what we'd look like
if we were always falling
the damp candle-laden air
belying our desert
tendencies.
Urgent agents
of my choked spiritual growth
make eye contact
blazon my body into
chakra quadrants, into
bleeds of color
fundamental every-ness.
Shaman, who lets,
they say, four different
beings occupy his body
like untenured office hours, tells
me that green is my color
as if opening an ornate
box of air, taking out
or putting in, injecting an
invisible syringe into my arm
that I very much feel, capturing
a hostage I didn't even know I had,
and today I wrench rainbows
from my spinal column, gouge
out my third eye with a spoon
and leave a child in the corner
storage bin to cry and rot; memory
is a bargain-store crystal
that comprehends all light as it
truly is, refracted, separate.
Go in a thousand different directions
to rake the ribcages, to

stir ventricles to bursting,
for wherever two or more
are torn asunder,
I am there

Jesse Clemens is a born-and-raised Angeleno poet, currently living in the San Gabriel Valley. He graduated with an M.A. in English with a Creative Writing Emphasis from California State University, Northridge in 2018. He has served as Poetry Editor of the Northridge Review, a coordinator of CSUN's Graduate Reading Series, and an event organizer for CSUN's appearance at the NoHo LitCrawl. He won the Academy of American Poets University Prize in 2018 (judged by Brenda Hillman). His poetry has appeared in *Inscape*, *California Quarterly*, *The Northridge Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently pursuing a career in instructional design, and is often found either playing music, cooking, or hunting for the next great taqueria.

HOMESICK

BY ERIN ROSE COFFIN

I want to build binoculars
out of paper towel rolls,
peer all the way into you.

I want to make a telephone
out of your old toothbrush.

Please pick up.

When we don't speak
for days, I hear your voice

in the rolling boil of water
or the silence of the radio.

I put your letter in the mailbox,
flip up the red flag.
When I look back inside,

there is only a burning bird,
a nest of ashes.

TOTALITY

BY ERIN ROSE COFFIN

You are the land
of wilted milk.
You are velvet honeysuckle.

You are a soft-lit,
hungry moon.
You are eating the sun.

You are dust, crystal dirt,
long-boned and quiet.
You are so loud and far from home.

Erin Rose Coffin holds a Masters of Fine Arts in poetry from North Carolina State University. Her work has appeared in *Raleigh Review*, *Arcturus*, *Punch Drunk Press*, *Atlantis*, and the anthology *Nuclear Impact: Broken Atoms in Our Hands*. She is an editorial assistant for *So & So Magazine*, and was a finalist in the North Carolina State Poetry Contest, judged by Yusef Komunyakaa. In 2018, she judged the Carol Bessent Hayman Poetry of Love Award. She lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband, the musician Jon Lindsay.

POEM NERUDA SAGUARO

BY GIANCARLO HUAPAYA
TRANSLATED BY RYAN GREENE

To Forrest Gander

From the deepest dark of space
we observe the grass on little pink stones
we are ocular cone encircling later shadow
disrupting geometric dialogues
of Nerudas on grass
a Neruda on another Neruda on grass
a political body on a lover's body on a cactaceous body
a tower of Nerudas saguaro-shaped
spines stretch it's a quicker spin of language
through the plant courses its communist flux
what is communist flux asks the guest
it's a quicker spin
the revolution will come dancing
or it will not come
but Neruda doesn't dance
from his nocturnal green
from his cactus privilege he pricks
those dancers shocked by his texture
and they bleed out jets that color breath
it's blood infected with communist flux
what is communist flux asks the guest

it's a literary translation
uniting question and exclamation marks
to form the sickle and the hammer
so it goes daybreaking in my backyard
as I respond/ with nerudian love
what is communism and what species of cactus owns
but the public education policies are bacteria
this is why communism is an exclamatory question
of diagonal concepts/ of equity in bloom/ of love lost
the sky's last slip of dark reminds me of Karl Marx's horoscope

the accordion daybreaks with military helicopters.

Giancarlo Huapaya (Lima, Peru) has published three collections of poetry, the most recently, *Taller Sub Verso* (Sub Verse Workshop) (2011, 2013). His poems and translations have appeared in the anthologies *4M3R1C4* (Chile), *Aguas Móviles* (Peru) *Cholos* (Guatemala), *OOMPH!* (US), and in the journals *Buenos Aires Poetry* (Argentina), *Poesía* (Venezuela), *Transtierros* (LAT), *Zunái* (Brazil), *Jacket2* (US), *Anomaly* (US), among others. He is Founder and Editor of Cardboard House Press, a nonprofit publishing house for Latin American and Spanish literature in translation. As a curator of visual poetry, he has presented exhibitions at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts in San Francisco and the University of Arizona Poetry Center in Tucson. In 2016, he edited the anthology *Pulenta Pool: Peruvian Poets in the United States for Hostos Review*. As literary translator, he has translated into Spanish work by C.D Wright, Susan Briante and Ross Gay.

Ryan Greene is a translator, poet, and sometimes bookmaker from Phoenix, Arizona. He has translated work by Ana Belén López, Claudina Domingo, and Giancarlo Huapaya. His translations of selected poems by Ana Belén López are set to appear in *rojo si pudiera ser rojo / / red if it could be red*, a bilingual chapbook forthcoming from Anomalous Press. Once, when he was far from home, his mother sent him a sprig of creosote so he could remember the smell of rain.

Untitled

BY MARGARITA SERAFIMOVA

One morning when I was viewing my incomparable past
across the sea,
I rode my inner horse.
A very tall one, stepping in place.

Margarita Serafimova was shortlisted for the Montreal International Poetry Prize 2017. She was awarded a merit-based fellowship by Summer Literary Seminars as one of fifty runners-up in their 2018 poetry contest. Margarita has three collections in Bulgarian. Her work appears in *Agenda Poetry*, *London Grip New Poetry*, *Trafika Europe*, *European Literature Network*, *The Journal*, *A-Minor*, *Waxwing*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *StepAway*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *HeadStuff*, *Minor Literatures*, *The Writing Disorder*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Noble/ Gas Quarterly*, *Origins Journal*, *miller's pond*, *Obra/ Artifact*, *TAYO*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Opiate*, *Poetic Diversity*, *Novelty Magazine*, *Pure Slush*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Punch*, *Tuck*, *Futures Trading*, *Ginosko*, *Peacock Journal*, *Anti-Hero-in Chic*, *Liquid Imagination*, and many other places.



Radioactivity

BY KATE MARTIN ROWE

1. Here, everything burns. Everything will burn. Will burn, will burn. Burn it will. The burning of everything will be terrific and high. The burning of everything will be near to my heart. The fire burning will turn everything on the mountain to bones. The burning of everything will preclude a disappearance of snow. The burning of everything will be loss of home. The burning of everything will be a hundred years of obliteration, forest obituary, no-man's land, wasteland, glass soil because everything will burn. The burning of everything will include the cemetery. Death will get a nice glow all around it. The burning of everything will include a cake of fire and a poignant, last supper.

2. Acid canyon gets its name in several ways. It's not the official name. The cross-country team runs there after school, stoners lounge at dusk, partiers drink on Saturday night. They say that too much time there will cause a watch to stop running. They say that nuclear waste is buried there. They smile when they say this. They laugh when this is said. A sum: alcohol, endorphins, acid, the paranormal, cardiovascular health, competition, nicotine, electrons, half-lives, radiation, glow. Everyone glows here. This is also a joke. There are terrific lightning storms. In the rains of late summer, the runners are told by their coaches to come back if the lightning comes close. Count, they say. Or, if you're in a canyon, they say, don't come back until it's over. The canyon is a womb. The canyon is. The canyon is our drug of choice.

3. "The New Mexico Department of Health and the United States Department of Energy said today that they would seek to determine whether a cluster of brain cancer cases in Los Alamos are linked to radiation released into the environment by the nuclear laboratory there."

"Although Los Alamos considers itself principally a research installation, its network of top-secret laboratories, production centers and testing buildings produced millions of gallons of radioactive and toxic wastes that were dumped in the surrounding ravines and canyons. Because much of the dumping occurred without any documentation, the Energy Department does not have a solid record of what was dumped or even where all the dump sites are."

4. On Deer Trap Mesa, you can find irregular rectangular depressions carved out of rock, where the Ancestral Pueblo trapped deer. The animals fell in one at a time and could not escape. They were dunked in despair and then consumed. You can walk in their staircase carved in stone, just past the tract housing. You can go there with your friend who lives in the basement of his parents' house and attends the Christian school. You can listen to Christian heavy metal while he teaches you drums, then bike to the edge to of the deer traps. You can admire his long hair. You can wish he would take your hand, you can kiss him on the lips, you can. The moon is bright, it will guide you to the traps. The sky is black, the stars three-dimensional, but you may find yourself unable to pray.

5. At the bomb museum, we focus on history. History is an idea we can gift-wrap for you, if you like. History is the truth we tell you, if you like. History is what we like. Oppenheimer was a handsome (and smart) man. We like Oppenheimer. Everything is state of the artist of history that we like. And we like you. Would you like a little story today? There were socials, and there was the bomb. What else would you like to know? It was a thing of ellipses. Death was an afterthought. This is difficult--history is an acrobat, we are the tightrope. We lie here nicely, and let it walk. We tell our stories.

6. If you find yourself on top of the world, be intelligent. Be crying, not emotional, be spoon, not fork, be pilgrimage and stigmata. Be not joying.

7. “Scientists working on the study, though, say there is no cause for alarm. Dr. Mack Sewell, an epidemiologist with the New Mexico Health Department, said the brain cancer rate in Los Alamos from 1984 to 1988 was nearly twice the national rate...”For the one five-year period the rate in Los Alamos was higher,” Dr. Sewell said. “But it could be due to chance alone.”

8. My history teacher showed a video on the atomic bomb. Eleven years of compulsory schooling, and I had never been made to understand this thing. I understood the dark actuality of terms like nuclear and war. Atoms I knew from chemistry. I knew where the men at church, including my father, worked. I could follow a thought to the answer. My teacher could have chosen to ignore the gleaming fact. She could have chosen gloss, bury, breeze. She chose the video. I saw the cloud. I saw the horror of life. After class, face in locker, I wept.

9. The highest PhD's per capita is a flying saucer of hyperactivity. The boy swears by the flying saucer, the object unidentified, that he saw early one morning driving home from your house after your parents were in bed. This UFO was a moment for him, so much so that he got out of the car and stood on the canyon rim, careening into the dawn. He careened and the UFO showered its light. He does not believe in God like you believe in fear, or pancakes. This is not quite correct. He does not know if he believes in God. As he drives back to his sleeping house, he can only be sure of what he has seen. A few hours later, at school, it is good for a laugh, but he is not laughing. He can only be sure of what he had not seen. His life is metamorphosized in the blink of a greater intelligence.

10. Center for Environmental Health Studies

Rates of Brain Cancer In Exposed Counties

Los Alamos County

Los Alamos County ranked third highest in brain cancer incidence from 1970 to 1996 of the 33 counties in New Mexico.

· Los Alamos County also ranked third highest in brain cancer mortality from 1970 to 1996 of the counties in New Mexico.

· During the mid- to late- 1980's brain cancer rates in Los Alamos County were 60 to 80% higher than in the U.S. or state-wide, contributing to public concern over a cluster.

11. The drought consumes all. All that can be consumed in dry and all the way. The views and the evergreen, the lanky aspens. It's a thirsty, desirous affair, full of sunshine. Again, it's cold. In winter,

it's seventy below moisture and blue sky. So don't freeze your heart out. Don't freeze your apples, or whatever you think like, don't freeze me and mine or his and hers or you and all of yours. Don't have an affair of the mind. Don't deal in lightning or cheat on your ideas of humanity. Fire, it's falling over all the church time, and even the church scientists believe in evolution. It's time for a good soaking, whatever your persuasion.

Kate Martin Rowe's poems and nonfiction have appeared in *Brevity*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Askew*, *Zyzzyva*, *VOLT*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal* and *Chaparral*, and have won an Academy of American Poets prize and the Rachel Sherwood Poetry Prize. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from the Bennington Writing Seminars and teaches writing at Glendale Community College and Cal State Northridge. She lives in northeast Los Angeles with her family.

Phys-Ed

BY KENT LEATHAM

It's difficult to say the penis was beautiful—
large, yes, and disturbingly purple—

because I wasn't the boy on the ground,
clutching the tattered turf as though

to burrow or bury, while the bully slapped
(and how it swung as he swiveled his hips)

his prick against the down boy's face—
Who thinks of that? Who chooses, rather

than kicking or punching, to drop your pants,
to make yourself most vulnerable,

and thus oppress?

I was safe in the knot beyond,

the clenched crowd of other boys,
hiding our open mouths in our hands,

legs crossed, tongues numb.

The one down was a friend, I guess;

we never spoke about it again.

Four lives later, I find I've lost

his name, although I still see

the impacts of that purple cock

against his red, wet cheek,

still hear the crushed voice:

it's beautiful beautiful please stop

okay god yes it's beautiful

Being There

BY KENT LEATHAM

*(for the victims of the Umpqua Community College massacre,
Roseburg, Oregon, October 1, 2015)*

*(Umpqua, which means “thundering water” or “across the water,”
or “satisfied,” as in a full stomach)*

the way some days you go through the motions
the way you let yourself do things you don't want to do

the way he pulled down my pants
and filled his mouth

and I wasn't even thinking about it
there'd been another shooting that day

more students at another school
I'd gone to my own in a different state

and we'd talked about it and then I taught
and when I got home he pulled down my pants

and I came in his mouth the way I didn't want to because
I wasn't really there—

the next day or maybe it was the day before
I wrote an essay on how I

think about dying on a regular basis
I don't get nervous or sweaty or paranoid

I simply recognize life's constant potential
to stop

and at the end I explained how I use that awareness
as inspiration to live more fully

and I sent it to a friend
who replied she has the same chronic thoughts

except without the motivation
and she was glad I could put that positive spin on it

and I had to write back and confess I'd been lying
I think about dying but it's never a boost

the way you can walk into a classroom
and teach

or clench your fingers around the curve
of a skull as you come

and it has to be good
but you aren't really there

[(Echopoem)]

BY KENT LEATHAM

(1)

I knew an old woman who swallowed a fly

It did not cry

*[“There is, after all, a difference between (1) pain as a purely neurological event, and (2) actual suffering, which seems crucially to involve an emotional component, an awareness of pain as unpleasant, as something to fear/dislike/want to avoid”]*¹

but surely it had no compulsion to die

*[“If nothing else is left, one must scream.
Silence is the real crime”]*²

Thankfully, there are plenty of flies

*[“An estimated 1,000,000 species,
though only ~120,000 types of Diptera (gnats, mosquitoes, midges, etc.)
have been adequately catalogued and described”]*³

Oh me, oh my

1 David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”

2 Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*

3 Wikipedia, “Fly”

(2)

I knew an old woman who swallowed a spider

It could not weave a web inside her

*[“It’s never right. Never does it say enough. Never does it say it in the right way.
Never does it seem perfectly defensible as art, as truth, as solution, as anything.
Never is it the right time. Never is it the right language. Never is it the right shape.
Something is always incomplete”]*⁴

and bit in defense,
never to spite her

*[“Most bites occur because a spider is trapped or unintentionally contacted.
It is important for employers to educate their workers about the risk of exposure”]*⁵

She swallowed the spider to catch the fly,
which is a bit like lying to cover a lie

*[“I don’t see any city,” said Milo very softly.
“Neither do they,” Alec remarked sadly,
“but it hardly matters, for they don’t miss it at all.”]*⁶

Oh me, oh my

4 Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks*

5 The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (CDC), “Venomous Spiders”

6 Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

I knew an old woman who swallowed a bird

It was named after a name she heard

*[“In dry hills of the west, a soft, mellow ‘Poor Will’ carries across the slopes on moonlit nights. Drivers may spot the poorwill sitting on a dirt road, its eyes reflecting orange in the headlights, before it flits off into the darkness. This species is famous as the first known hibernating bird: in cool weather it may enter a torpid state, with lowered body temperature, heartbeat, and rate of breathing, for days or even weeks at a time. Science discovered this in the 1940s, but the Hopi knew it long before that: their name for the poorwill means ‘sleeping one’”]*⁷

but the call brought no rescue

if poor William heard

*[“Why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people?
Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation.
It is the order of nature, and regret is useless.”]*⁸

She swallowed the bird to catch the prior
victim, “for his own damn good” *[liar]*

Oh mere, oh mire

7 Audobon.com, “Common Poorwill [*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*]”

8 Chief Seattle, “Speech of 1854” (Henry Smith transcript, 1887)

(4)

I knew an old woman who swallowed a cat

and there it sat

ignoring the nightjar, weaver, and gnat

[“What disregards people does people good”]⁹

Poor sociopathic domesticant brat

*[“Domestication started about 10,000 years ago,
(but) most of the garish indoor breeds—
from white-booted Birmans to long-coated Maine Coons—
didn’t exist before 200 years ago”]¹⁰*

[“Certain losses are final”]¹¹

How ’bout that

9 William Stafford, “An Address to the Vacationers at Cape Lookout”

10 Nick Stockton, “Scientists Discover Genes that Helped Turn Fearsome Wildcats into House Cats”
(*Wired*)

11 Philip Levine, “Lost and Found”

I knew an old woman who swallowed
and swallowed
and swallowed a dog

*[“that feeling of being shut away again and again, weeping and begging,
humiliated and in incredible pain, and going through it every day, every day
forgetting what it felt like and coming out and loving those same people again,
as if every day the part that loves is regenerated and then torn off again”]*¹²

After a while
the rhyme wore off

*[“I’m glad to be back,” he said, “but it’s a tremendous loss.
I see now what we give up in being civilized and human”]*¹³

After a while
only the jaws moved
at the other end of
the meaningless tail

*[“This is our part in these great days”]*¹⁴

12 Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks*

13 Oliver Sacks, “The Dog Beneath the Skin” (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*)

14 Auguste Barbier, “Pack of Hounds,” trans. Osip Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*

[*“The world I live in is loathsome to me”*]¹⁵

Oh

oh

[*“Breeding is an ugly thing”*]¹⁶

(6)

I knew an old woman who swallowed a ~~hearse~~

[*“One does not, if one is beauty, have to know what beauty is”*]¹⁷

[*“Oh Horse, Horse, Horse”*]¹⁸

[*“This is the way the world is too much”*]¹⁹

[*“Never, never, never, never, never, never, never”*]²⁰

(silence)

15 Albert Camus, “Why Spain” (*Combat*, December 1948)

16 L. Q. Jones, *A Boy and His Dog*

17 John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Blood Horses*

18 D.H. Lawrence, letter to Spud Johnson, 1924

19 T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”; William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much with Us”

20 The Rolling Stones, “Beast of Burden”

Kent Leatham's poems and translations have appeared in dozens of journals, including *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Fence*, *Zoland*, *Able Muse*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. He received an MFA from Emerson College and a BA from Pacific Lutheran University, served as an associate poetry editor for Black Lawrence Press, and currently teaches creative writing at California State University Monterey Bay.

THE DATING WORLD

JOSEPH BUCKLEY

FADE IN:

EXT. PUBLIC PARK - DAY

SLOTH, seen as three-toe's, at a car door. Glamour nails can't grip the handle. Hair is mangy and shoots off in random directions. The way its mouth creases is like an almost mocking smile. Inside the car is ME, anemic, 30s, desperate, a mountain of cigarette butts and empty coffee cups next to me in the passenger's seat. A cloud of smoke so thick, it's opaque.

ME, eyelids twitter, tweaking the upper lip, this way, ok, that way, pouting it, pursing both lips together.

FADE TO:

INT. FANCY RESTAURANT - NIGHT

SLOTH eating lobster, then swallowing the whole cup of drawn butter, then the cup, then the lobster shell, moves on to the food on MY plate, MY napkin, and then MY tie.

ME unable to control MY sweat. Folded hands, legs crossed, elbows off the table. Tries to steady shaking hold spilling third cocktail on its way to MY lips. Forced smile.

MONTAGE:

SLOTH and ME on the couch, in front of the television, strapped in ambivalence. Cartoon hearts float up and pop. The word "Love" appears.

ME with a look of elation, ebullient, the corners of my smile quiver with emotional impact. Eyelids tremor, body burns, bones gelatinize?

CUT TO:

ME shrugging my shoulders repeatedly

CUT TO:

ME throwing the sloth's jars of dried bugs, leaf-print throw, and inversion table into the yard.

CUT TO:

ME crying on my knees, hands folded and held to the sky.

CLOSE ON ME looking at a framed picture of the SLOTH and ME holding hands in front of the

insectarium. The sloth wearing a baseball hat that reads, “Buggin’ Out.” MY expression is of panicked forgiveness.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. BEACH - DAY - Climactic Music Plays

ME on a beach, eyes wide, running through swarms of sandpipers and seagulls, toward the SLOTH. SLOTH standing still, belly flared, tilts its neck to the side and stares at ME with the mock smile, falls over to play with a bug in the sand.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - DAY

ME and SLOTH on rocking chairs, glasses with tea. Gaze into one another’s eye, gaze into the horizon.

FADE BACK:

EXT. PUBLIC PARK - DAY

ME continually shifting my hips, hands, and lips to look sexy and available in the car. ME unable to sit still. SLOTH stands at my door, homeless bees swarm, the sun suns.

FADE OUT.

JOSEPH BUCKLEY BIO HERE

for the forgiveness of sins

BY SALLY BURNETTE

usually i watch // an orbweaver from the ceiling of his office // & i look how i did at 14 & he more like a blur of flesh & button-down than actual person // but tonight i'm 25 & he's still 30 something & we're on an empty beach in the bed of a truck // i'm in my body staring at his beard // & recoiling from his staccato laugh // he says you know why i chose you right // you keep secrets without being told to // he picks me up & i try to scream but it just reverberates inward // so i hang across his arms like the skin of a dead possum // eyes dead open like a doll // i see a ghost-possum strutting across a marble countertop // knocking a line of egg cups over the edge // onto the glacial lip of a bathtub // cracking porcelain oozing copper nectar // a basket of sliced-in-half blueberries floats // insides gutty // sheep's eyes // anthocyanin seeping into the water // an altar cloth balloon emerges // & after it a pink hand glazed in tinsel // helium-filled // they both ascend through the clouds // never touching // the bathwater writhes with hookworms // shed for many // this is my blood

Sally Burnette is the author of the chapbooks *laughing plastic* (Broken Sleep Books) and *Special Ultimate: Baby's Story: a Documentary* (Ghost City Press). They are originally from North Carolina but currently live in Boston and read flash fiction for *Split Lip Magazine*.

EMILY AS BETWEEN FEELINGS

BY DARREN C. DAMAREE

There are bones in each wing,
but the wind doesn't care about bones.

Emily is the wind, all of the time, the wind.

Darren C. Damaree is the author of eight poetry collections, most recently *Two Towns Over* (March 2018), which was selected as the winner of the Louise Bogan Award by Trio House Press. I am the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology and Ovenbird Poetry.

Successfully Hiding It.

BY CORI BRATBY-RUDD

Sipping watery coffee, no creamer, fourth cup.
Mom takes the dog outside to shit, pattering across
the false wood, actual plastic, flooring
and I sit at the table playing solitaire.

Mom takes the dog outside to shit, pattering across
I think, when she comes back I will tell her.
And I sit at the table playing solitaire.
I will tell her what happened that day at the hostel.

But she walks back in the room –
starts ranting about how the dog pissed on the trash can again.
I will tell her what happened that day at the hostel.
I will. I will. I will—

The Christmas tree in the corner of the room,
I'm sipping watery coffee, no creamer, fifth cup.
On the false wood, actual plastic, flooring
still, I am silent; on the verge.

Cori Bratby-Rudd is an emerging writer with a publication history that includes pieces in *Ms. Magazine*, *DryLand Lit Press*, *FEM News*, *Canyon News*, *Rainy Day Magazine*, *The Rush Magazine*, *Westwind Journal of the Arts* and recently received an editorial choice award in Audeamus' Academic Journal for the best research piece. She is a current MFA candidate in Creative Writing at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California.



Pie

BY WILLIAM CASS

Tony served a couple of different functions at the entrance to the strip club: he took the cover fee from patrons and also acted as bouncer when necessary. He stood behind a podium just inside the open front doors where he could see outside into the parking lot, as well as inside through a plush red curtain's gap to the stage and bar. He was a big Italian-American who fit the profile of his job: bald head, long goatee, barrel chest, tattoos on both arms from his years in the service, gruff demeanor, and grey, steady eyes. All the dancers knew and trusted him. He'd seen plenty turn over in the seven years he'd been working there on weekend nights. In the daytime hours, he swept chimneys.

It was a rainy Friday night in October, chilly for San Diego, and the place wasn't half full at eight when the dancers changed shifts. Except for Gail, he'd seen all of them who were coming on find spots at the back of the parking lot and scurry through the rain to the staff door at the rear of the building. He finally watched Gail's old sedan crawl into the lot at ten minutes past eight. Instead of parking near the staff door, she pulled her car towards the front of the lot a couple dozen feet away from where Tony stood. Enough of the light over the entry reached her car for him to see her fiddle with something that looked like a blanket in the back seat before she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and hurried into the foyer through the rain.

She shook off the hood and looked at him from the other side of the podium. As she did, something clenched, as always, at his chest. Like the other dancers, she was pretty, even in her sweatshirt, jeans, and damp ponytail. But there was something different about her. She was a little older than the others, never smoked or drank, showed no sign of drug use, and seemed a bit removed, distant. That demeanor on stage, he knew, was part of her allure to patrons, which her tips reflected. She'd been dancing there for about a year, and always only on the same two nights he worked.

He said, "You're late."

She nodded. "I need your help, Tony."

"What?"

"My daughter's sitter called just before I was ready to leave. Sick, throwing up, couldn't make it. I wasn't able to find anyone else, so I brought her with me."

Tony watched her turn her head towards the parking lot. He followed her eyes and frowned. "Your kid in that car?"

She shrugged. "I had no choice."

"You could have called in sick yourself."

She returned her gaze his way. It had hardened a little. "I need the money. Rent's due."

Tony blew out a long breath. The rain had lessened to a drizzle, and he could see a toddler's head now poking out of the blanket in the back of Gail's car. She was strapped into a car seat, centered, with her little feet sticking out towards the console in front.

"I just need you to keep your eye on her," Gail said. "Maybe run out and check on her now and then, be sure the blanket stays around her. There's a sippy cup in a bag alongside if she needs it."

"You can't leave your kid in a car for six hours," Tony said. He looked out into night. "It'll just

get colder.”

“Well, I can’t bring her back into the dressing room. You know Max is always in and out of there; he’ll fire me on the spot.”

He studied the weariness and worry in her eyes. Inside, the music changed, and the announcer’s animated voice introduced another dancer over it.

“Look,” Gail said, “I’ve got to go and get ready. I’m up in five minutes.”

The big man shook his head. He asked, “How old is she?”

“Two.”

“Does she cry?”

“Never makes a peep.”

He opened the closet door next to him partway. It held mops, brooms, and other cleaning supplies and could only be seen into from his perch.

“I’ll bring her in here,” he said. “Put her on the closet floor, keep the door ajar, pray like hell no one notices, especially Max.”

Gail reached across the podium and gave his thick wrist a squeeze. She stepped back outside and then was gone up the side of the building towards the staff door. Tony glanced through the curtain into the bar. Max was on his usual stool, laughing with the bartender, a full drink in front of him. The parking lot stood still in the drizzle; no one else was around. Tony took one more peek inside, then trotted out to Gail’s car.

The little girl looked at him without expression when he opened the back door. Her big eyes and brown hair were the same as her mother’s. He set the tote bag on her lap, unsnapped the seat belt, and lifted the car seat outside. He closed the door with his hip and quickly retraced his steps back inside the foyer. He glanced through the curtain when he passed it; Max was still hunched over on his stool at the bar with his back to the entrance. Tony opened the closet door a bit further and slid the car seat just inside of it. He turned it so it faced the podium and set the tote bag beside it. He used a corner of the blanket to wipe rain droplets off the girl’s face. As he did, she grimaced, then giggled.

“So, you stay quiet, you hear,” Tony said. He put an index finger to his lips. “Shh.”

The girl giggled again, reached out her hand, and grabbed his finger. He smiled himself, pulled his finger loose, tucked the blanket around her, and stood up. When he turned his head at the podium, he could just make out her dim figure on the floor through the crack of the darkened closet.

The music changed again inside, and he heard the announcer introduce Gail. A smattering of applause followed. Two men came through the entrance, paid Tony, and pushed through the curtain. The rain had stopped completely. Cars began entering the parking lot more steadily, and Tony stayed busy for the next hour or so. He glanced down regularly at the girl in between patrons; when he did, she was always staring up at him, but never made a sound.

About ten, Max pushed through the curtain from inside, nodded to Tony, then stepped outside the foyer and lit a cigarette. He was a thin man with a small pot belly and a carefully kept layer of stubble over his cheeks and chin. He stood out of the rain under the entrance’s awning.

He said, “Hope this rain is done.”

Tony shrugged. “Weather report says we’re in for more.”

“Pretty good crowd in spite of it.”

“Yup.” Tony glanced down at the girl in the shadows.

“No problems yet?”

“No.”

Max exhaled smoke, then turned and looked at him. “Guess I’m paying you just to be a high-priced hostess tonight.”

“So far,” Tony replied.

They both chuckled. Max tossed his cigarette out into the parking lot. It hissed as it landed in a puddle. He gave Tony another nod, then pushed back through the curtain inside. Tony exhaled himself. He squatted down, found the sippy cup in the tote bag, and handed it to the girl. She grasped it in both hands, tipped it, and began sucking at it silently.

“There you go,” Tony said. He rearranged the blanket around her before taking his spot again at the podium.

A moment later, Gail pushed through the curtain, frowning. Her hair was down and glitter dusted her eyelids. She said, “I saw Max come out.”

“No worries. Didn’t see or hear a thing. Just had a smoke and we shot the breeze. You were right...that little girl of yours is quiet as a mouse.”

Gail smiled and pointed to the closet. “She in there?”

Tony stepped back and pulled the closet door open a bit further. Gail’s smile widened as the little girl dropped the cup and stretched out her arms when she saw her mother. Gail bent down in her lime-green G-string and bikini top and hugged her. Tony watched Gail kiss her daughter’s forehead and put the cup back in her hands.

“You be good,” she told her. “I have to go.”

She stood back up, looked at Tony, and said, “Thanks.”

“Sure. By the way, what’s her name?”

“Alice.”

“Alice?”

“It was my mother’s name.”

Tony nodded and watched her disappear through the curtain. The place had grown loud with voices and music. He stared outside where it began to rain again and let his thoughts tumble over themselves. When he looked down a while later, Alice was asleep, the sippy cup still clasped in her hands. Tony removed it gently, put it in the bag, and used the toe of his shoe to readjust the opening in the door.

The place emptied out at two, and all the staff except Max, Gail, and Tony were gone fifteen minutes later. Tony tabulated the door count more slowly than usual. He was just zipping the wad of bills into the rubber deposit pouch when Max came through the curtain. They looked at each other until Tony said, “I’ll lock up.”

Max nodded once, took the pouch, and Tony watched him walk across the lot. It had stopped raining again. He stood at the podium and returned Max’s small wave when his car passed by. Tony waited until it had left the lot and the taillights had disappeared down the street before opening the

closet door and lifting out the car seat. He leaned it on the podium in front of him. The little girl was still asleep, her chin in her chest with a little trail of drool down one side of it. Tony was wiping it off when Gail pushed through the curtain. Her eyes moved from the car seat to Tony's.

She said, "Phew."

"Yeah." He snorted a little laugh and tucked the blanket tighter around Alice.

"I don't know what I would've done without your help. I'd like to repay you somehow. Can I buy you something to eat?"

He looked at her. She was back in her sweatshirt, jeans, and ponytail with all her make-up wiped away. He felt the same clench in his chest. He thought she was probably in her mid-twenties, a couple of decades younger than him.

"There's an all-night diner up the block with good pie," he said.

She nodded. "I know where it is. We'll meet you there."

"It'll take me a while to lock up."

He lifted the car seat and Gail took it by the handle. She smiled down at her sleeping daughter then up at him. "We'll see you in a bit then."

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They sat across from one another at a booth against the diner's big plate glass window. Alice slumbered in the car seat next to Gail. She and Tony both had cherry pie and coffee in front of them. At first, they ate slowly without talking.

Finally, Gail said, "This is good."

Tony chewed and nodded.

She took a sip of coffee. "My mom used to make pie."

"Used to?"

"She passed away a few years ago."

"Any other family?"

Gail shook her head.

"Alice's father?"

She shook her head again. "Just a mistake I made one night. I never even knew his name."

"Well," Tony said. "That mistake sure made one cute little girl."

Gail glanced at her daughter, a sad smile creasing her lips, and nodded. "How about you? Family?"

"Nope. Just me and my lonesome."

"What do you do when you're not at the club?" "Well, I did my twenty years in the Navy and have been sweeping chimneys since I got out. Learned the trade from an old vet, then bought his business when he retired." He regarded her while she took another sip of coffee.

"How about you?"

"School. College. I'm about to graduate. End of the semester in December."

He felt his eyebrows raise. "No kidding? What are your studying?"

“Computer programming.”

He gave a low whistle. “You juggle that with raising Alice and dancing? Impressive.”

She shrugged. “The dancing pays the rent. Not another job I could work just two nights a week that would do that. Gives me time for classes, studying, Alice.”

Tony watched her eat while an idea formed in his head. The place was warm. Rain had resumed, and a frame of condensation had formed around the inside of the window. They were the only customers.

“So,” Tony said. “I’ve got a proposition for you.”

She looked up at him suddenly.

He smiled. “Not that kind. A legitimate proposition. I’ve been looking around for someone to develop a website for my business. I don’t have a clue how to do that, and neither did the former owner, so right now I’m just a quarter page ad in the phone book. Badly behind the times.” He paused. “You think that’s something I could hire you to do.”

Her eyes brightened slowly. “Sure,” she said. “I mean, of course. I developed a couple of those for one of my classes.”

“I’ve researched some of my competitors’ sites. People can get estimates and book appointments right on them. Someone would also have to manage those for me, I guess, at least until I learned how. Think you could do that, too?”

She nodded. “Another idea would be to solicit reviews of your work to start. Build up a bank of positive comments you could post. Maybe add a video of you explaining some safety or inspection tips.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that sort of stuff. That would be good.” They’d both set down their forks. He said, “And you could do all that.”

“Yes.”

He took a turn at nodding. The waitress came by and refilled their coffee cups. Tony watched her walk away, then turned back to Gail.

“So,” he said, “I’ve priced out a few web design outfits, and I think I could pay you about what you’re probably making at the club. That is, if you count what you’d save not having to hire a sitter. Pretty close, anyway. You might not need to dance anymore.” He tilted his head towards Alice. “Stay home with her, work from there. Until I can get up to speed and manage the thing myself. Couple of months maybe.”

Gail looked down at her daughter, then back at him. Although she was smiling, she looked as if she might begin to cry. Finally, she said, “I can do all of that. I’ll call Max tomorrow and tell him I’m quitting.”

Tony nodded several times. Then he took another bite, and said, “Nothing like a good piece of pie.”

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The website turned out well from the start, and Tony’s business immediately picked up. At

first, they got together to go over things a couple of times a week at the small house he rented. When they did, he usually made them dinner using Italian recipes of his mother's. Alice ran around and played with his dog while they worked. Gail patiently tried to teach him how to manage the site, but he pretended not to understand much; he wasn't in any hurry for their sessions to stop.

One night after they'd eaten, Alice was curled up on his living room floor singing to his dog. He and Gail were crowded together at his dining room table peering at her laptop's screen, close enough that their knees occasionally touched; when they did, Tony felt a jolt.

As Gail was closing up her laptop, Tony said, "I enjoy getting together like this. I mean, you, me...the three of us."

She looked at him. "I do, too."

Tony felt the thump of his heart in his temples and hoped it didn't show. "It's not so quiet, so empty here at night."

"That's good."

"Yeah," he nodded. "It is."

She gave his shoulder a playful cuff and stood up. "Well, dinner was good. Appreciate it."

He nodded and said, "You bet."

Later that night, he lay in bed staring at the ceiling. He thought about the phrase "old enough to be her father". If that was true about them, he thought, it was only barely so.

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Neither of them had a fireplace, so in early November, Gail arranged to use the empty house of a classmate who did so she could film Tony giving his safety and inspection tips in front of it. Afterwards, they sat out on a bench in the classmate's back yard to review the film clip while Alice played in a sandbox nearby.

"You're good," Gail told him after they'd watched the clip twice. "Very believable. You should audition for TV ads."

Tony grunted dismissively.

"I'll post this on the website when I get home," Alice said.

They sat silently for a while watching Alice play. She moved plastic figurines around in the sand and narrated some sort of story with them.

"She's really something," Tony said quietly.

Gail nodded, then turned and looked at him. "You have any kids, Tony? You ever been married?"

"No children, but I was married once. A long time ago after I first enlisted. Went on deployment, came back, and she was with someone else." He pursed his lips. "The divorce took longer than the marriage."

He was leaning forward with his hands clasped between his legs looking out across the grass. After a moment, Gail said, "Shucks. That sucks."

Tony grunted again and shrugged. "How about you? Ever tied the knot?"

“No, though I was pretty serious with a guy for a while. Just that one time, though.” She folded her hands together. “I got traded in for a different model, too.”

Tony looked over at her. “I can’t believe it. Who would ever do that?”

Gail lifted her eyebrows.

“He must have been nuts.”

She gave a short chuckle and fixed him with a sheepish smirk. Then they both turned back to watching Alice with her figurines. A few of the yellowed leaves left on the willow tree next to the sandbox fluttered to the ground.

“So, that was what, twenty years ago now?” Gail said. “You must have been with someone special since.”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

Tony blew out a breath and shrugged again. “Trust, I guess.” He turned to her. “You?”

She cocked her head, considering. “I was going to say emotional availability,” she said. “But, seems like we might be describing the same thing.”

Tony nodded. The veins in his temples began their familiar throb. “What sort of qualities in someone would it take for you to get past that?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She paused. “He’d have to be kind, gentle, thoughtful. Make me feel safe. Patient, for sure. Good with Alice.”

Tony thought: that’s me. He lifted the hand closest to her in her direction.

“One other thing.” She nodded slowly. “Someone who I could share dreams with for the future.” She stood up suddenly without turning his way. “Enough with the fairy tales. Reality beckons. Dinner, bath, bedtime stories, then burn the midnight oil and finish an essay that’s due in the morning.”

He watched as she swooped up Alice from the sandbox and nuzzled her daughter in the stomach with her nose. The little girl squealed with laughter. Tony lowered his hand to the bench where Gail had been sitting, the wood there still warm.

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They both stayed busy until Thanksgiving, which Gail and Alice celebrated with a married couple in Gail’s degree cohort and Tony spent alone. He didn’t sweep any chimneys over that four-day weekend: no one wanted work done during that time. But, he tended the door at the strip club on that Friday and Saturday night; the few men who came in then seemed somehow more forlorn and anxious than usual.

During the daylight hours, Tony took long walks along the bay and painted his back fence. He tried to keep his mind off of Gail. But, he found himself clicking the video of himself on the website often, thinking of her holding the camera as she filmed him and their exchange afterwards, of the things they’d said and those they hadn’t.

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Another evening came shortly after the holiday, when Gail brought Alice over for dinner and more website work. Tony met them at his front door. When he opened it, her eyes were wide and dancing. He glanced down at the bottle of wine she held in one hand; they never drank together.

“Ta, da!” she said, showing him the bottle. “Time to celebrate. I just got a job offer from a software company in San Jose. A great one.”

Alice jumped up and down, and Gail opened her arms. She waited for Tony to do the same before stepping into his hug. He stood blinking, the bottom of the bottle pressing into his back and the smell of her shampoo in his nose. He heard himself say, “That’s terrific.” She felt soft, warm. A kind of numbness crawled up through him. He heard himself say, “Congratulations.”

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A few weeks later, Tony went to Gail’s little department graduation ceremony and sat with Alice during it. Afterwards, the two of them came over to his place for lasagna. They lingered over dinner talking about this and that. They didn’t mention the next morning when Tony would help the two of them pack a U-Haul with their belongings, or the new life that awaited in San Jose.

While their after-dinner coffee grew gold, Alice fell asleep on Tony’s lap at the dining room table. Gail reached over, smoothed her hair, looked at him, and said, “I’m not sure how to thank you. I don’t even know where to start.”

Tony shook his head. “No need to.”

He held her gaze until Alice muttered and suddenly sat up straight. She looked back and forth blankly at both of them, then asked, “Where am I?”

Gail smiled. “Right where you’re supposed to be, sweetie.” She took her daughter’s hand.

“That’s right,” Tony said. He swallowed. His dog came over and sat at their feet whining. “Be quiet, you,” Tony told him. “Everything’s okay. Everything’s fine here.”

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The winter was a cold, rainy one, and Tony stayed swamped with work and managing the website. Things were a little slow at the strip club with the stretch of bad weather. Several other dancers came and went during that time. Tony tossed out a few patrons who got too frisky and broke up a couple of fights. Spring arrived late; the buds on the flowering plum tree outside his bedroom window didn’t appear until mid-March, and the first crocuses remained closed almost that long.

After Gail and Alice first left, Tony exchanged a few messages with them, but he wasn’t much for email or texting, so those eventually died away, and he didn’t hear from Gail again until an early April afternoon when he came home from work. He’d just finished cleaning a nasty chimney for an old woman who had left it neglected for years, and he was covered with soot as he stumbled upon the package waiting for him on his front step. Tony sat down on the step and held it on his lap. It was

wrapped in a brown shopping bag that had been cut up; he smiled when he recognized her return address above the special delivery sticker. He tore off the paper. A card sat on top of the box inside that was covered in bright yellow paper and tied with purple ribbon. He opened the card, which contained a message to him saying that she wasn't sure when his birthday was, but she knew he had one sometime, so she and Alice were sending birthday wishes. The message also said they thought of him often and missed him. It included a photo of the two of them sitting on some rocks above a beach with the sun setting behind them. In it, both were smiling at the camera; Gail's hair was cut short and Alice looked taller and skinnier.

Tony set the card and photograph down next to him on the step and carefully removed the ribbon and wrapping paper, then opened the box. Inside was a pie. He could tell it was homemade because of the lumps on top and a portion of the crust that was slightly burned. He lifted it to his nose and inhaled its sweetness. As he did, he felt that old, familiar clutch in his chest. He set the pie back on his lap and looked again at the photo, running his fingertip over it. The sky in it was full of falling light, the same sort that washed over him on the step. A small breeze arose, ruffling the wrapping paper and ribbon, the torn grocery bag, the edge of the card, the bottom of his goatee where he'd just begun noticing wisps of gray.

William Cass has had over a hundred short stories appear in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Gold Man Review*. Recently, He was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and *Black Hill Press*, received a Pushcart nomination, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal.

